THE (NET)WORK OF MOURNING: EMOTIONAL CONTAGION, VIRAL PERFORMATIVITY, AND THE DEATH OF DAVID BOWIE

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David Bowie's death in January 2016 led to a vast outpouring on social media of grief and public mourning. According to Twitter UK (2016), over 4 million Bowie-related tweets were sent in the 24-hour period following news of his death becoming public, with the stream of tributes peaking at 20 thousand tweets per minute just after 7 am GMT (Twitter UK, 2016). Bowie's death takes its place among a number of other high-profile 'celebrity' deaths in the social media era, including those of Michael Jackson in 2009, which famously tested Twitter's capacity, and, more recently, Robin Williams in 2014 and Leonard Nimoy in 2015. What makes Bowie's death particularly notable in regard to social media is the way in which it has opened up a renewed dialogue about public responses to celebrity deaths, and whether this marks a new moment in the sociology of mourning.

Within days of Bowie's death, journalists such as Caroline Framke (2016) were attempting to explain "why we grieve artists we've never met, in one tweet." While Framke argued that these public expressions of grief were individual and authentic, other commentators expressed skepticism. *Spiked* editor Brendan O'Neill (2016), for instance, contrasted the "shallow" sadness expressed by "hacks" and "fans" on social media with the "deep and raw and real" grief of Bowie's family, which in his view was signalled by their relative *distance* from social media, their need to grieve in private: "Bowie's son, Duncan Jones, left Twitter immediately after announcing his father's death. Iman [Bowie's wife] is nowhere to be seen." In many respects, this debate over authenticity merely replays earlier ones about the role of the media in the spread of public mourning following celebrity death. In *Understanding Celebrity*, Graeme Turner (2014) explores this debate in the context of the 1997 death of Diana, Princess of Wales, arguing that media and cultural studies were at the time ill-equipped to respond

to the "debates about the authenticity versus the mediated character of the event" that the public response to Diana's death provoked (p. 109).

Taking a more considered approach to the public grieving that surrounded Bowie's death, Megan Garber (2016) notes that, in the social media age, "[m]ourning has become, as it were, #content." The sharing of emotion that occurred, particularly around the #RIPDavidBowie hashtag, was evidence, Garber writes, of people "forming a community of grief. #RIPDavidBowie was a hashtag, yes; it was also a funeral." This, she adds, is less a novel development than a return to earlier forms of mourning in Western society: "the Internet is, in some sense, returning us to the days before war transformed grief into a largely solitary affair. Public mourning—via Twitter, via Facebook, via Tumblr—has become its own kind of ritual." Candi K. Cann (2014) recently made a similar point, arguing that "[p]ublic and communal grief is returning to society through social media, as new communities formed in virtual spaces bond together over death events, and reveal a communal identity shaped over grief" (p. 83). Cann also notes social media data increasingly allow researchers to "track trends in mourning at a broader scale, and to examine the role of bereavement in everyday life, and across social strata" (p. 83). Finally, Gillian Terzis (2015) suggests the public performance of grief via social media also highlights the complex relationship between performativity and authenticity, particularly in regard to the ways in which grief (or its performance) spreads through a network as a kind of "emotional contagion" (p. 15).

In the context of mourning, then, social media not only raises new questions about public mourning, social and emotional contagion, and viral performativity, but also offers potential to visualise and analyse this networked spread of affect and the forms it takes. In recent years, large-scale visualisation projects have emerged that employ automated sentiment analysis to display, in real or close-to-real time, emotional content shared via Twitter. CSIRO's *We feel* and fuse*'s *AMYGDALA* project are notable examples—indeed, *AMYGDALA* offered a near-real-time "generative emotional" visualisation of the #RIPDavidBowie hashtag as it unfolded (Brownlee 2016). These visualisations, illustrative though they may be of broad emotional trends on Twitter, offer little by way of an understanding of who is sharing emotional content, what they are sharing, and how they are connected to others sharing emotional content within the network. In particular, the focus on a specific hashtag already privileges a self-selecting sample of mourners: those who chose to connect their expressions of grief with the stream of similar statements collected under the #RIPDavidBowie hashtag. This focus on the macro-level of Twitter's communicative layers (Bruns & Moe, 2014) misses a potentially much broader and more diverse, as well as less public, range of responses to Bowie's death, by users who did not include the hashtag.

In this paper, we therefore take a more meso- and micro-level approach to examining the networked spread of mass mourning on Twitter in the wake of Bowie's death. We focus on a corpus of 6.3 million tweets containing the keyword 'Bowie', collected using the Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolkit (TCAT) over 15 days following the confirmation of Bowie's death (from 7.12 am GMT on 11 January to 5.48 am GMT on 26 January). While comprehensive, this dataset is not complete. Because Bowie-related tweets accounted for more than 1% of total Twitter traffic as news of his death broke, there are inevitable gaps in the early stages as our data collection was rate-limited. The dataset

will, nonetheless, allow us to focus on the period of collective mourning, when a broader range of expressions of mourning, beyond initial expressions of disbelief and shock, were entering the Twitter discourse. By examining how particular mourning practices and mourning artifacts (e.g., images, links) spread across and through the network after Bowie's death, we will map in a more refined way the dynamics of emotional contagion around this particular instance of mass-mourning, and suggest ways that this method of analysis adds to existing understandings of mediated celebrity death and public grief.

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