

Making or breaking news?

**A paper considering the use of Twitter by journalists during the
2011 UK riots, completed for the Robert Bell Travelling
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John Hartevelt BA (Hons) GradDipJ
john.hartevelt@gmail.com

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1. INTRODUCTION

“An explosion of violence”

It was a quiet evening on the news desk at the *Sunday Telegraph*. Working his regular Saturday night late shift, then-reporter Michael Howie had his radar up for anything that might make a late run for tomorrow’s paper.

Around 9pm, on August 6, 2011, the picture desk spotted something with potential. Howie recalls:

There was a really grainy picture of a burning car on Twitter – it looked quite interesting ... It was a terrible picture but I did a search on Twitter and I found a couple of references to things kicking off in Tottenham.¹

There were many versions of the picture circulating on Twitter, including this one:

[charmskil](#) Queen of Sheba
New photo: Police car set ablaze during Tottenham, UK riot, via [@teakay09](#) - <http://yfrog.com/gzkhlorj>
[08/06/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#)

It was not immediately apparent that this was a story of national significance that the *Sunday Telegraph* would make a great show of. But, in consultation with the night news editor, Howie decided to take the tube out for a look.

I went up there and quite quickly realised there was something major going on. I spent the rest of the night there texting and emailing updates constantly to the [news] desk.²

Howie was witnessing, and reporting on, the beginnings of an outbreak of four nights of rioting that spread from the boroughs of London to Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester. It became the most violent and widespread outbreak of civil disorder the United Kingdom had seen in decades.³ More than

¹ Michael Howie interview

² Howie interview

³ “David Cameron orders police to come down hard on looters,” *Daily Mail*, accessed February 12, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2024203/UK-RIOTS-2011-David-Cameron-orders-police-come-hard-looters.html>

3000 people were arrested over four nights.⁴ Buses and cars were set alight and shops looted. Five died in incidents directly related to the violence.⁵

*It was a completely lawless, proper anarchic sort of environment. It was pretty scary actually.*⁶

The riots were a shocking event for British society, prompting concern about London's readiness for the 2012 Olympics Games, which were less than one year away.⁷

It was a huge story for London's fiercely competitive media. But the nature of the story made the riots difficult to report on. Journalists – photographers and videographers in particular – were themselves the targets of violence.⁸

On the third night of rioting in Hackney, the *Guardian's* Paul Lewis tweeted:

[@PaulLewis](#) press photographer dragged to the ground by four youths and beaten #Hackney #Pembury
[08/08/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [2](#)

Howie recalls fearing for his personal safety on the first night in Tottenham:

*We had our suits on and we were on our expensive smart phones the whole time and people thought we could have been cops, or spotters or whatever. ... One of the rioters turned around and I caught eyes with him, he came storming up to me with a hood on and sort of like a scarf [over his face] and he was like 'are you cops, what you doing here, what the fuck?' ... He was coming towards me ... He kind of stopped and pointed down a side street and said 'fuck off, fuck off right now'.*⁹

A turning point for Twitter in the UK media

Aside from personal safety, the riots presented other challenges to the media. The riots were taking place in many different localities around London, and the police were seldom in a position to provide much information to journalists,

⁴ "England's week of riots," BBC News, accessed February 12, 2013,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14532532>

⁵ "Police, pollies in war of words over riots," AFP, accessed February 12, 2013,

<http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-world/police-pollies-in-war-of-words-over-riots-20110813-1irg2.html>

⁶ Howie interview

⁷ "London riots raise concerns about 2012 Olympics," CBS News, accessed February 13, 2013,

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/08/08/501364/main20089628.shtml>

⁸ "London riots: photographers targeted by looters," *The Guardian*, accessed February 13, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/09/london-riots-photographers-targeted>

⁹ Howie interview

authoritative or not. It was difficult to keep track of where violence was flaring and to what extent. Furthermore, the story was unfolding very late at night and early in the morning, easily blowing morning newspaper deadlines.

The challenges of reporting the riots, as well as the unique circumstances of the story, fuelled the rise in significance of a new tool in the reporter's kit-bag. Twitter, already established as a powerful medium during breaking news events such as the Egyptian Revolution¹⁰ and the Mumbai terror attacks¹¹, came to the fore during the UK riots.

People very quickly got to understand that you could find out extremely quickly – much faster than you could by phoning the police – what was going on by looking at Twitter. ... The riots definitely demonstrated the usefulness of Twitter as a tool to quickly verify or check out or corroborate something that you hear going on.¹²

The most prominent exponent of Twitter during the riots was Paul Lewis, a reporter at the *Guardian*. Like Howie, he got his first sniff of the story from the widely retweeted (republished) image of a car on fire in Tottenham. Lewis followed the trail of Twitter to cover the riots that night. He went on to tweet and leverage the information he found on Twitter through the following nights of the riots.

For all of those four nights, it was a constant conversation with people who were guiding me, helping edit, telling me when I'd made mistakes, advising me where to go and where not to go ... At every stage, the crowd was providing guidance and advice.¹³

By the end of the riots, Lewis had gained 35,000 new followers in three days. His tweets were being retweeted at a rate of up to 10,000 each.¹⁴ Lewis's *Guardian* colleague, James Ball, believes this was a turning point for the medium.

*Before then, people hadn't particularly thought of Twitter as being a hugely significant outlet. ... When Paul started doing his regular updates, I think the effectiveness and popularity of them caught the *Guardian* by surprise.¹⁵*

¹⁰ "The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world," Peter Beaumont, *The Guardian*, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya>

¹¹ "Mumbai attacks: Twitter and Flickr used to break news, Bombay, India," *The Telegraph*, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/3530640/Mumbai-attacks-Twitter-and-Flickr-used-to-break-news-Bombay-India.html>

¹² Howie interview

¹³ Paul Lewis interview

¹⁴ Lewis interview

¹⁵ James Ball interview

Twitter was used by the media both to gather information about the riots and to broadcast news about them. It did not replace the more traditional methods of reporting and publishing news. However, when used effectively, Twitter added significantly to the speed, depth and accuracy of riot coverage.

This study examines the uses for Twitter in modern newsrooms. It considers the potential of Twitter in two main sections:

1. As a news gathering tool.
2. As a broadcast medium.

Throughout, the study draws on the experience of British newsrooms during the 2011 UK riots. In particular, the use of Twitter by journalists at the *Guardian* is examined. Other major media outlets have also been consulted about the riots and the use of Twitter more generally.

Each section begins with an introduction, outlining the scope of the chapter and then proceeds through a series of sub-sections.

The study concludes that Twitter is an essential tool in the daily news gathering work of journalists and modern media organisations. Because of its significance in news gathering, broadcast is also essential, although questions remain about the priority tweeting should be accorded in publication.

Interviews for this study were carried out in London, United Kingdom, in February 2013. The study also draws on numerous original tweets posted before, during and after the riots and considers existing research.

2. TWITTER AS A NEWS GATHERING TOOL

Journalists have historically found news from many different sources. In different rounds, some sources are more prominent than others. For example, political journalists may be most interested in fostering personal contacts, while an emergency services reporter would spend a lot of time focused on a police scanner, or a markets reporter watching real-time stock movements.

As technology has continually developed and the news industry evolved, evermore sources have emerged for journalists working across the spectrum.

Since Twitter was used widely by people experiencing the Mumbai terror attacks in 2008, the online “micro-blogging” site has quickly emerged as a potentially powerful source for news gathering. On Twitter, witnesses are relaying news events in real time and prominent figures are offering important or interesting insights directly from their smartphones, laptops or tablets.

This section of the study examines the ways in which journalists are using Twitter to help their reporting. It also explores some of the potential problems with using Twitter to gather news.

Where news breaks

Twitter has been closely associated with several major global news events in the past four years. By its own account, Twitter was the source people “instantly” turned to when three major stories unfolded:

- US Airways flight 1549 crash-landed in to New York’s Hudson River in January 2009.
- US marines carried out a raid on a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, killing Osama Bin Laden, in May 2011.
- Barack Obama was re-elected president of the United States, in November 2012.¹⁶

In each case, Twitter notes, the news was either broken on Twitter or substantially defined by a massively popular tweet:

- @jkrums tweeted: “There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.” This tweet was published before any of the numerous global media organisations with large operations in New York had reported the story.¹⁷

¹⁶ “Twitter engineering: Improving Twitter search with real-time human computation,” Twitter.com, accessed January 25, 2013, <http://engineering.twitter.com/2013/01/improving-twitter-search-with-real-time.html>

¹⁷ “Meet @jkrums,” Columbia Journalism School, accessed February 18, 2013, <http://twtvite.com/cjkrums12>

- @reallyvirtual tweeted: “Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event).” In retrospect, this tweet carried considerable relevance and became a piece of the historical narrative about Bin Laden’s death.
- @barackobama tweeted, alongside a photo of himself in an embrace with wife Michelle: “Four more years.” Obama chose to tweet before making any other public comment on the night of his re-election. This tweet was retweeted more than 810,000 times, becoming the most widely circulated post in Twitter’s history.

Twitter was not the only the source of news in each case, nor was it necessarily the most important. But it is clear that Twitter made a significant contribution to the story in each case. Reporters could not ignore its contribution and still tell the full story.

Similarly, during the UK riots, reporters quickly found Twitter indispensable for keeping up with developments. Some reporters got first wind of the story from a picture of a burning car circulating on Twitter.¹⁸

By keeping watch on Twitter, Matthew Taylor, of the *Guardian*, was probably saved from missing a story on the second night of rioting, August 7, 2011. Taylor had travelled to Brixton, where trouble had been expected, in the evening. When nothing resembling a riot transpired, he headed for home at around 10pm.

Taylor tweeted:

[mrmattthewtaylor](#) Matthew Taylor
Things becoming calmer again in [#brixton](#) following arrest. Still big police presence.
[08/07/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) 2

But when he got off his train in north London, Taylor found news of it “all kicking off in Brixton”¹⁹. Tweets appeared such as:

[clairegreenway](#) Claire Greenway
Woah, actual riot happening outside my flat in Brixton. Fires in the middle of the road further up, police blockades, lots of sirens.
[08/07/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) 35

And:

[mshapland](#) Martin Shapland
Bus just stopped dea - riot on Brixton high street right outside my flat
[08/07/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) 6

Taylor made it back to the trouble spot in time to report nearly all of the details. Taylor believes Twitter helped him get to the story sooner.

¹⁸ Howie and Lewis interviews

¹⁹ Taylor interview

If you took Twitter out of the equation, as though it didn't exist, I would have got a call from the [news] desk at some point or I would have heard about it on the radio. But the difference with Twitter is that the [news] desk wouldn't have heard about it until midnight, probably, and the radio wouldn't have reported it until the next morning, probably. It may not have been that I would have had enough time to get back down there.²⁰

Taylor describes this “immediacy of Twitter” as one of its strengths for the media. Just as an innocent by-stander in Abbottobad unwittingly broke the story of a US raid on Bin Laden’s compound, locals tipped journalists off to goings on throughout the UK during the 2011 riots.

Paul Lewis says he was guided through one of the most dramatic episodes of the riots by details posted to Twitter. On the third night of rioting, August 8, rioters had taken over an estate in Hackney. At the scene, a police car was being showered with rocks. It attracted special attention when it started to reverse, revealing the presence of a driver. The rioters “mobbed” the car, with a man poised on top the roof with a concrete block while others tried to rip the doors open.²¹

It was as close as I came to seeing a police officer killed [but] he managed to drive off with his windscreen shattered.²²

Police then flooded the area, sending rioters fleeing across a park chased by police on horse back.

If I'd been a journalist covering the LA riots, or any other civil disorder up until about 2008, I would have just followed police sirens or looked for plumes of smoke. But I said [on Twitter] where did the rioters who ran across Hackney Park go? And instantly, everybody said Kingsland Road – the junction between Kingsland Road and Balls Pond Road. So I was able to get there immediately afterwards and watch the thing unfold.²³

Lewis tweeted:

[pullewis](#) Paul Lewis
Credible witnesses: [#Hackney](#) violence spreading east, to Kingsland Rd and London Fields
[08/08/2011 Reply Retweet Favorite 67](#)

For Lewis, this was a “constant process” during the riots. He did not report exactly on the information Twitter provided. Instead, he used the best of the details that emerged to help guide him and his *Guardian* colleagues to the stories.

²⁰ Matthew Taylor interview

²¹ Lewis interview

²² Lewis interview

²³ Lewis interview

James Ball, who was monitoring tweets from the *Guardian* newsroom, found Twitter was not always reliable and often filled with a lot of useless noise. But, he says, nothing could keep up with its speed for reporting the riots.

What Twitter had was that everyone was there already and so the second a few people gathered outside a house, that was appearing ... You weren't going to keep up with Twitter, but you could use it to make yourselves faster and it was pretty easy to be more accurate than Twitter.²⁴

Ball was working in Washington DC when Hurricane Sandy hit America's east coast in November 2012. He noticed Twitter users again posting information with potential news value if followed up. Just as in the riots, people on Twitter were asking questions about things like power cuts or damage to buildings and infrastructure. This yielded worthwhile tips to a journalist by-stander willing to check on their veracity. For example:

[okkinderhook](#) OK.Kinderhook
[@tevet](#) Mid 40's here, wind, rain...Hurricane Sandy...power outages started a couple of hours ago.
[10/29/2012 Reply Retweet Favorite 3](#)

Michael Howie, who has moved from the *Sunday Telegraph* to the *London Evening Standard* since the riots, similarly finds news regularly breaking on Twitter.

It is one of the key tools on a daily basis. ... If ever we get a tip off or something comes in, the first thing I would do is put it in [a search of] Twitter. ... The riots definitely demonstrated the usefulness of Twitter as tool to quickly verify or check out or corroborate something that's going on.²⁵

Just as Lewis reported using the information to guide his coverage of the riots, Howie similarly finds tweets can help with every day editorial decision-making.

You get a sense of is it worth sending someone out, how urgently do I want to be hammering the phones.²⁶

Even very large media organisations with resources all around the world have found Twitter can reach further than their reporters. According to the User Generated Content (International) Editor of the Associated Press, Fergus Bell, Twitter was initially regarded by some at AP as unnecessary because of the agency's reach.

There was a thought that we are already in those places [so] we don't need to use this kind of stuff. But actually, the way that it evolved showed that you can have five crews and reporters in a city but it's something that you might miss

²⁴ Ball interview

²⁵ Howie interview

²⁶ Howie interview

*that is captured by someone with a cellphone and by someone tweeting that out. If it's an interesting event, it doesn't really matter who captured it – it's out there.*²⁷

Bell cites the impact Twitter had on AP's reporting of a shooting rampage in Germany.

*Information was being shared on Twitter about police in the area and we were able to get the first pictures from each of the places that he went because of social media. We didn't have to rely on police reports updating us about what was happening, we knew where roads were being closed and where police presence was and so we were able to move our crews to follow it a lot quicker than if they had gone on the information from police.*²⁸

Associated Press now expects its reporters to monitor Twitter constantly for potential leads within their beat or locality. Bell moves in to a more specific monitoring role during a major breaking news event, watching for tips and information to be acted on in the field.²⁹

Stories based on a tweet or series of tweets that have “gone viral” and may be funny or in some way intriguing are also not uncommon. Bell cites the unfortunate case of British pop star Susan Boyle, who fell victim to a bungled attempt by her representatives to promote an album launch. In an effort to promote the album, the hash-tag #susanalbumparty was floated on Twitter. The crude connotations had apparently not been spotted by her PR team and the gaffe became a story.³⁰

Similarly, Howie cites stories that are sometimes based around a tweet, or series of tweets, by a celebrity. An example was the very public split between Kate Rothschild and Ben Goldsmith, which played out over a series of dramatic tweets between the two.³¹

*You get loads of stories nowadays where famous people use Twitter to make some kind of pronouncement and often it sort of ends up with egg on their face.*³²

However, Bell notes, tweets that have not gone viral can also have value.

²⁷ Fergus Bell interview

²⁸ Bell interview

²⁹ Bell interview

³⁰ “SuBo trends with ‘Susanalbumparty’,” Associated Press, accessed March 7, 2013, <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/subo-trends-with-susanalbumparty/story-fnek2kwj-1226521651410>

³¹ “Goldsmiths vs Rothschilds: these tweets will tear us apart,” William Langley, *The Telegraph*, accessed February 26, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/9321262/Goldsmiths-vs-Rothschilds-these-tweets-will-tear-us-apart.html>

³² Howie interview

If something is going viral, it becomes a story, but equally a lot of what I do is monitoring Twitter for breaking news. So, it's not necessarily become a big story, but I could say 'hey, I've just noticed that there is a lock-down at this school in Oklahoma, I think this is something we need to look at'. It might not have gone viral, but it's something that we need to look at.³³

Finding eyewitnesses

Because of concerns about reliability (discussed later, in the section on verification) few tweets from unknown Twitter accounts can be published as news by credible, mainstream media outlets. Many of the tweets circulated during the UK riots were based on little more than rumour or deliberate falsification. It was common for people to tweet a picture or piece of information inviting the impression that they were the source of it, whereas they had simply taken it from another account.

As has been shown, however, journalists could carefully use the information posted on Twitter to help guide their reporting. With a little more time, journalists can seize upon the person behind a Twitter account to yield further information for stories.

During the UK riots, James Ball was based at the office of the *Guardian* in Kings Cross. He sat alongside a journalist curating a live blog detailing the riots. Ball had two screens up showing a string of continuous searches on Twitter for details relating to the riots. He was constantly combing Twitter for terms such as #UKriots, #riotscleanup, "riots" and the names of key streets and areas where there was rioting. He tried to "mute" tweets on areas he already knew about, in order to slow the flow of tweets to a speed where something useful could be spotted.

I was filtering some of the Twitter stuff and saying, hey, you know this stuff that's going on here, these people seem to be there too, we could try to ring them, use some of their photos.³⁴

Ball would generally try to make contact with the account holder. *Guardian* reporters, or trusted associates in the same locality as the source of the tweets might instead verify the information or try to track down the source down.

As a result of a strict policy on clearing content posted online, Associated Press is regularly mining Twitter users for more detailed information. According to Bell, AP will not publish content from Twitter without permission from the source.

So sometimes we're a little slower ... but we know that we're giving our customers and members rights-clear content that we have verified.

³³ Bell interview

³⁴ Ball interview

Another reason for doing that is that we can tell the story behind the video or the photo because we have to speak to that person to get permission to use it. Therefore, we're able to turn it from a random clip on YouTube that anyone can see, in to a story.³⁵

Associated Press drew on the “hyper-local” information posted to Twitter in order to report on the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011.

It [Twitter] was used as an information board. It was kind of hyper-local sharing. I was following people that I knew were in distinct neighbourhoods. ... We were building up a picture of what exactly was going on.³⁶

Even within the geographical nexus of the uprising in Cairo – Tahrir Square – there were hyper-local sources tweeting detail down to goings on at medical tents, on perimeters or the palace.

[occupiedcairo](#) Loay El Birtaany
Medical supplies needed at temp. hospital at tahrir: neck supports and stitching thread [#jan25](#)
[02/02/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [28](#)

[elfoulio](#) Abdel-Rahman Hussein
Friends managed to sneak in food and medical supplies into #Tahrir, army still not letting these things in
[02/03/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [9](#)

Information on Twitter drew reporters to a location where they could talk in more depth with the source.

According to Howie, using Twitter to identify good sources of detailed information – beyond what has been posted – is now commonplace.

That's a definite, oft-used advantage of Twitter that is very useful. You can tweet the people that have tweeted about it and you might have someone who was there and you have the window, that opportunity to get really good eyewitness reports that would be far harder to get [otherwise].³⁷

A simple search of Twitter, using well-chosen keywords, can yield the information and sources sought. However, discovering news-worthy tweets and sources sooner may be more effective with the use of more advanced search tools. *Twitter for Newsrooms* notes a suite of applications to effectively sift through the noise of Twitter for relevant information and accounts. Tweetdeck,

³⁵ Bell interview

³⁶ Bell interview

³⁷ Howie interview

for example, allows continuous, real time monitoring of multiple search terms as well as information on trending topics.³⁸

Verifying content

As noted, journalists using Twitter for information during the UK riots had to discard a lot of unreliable information. Various different methods for establishing validity have been used during the riots and other major stories.

The first line of defence against false information in tweets was, for Ball, using only trusted sources wherever possible.³⁹ Others have endorsed this approach.

*If there are particular geographic areas which you as a reporter are really focused on it makes a lot of sense to try to identify credible sources in these areas before the news breaks.*⁴⁰

Similarly, Buttry argues that journalists should make regular use of Twitter so that when they really need it in a breaking news scenario, they know how it performs.⁴¹

Sometimes, however, excellent tips are yielded by complete strangers on Twitter. Buttry suggests a range of tests to check on the validity of such tweets. How recently the account was established, the nature of tweets from the account to date and the type of accounts they are following and being followed by can all help to establish authenticity or otherwise.⁴²

Further, when someone is tweeting about a breaking news event and is potentially an eyewitness or was involved, their tweets – if authentic – are very likely to be timed close to when the event unfolded. A lack of photographs may point to a lack of authenticity. Some Twitter accounts are also enabled to show the location from where a tweet was sent – a good indication of validity or otherwise when geographical information on a story is known.⁴³

The next step is generally reaching out to the person behind the account. Some accounts include their email address in their bio. Otherwise, responding via Twitter and asking for a phone number is an option endorsed by Lewis.

³⁸ “A strategy for search,” Twitter for Newsrooms, accessed February 1, 2013, <https://dev.twitter.com/media/newsrooms/report>

³⁹ Ball interview

⁴⁰ Craig Silverman, cited in “How to: verify content from social media,” Journalism.co.uk, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news-features/how-to-verify-content-from-social-media/s5/a548645/>

⁴¹ “How to verify information from tweets: check it out,” Steve Buttry, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://stevebuttry.wordpress.com/2013/01/21/how-to-verify-information-from-tweets-check-it-out/>

⁴² Buttry

⁴³ Buttry

As a rule, you've got to meet people. There are some exceptions when you don't meet them, when it's impossible to have a face-to-face meeting and speak to them and you have to find another way of verifying they are who they say they are. ... My general view is that tweeters are just online identities – they're not people until you meet them. I will always try to use a high degree of caution.⁴⁴

According to Ball, establishing contact over the phone during the riots was generally enough to establish authenticity.

In large part, the whole thing was just about getting a number and just speaking to someone – the fact that they're willing to talk to you on the phone, give you a name and have a bit of a chat is beyond most people who are [hoaxing].⁴⁵

Ball was able to subtly prompt corroborating details from account holders. For instance, they might be asked if they had any pictures closer to the action, from another angle or around the corner.

If it's someone who's actually there, and they're still there, then it's fine. ... A lot of the people who are sort of hoaxing or messing about, they don't have the nous to go 'oh no, I'm around the corner now' or something. They just stay quiet or you get 'are you doubting me?' sort of thing.⁴⁶

A major finding of a joint study into the riots by the *Guardian* and the London School of Economics, "Reading the Riots", was the strength of the Twitter community at knocking down rumours that emerged on the site.

A picture purporting to show the London Eye on fire, for example, was picked up and retweeted by a number of users. However, within 30 minutes the claim was refuted and soon after there were strong statements that the picture was a fake.⁴⁷

Users produced lists of trusted sources and links to live traffic cameras were posted to disprove claims of rioting in a borough.

It was regular people who were disproving rumours and there was more effort put in to proving that they're wrong than proving that they're right. I think that process of self-regulation, that as a whole this crowd has the capacity to work out what's right and what's wrong and to do so independently of journalists is a bit of a game-changer really.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Lewis interview

⁴⁵ Ball interview

⁴⁶ Ball interview

⁴⁷ "How riot rumours spread on Twitter," *Guardian.co.uk*, accessed January 22, 2013 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/interactive/2011/dec/07/london-riots-twitter>

⁴⁸ Lewis interview

In a 2006 study published in relation to blogging, Wei identified a kind of collegiality among online communities in support of discovering the truth.

People are ready for fuzzy credibility (if not too much). They take info with a grain of salt, watch the warning opinion signs, and make their own judgment calls. Moreover, concerns are partly balanced by a new kind of credibility – an ethos about the goals of the sites, such that even if they do not trust a good chunk of the audience, they trust the site and community as a whole.⁴⁹

Crowd sourcing

The power of large, multi-skilled online communities to drill their way to hard facts has encouraged some journalists to actively ask for help through a process known as “crowd sourcing”. The idea, particularly in relation to Twitter, is controversial among journalists.

The journalist most often associated with crowd-sourcing via Twitter is Andy Carvin. Buttry cites a case during coverage of the Libyan Uprising where Carvin tweeted the image of an exploded munitions shell and asked for clues on whether or not it was of Israeli origin.⁵⁰ The Facebook page of an Arabian media outlet, Al Manara, had suggested that the shell may have come from Israel. Carvin tweeted:

[acarvin](#) Andy Carvin
They ID it as Israeli. Maybe, maybe not. Need help to ID it. Anyone? RT
[@jan15egy](#): it's posted on Al Manara Press FB <http://goo.gl/LMfeU03/12/2011> Reply Retweet Favorite 3

According to an account of the 2011 BBC conference on social media, there was debate among attendees about such calls for help from the audience.

Sky News' Neal Mann ... insisted that traditional journalistic processes of verification should be applied to tweeting. In his view, Carvin risks magnifying inaccuracy.⁵¹

There is some resistance to crowd sourcing among journalists who covered the UK riots for similar reasons.

A lot of the time when people retweeted things saying ‘not verified’ or ‘is this right?’ they were just helping nonsense get out and about, really. I think it’s usually better to try and be a bit more subtle.⁵²

⁴⁹ Hsing Wei, “The Hype vs. Reality vs. What People Value: Emerging Collaborative News Models and the Future of News,” (Harvard: Spring 2006).

⁵⁰ Buttry

⁵¹ “BBC Social Media Summit Fixates on Creating ‘Open Media’,” Julie Posetti, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2011/06/bbc-social-media-summit-fixates-on-creating-open-media158.html>

The *Guardian*'s Paul Lewis has a very firm position against the sort of crowd sourcing used by Carvin.

*Everyone has a kind of different philosophical boundary for what's acceptable and what isn't. For me, that's just not quite right. I still think there is a contract whereby, regardless of the form of information, readers want us [journalists] to establish some form of truth or accuracy. ... And I think there is a degree of responsibility, particularly when you're in the midst of a riot, that when you send a tweet saying 'is there a Croydon fire?' lots of people in Croydon are going to think, 'ah, something's going on,' even if you said simply 'can anyone verify or is this true?'*⁵³

There are also doubts about how effective crowd sourcing via Twitter is as a news gathering tool. Some feel an explicit call for details or footage corrupts the news gathering process, encouraging less than pure accounts from witnesses to an event.

*There is something to be said for not directing people, or not showing people your interest in what they're saying [and instead, just] letting them share what is interesting to them ... allowing someone to just tweet what they are observing. The audience are the ones creating that content and they're the ones that know what they find interesting.*⁵⁴

Furthermore, some journalists have drawn not only a poor quality response to crowd sourcing attempts, but little or no response at all.⁵⁵

Nonetheless, a less explicit form crowd sourcing was successfully used by some *Guardian* journalists during the UK riots. As already discussed, Lewis found Twitter was useful as a "guide" when trying to find his way through the latest outbreaks of violence. On the first night of rioting, Lewis – a Hackney resident – turned first to Twitter to ask his followers if they knew what all the sirens were about. He then tweeted an open request for any advice.

[@PaulLewis](#): I'm heading to Tottenham riot. Advice anyone?

This was, perhaps, a subtly different kind of crowd sourcing, posing a question without suggesting an answer. It attracted some sarcastic replies:

[brianwhelanhack](#) Brian Whelan
@PaulLewis mask up!
[08/06/2011](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#)

[old_holborn](#) Old Holborn

⁵² Ball interview

⁵³ Lewis interview

⁵⁴ Bell interview

⁵⁵ Howie interview

RT @PaulLewis: I'm heading to Tottenham riot. Advice anyone? << Give me strength. Get a Plasma TV, Dixons. 52".
[08/06/2011 Reply Retweet Favorite 5](#)

Nonetheless, Lewis found such tweets were generally worthwhile during the riots.

People genuinely wanted to help – partly because it's a moment of civic crisis, so people feel they have a duty almost to kind of co-collaborate with journalists ... If you ask them what they think, you'll get all sorts of useless information, but if you ask them for specifics [you get further].⁵⁶

Even for a well-followed account, however, there seems little certainty about what Twitter can yield from a crowd sourcing query. In a 2010 study titled the "million follower fallacy" Cha (et al) found that influence on Twitter was much more dictated by the number of retweets and mentions than by the number of followers.⁵⁷ Thus, for instance, a mainstream media news account may be well-followed but find little resonance when asking its audience for help on a story.

Who are these people?

A vital issue with crowd sourcing, and any other kind of audience interaction via Twitter, is the question of audience identity.

In the immediate aftermath of the UK riots, some British politicians suggested Twitter had fuelled the violence, with users collaborating via the medium.⁵⁸ An analysis of some five millions riot-related tweets largely dispelled that notion, however. "Reading the Riots" found the overwhelming sentiment being relayed on Twitter was one of dismay or even disgust at the violence.

Amid the enormous database of tweets, researchers discovered only a tiny fraction that did attempt to either encourage or express support for rioters during the unrest. ... But the tiny fraction of tweeters who did use the public platform to support the riots were typically swamped with a deluge of overwhelmingly negative responses.⁵⁹

Guardian reporter Matt Taylor recalls:

⁵⁶ Lewis interview

⁵⁷ M. Cha (et al.), "Measuring user influence in Twitter: The million follower fallacy," in *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media* (Washington: 2010)

⁵⁸ "David Cameron considers banning suspected rioters from social media," Josh Halliday, Guardian.co.uk, accessed February 5, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/11/david-cameron-rioters-social-media>

⁵⁹ "Twitter and the riots: how the news spread," Guardian.co.uk, accessed January 29, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/07/twitter-riots-how-news-spread>

I didn't realise it quite as much at the time but subsequently, the people who were tweeting were very much people like me, if you like. Very much white, middle-class professionals who were watching or reporting other things that they'd heard or watching telly or watching out the window and so it was a sort of a self-selecting community of people talking to each other, really. None of the people involved in the riots were tweeting, or the police, and not that many members of the community who were worst affected by it were tweeting really.⁶⁰

The profile of users on social media like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn varies. However, it is clear that none are a truly representative sample of the population.

Helsper has argued the existence of a “digital underclass”. In her reckoning, the “underclass” is populated by a group increasingly more disadvantaged in their ability to use the internet and other information and communication technologies. Low educated and unemployed people are far less likely to have a broadband internet connection at home, and they have improved less for connectivity over time, compared with better off groups.⁶¹

Helsper’s argument finds some support in a range of surveys profiling social media users.

A 2012 survey by Pew found the fastest-growing demographic for mobile internet use was the 25-34 year old bracket, where 80 percent of cellphone owners used their phones to go online. This compared with only 68 percent among 35 to 44 year-olds and 16 percent among those aged over 65.⁶² Twitter is commonly, although not exclusively, used on a smart-phone.

A subsequent survey in the United States by Pew confirmed those on Twitter were more likely to be younger than older - 27 percent of 18-29 year olds used Twitter, compared with 10 percent of 50-64 year olds and 2 percent of 65+ year olds. There was little difference by income or education level but higher proportions were using Twitter among urban dwellers (20 percent among urbanites, compared with 12 percent among rural-dwellers).⁶³

⁶⁰ Taylor interview

⁶¹ “Britain needs a digital inclusion policy with concrete targets for both availability and take-up to counter the emergence of a digital underclass,” Ellen Helsper, accessed February 18, 2013, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/37962/1/blogs_lse_ac_uk-Britain_needs_a_digital_inclusion_policy_with_concrete_targets_for_both_availability_and_takeup_to_co.pdf

⁶² “Cell internet use 2012,” Aaron Smith, Pew Internet, accessed January 29, 2013, <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Cell-Internet-Use-2012.aspx>

⁶³ “Pew: 16% of internet users use Twitter, 15% use Pinterest,” Poynter.org, accessed February 14, 2013, <http://www.poynter.org/latest->

Further research supports the notion of Twitter as a relatively small, young and politically-engaged community. The 2012 Reuters Institute Digital News Report highlighted a “news absorbed” section of the population, which represented less than 10 percent of wider society. The group was “disproportionately important in the creation, consumption, and distribution of news,” the report found. The group, which represented about 7 percent of the population covered by the report, was more likely to comment on news, twice as likely to share news and accessed “significantly more sources of news”. Importantly, the “news absorbed” used Twitter “far more heavily than other social networks”. They were typically men, aged 25 to 34, often owning a tablet and most interested in international and political news.⁶⁴

Skepticism among some journalists about Twitter as a kind of “echo chamber” is also supported by research in to social interactions via Twitter. A study by Huberman (et al) looked at 309,740 Twitter accounts, which on average had posted 255 tweets, had 85 followers, and followed 80 others. The study found most active accounts interacted with only a very small fraction of their connections (accounts they followed or were followed by).⁶⁵

Trends recognition

Doubts about the representativeness of the Twitter community encourage questions about its suitability as a tool for recognising genuine community sentiment.

Ball notes, for instance, that the story of sentiment in relation to the riots that was told by Twitter was “incredibly different” to that told by Blackberry Messenger. The latter was a key method rioters used to communicate with one another about rioting activity.

*If you'd have been on one and not the other, you'd have got completely different pictures.*⁶⁶

Taylor agrees.

*I think it [Twitter] tells you a lot about what a certain demographic of people were concerned about during the riots. ... I think if you wanted to find out about the lives of the people involved, you wouldn't learn much from Twitter.*⁶⁷

news/mediawire/204348/pew-16-of-internet-users-use-twitter-15-use-pinterest/

⁶⁴ “Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2012: Tracking the Future of News,” Nic Newman (Ed.), accessed February 7, 2013,

<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/risj-digital-report.html>

⁶⁵ B. Huberman (et al.), “Social Networks that Matter: Twitter Under the Microscope,” in *First Monday* 14(1) (2009).

⁶⁶ Ball interview

⁶⁷ Taylor interview

Neither journalist dismisses the existing value and potential of Twitter for trend recognition, however. Social scientists, marketing professionals and even political experts have found, at least, potential in the insights Twitter could yield.

Hermida argues a place of Twitter in a new “ambient media” which collects news and perspectives from multiple and diverse sources. A future direction for journalism may be to develop systems that help the public negotiate and regulate the flow of information from sources like Twitter, Hermida suggests.

The purpose of these systems would be to identify the collective sum of knowledge contained in the micro-fragments in a manner that would bring meaning to the data ... One new role for the journalism professional may be designing the tools that can analyse, interpret and contextualise a system of collective intelligence, rather than in the established practice of selection and editing of content through the prism of news values.⁶⁸

Further, there is reason to believe the mood of Twitter at least approximates that of the wider population in some cases. A 2009 study cited by Thelwall (et al) showed average changes in Twitter mood levels correlated with social, political, cultural and economic events, although there was sometimes a delay between an event and an apparently associated mood change in Twitter.⁶⁹

The sense of a credible sentiment emerging from Twitter has excited some journalists to cite it in reports. In a survey of Twitter use among Australian journalists, Posetti found journalists “regularly monitoring public debate” on Twitter, which they acknowledged influenced their storytelling. ABC reporter Michael Turtle was quoted as saying:

It sometimes helps to use Twitter to gauge opinion on an issue ... You would certainly never claim the views online are representative, or seek to pass off a collection of tweets as an accurate poll. But it can point you in the direction of certain views, which can help guide some of the questions you might ask or angles you might follow-up.⁷⁰

Ball has a similar view.

As long as you're aware of the limitations – talking about people on Twitter is not the same as talking about people – I think it's got potential.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Alfred Hermida, “Twittering the news: the emergence of ambient journalism,” *Journalism Practice*, 4 (3) (2009).

⁶⁹ Bollen (et al.), cited in Thelwall (et al.), “Sentiment in Twitter events,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* (February 2011)

⁷⁰ Michael Turtle, cited in, Julie Posetti, “Twitterising Journalism and J-Ed: An Australian Political Reporting Case Study,” (Canberra, Australia: University of Canberra, 2009)

⁷¹ Ball interview

3. TWITTER AS A NEWS MEDIUM

Notwithstanding some important caveats, many journalists covering the UK riots found Twitter a useful tool for news-gathering. The significance of Twitter as a means of broadcast, however, is less clear.

The audience for a tweet, while in many cases quite large, is nevertheless invariably smaller than the average news story, published on a mainstream media platform. Moreover, until recently, there was no direct means of monetising content published on Twitter. An active presence on Twitter, therefore, has typically been regarded as little more than good for a media's brand and essential for news gathering.

However, the strong growth in numbers on Twitter has encouraged more thought about the commercial potential of the medium. This section of the study does not explore business propositions for media on Twitter. Rather, it weighs the editorial merit in journalists and media organisations as a whole publishing content on Twitter. It also explores the ways in which this can be approached.

Where people get their news

Several studies have shown the growing importance of Twitter as a source of news for ordinary consumers. The first Reuters Institute Digital Report, released in June 2012, found 43 percent of those surveyed aged between 16 and 24 got their news from social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook. It identified a change in the way people were discovering news, with social media challenging search engines like Google as a primary source. In the UK, one-fifth of all people came across a news story through a social network like Facebook or Twitter, with the proportion rising to 43 percent among young people.

Online is the most frequently accessed form of news for young internet users ... In general those who've grown up with the internet are showing markedly different consumption habits online. They discover and share more news through social networks and show less loyalty to traditional media platforms.⁷²

In the 2011 UK riots, *Guardian* reporter Paul Lewis found a large and international audience for his tweets, well beyond his own followers.

At one stage, I left my office and returned the following day and saw that in total, there had been 10,000 retweets ... and I got an extra 35,000 followers over the three days, so there was a lot of activity.⁷³

It is important to note that the 10,000 retweets Lewis attracted in one day

⁷² "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2012: Tracking the Future of News," Nic Newman (Ed.), accessed February 7, 2013, <http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/risj-digital-report.html>

⁷³ Lewis interview

suggest an audience in excess of 100,000 accounts. This is because Lewis's tweets were directly visible to not only his own followers but also all of the followers of those 10,000 accounts that chose to share his tweets. A significant portion of this new audience for his tweets decided to start following Lewis for themselves – thus the 35,000 new followers he noted.

The particular importance to news journalism of “retweeting” is suggested in a 2009 study, which found the practice was most associated with “information sharing”.

Those who are using Twitter for ‘daily chatter’ are less likely to be retweeting than those who are trying to engage in conversations or share information. ... Breaking news tends to be retweeted in the form of links to articles in media sources.⁷⁴

In other words, the most read posts on Twitter are likely to be news related. This hypothesis seems to be supported by some of the key trends on Twitter in 2012.⁷⁵

- *The London Olympics generated 150 million tweets.*
- *The US presidential election generated a large number of tweets - 10 million during the first debate, 31 million on election day and a peak of 327,452 tweets per minute while the result was tallied.*
- *A tweet from Barack Obama after his re-election on November 6, which read “Four more years” attracted more than 810,000 retweets - the most in Twitter’s history.*
- *“Superstorm” Sandy, which hit the east coast of the United States in late October, generated 20 million tweets.*

By Lewis's own account, his most retweeted posts were “from the ground, reporting things that were happening that other people could see”. The audience was likely to have been attracted to Lewis's tweets by the relevance, quality and authority of reporting, but also their speed. This is particularly the case because Lewis followed a policy of tweeting his observations and information before sending it to the newsroom to be published on the *Guardian* website.

As an organisation, it [the Guardian] recognises the importance of social media not only for its brand but also the type of journalism it professes to do, which is much more engaged and open and collaborative.⁷⁶

In Lewis's view, Twitter has encouraged a kind of “emerging genre”.

When big, national events happen, people turn to Twitter for the kind of neat

⁷⁴ D Boyd (et al.) “Tweet, tweet, retweet: Conversational aspects of retweeting on Twitter,” in *Proceedings of HICSS-43*, (Hawaii: 2009).

⁷⁵ “2012 Year on Twitter,” accessed February 15, 2013, <https://2012.twitter.com>

⁷⁶ Lewis interview

*epithets that interpret the world.*⁷⁷

Where journalists such as Lewis are themselves encouraged and encouraging others to publish significant news to Twitter before it appears elsewhere, this seems bound to draw larger audiences to the medium.

A study by Kwak (et al.) established those on Twitter were, in some cases, receiving news before the mainstream and global news network CNN. While CNN appeared to be ahead of Twitter on several stories, the study confirmed some stories such as accidents and sports results broke first on Twitter.

*Our preliminary results confirm the role of Twitter as a media for breaking news in a manner close to omnipresent CCTV for collective intelligence.*⁷⁸

Further, Lerman and Ghosh noted, Twitter has been the first source for stories not normally associated with pure breaking news, such as the introduction of new security measures for international flights in 2010.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, the audience for news on Twitter is still smaller than other mediums. In the 2012 Reuters survey, only 11 percent of those aged over 45 reported using social media for news. Between different social networks, more than half (55 percent) of people shared news on Facebook, beating Twitter, where 23 percent of people shared.⁸⁰

Mainstream media in the box-seat

Where news is sought and discussed on Twitter, the traditional, respected and mainstream media sources appear to be the most popular.

The “Reading the Riots” study established a strong bias in favour of mainstream media among the most popular or influential contributors to Twitter.

*Official Twitter accounts belonging to mainstream news organisations, such as @BBCNews or @Guardian, were mentioned more than 126,000 times in relation to the riots. Accounts belonging to professional journalists working for the same organisations got a further 89,000 mentions.*⁸¹

⁷⁷ Lewis interview

⁷⁸ H Kwak (et al) “What is Twitter, a social network or a news media?” In *Proceedings of the 19th international conference on world wide web*, (New York: 2010)

⁷⁹ Kristina Lerman and Rumi Ghosh, “Information contagion: An empirical study of the spread of news on digg and twitter social networks,” in *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, (Washington DC: 2010)

⁸⁰ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2012

⁸¹ “Twitter and the riots: how the news spread,” accessed January 29, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/dec/07/twitter-riots-how-news-spread>

Paul Lewis and CNN's Piers Morgan were the second and third most influential accounts, followed by BBC News, ITV News, BBC breaking and the Guardian at four through seven. A further three news organisations were in the top 20.

Other research supports this finding. For example, a 2010 study of over six million accounts found news organisations were among the most followed and retweeted. Celebrity accounts were the most popular for mentions.⁸²

Another study concluded: "News outlets, regardless of follower count, influence large amounts of followers to republish their content to other users."⁸³

A third study found that "one of the most important predictors of popularity" on Twitter was the source.

*This is in agreement with the intuition that readers are likely to be influenced by the news source that disseminates the article.*⁸⁴

In its 2012 Digital Report, Reuters identified a "number of clues" that showed the continued "dominant role" of trusted news brands in news provision.

*In terms of finding news, our UK respondents said they were much more likely to think about a branded news website than anything else.*⁸⁵

The Reuters report noted this was in accordance with recent research in the United States by Pew, which concluded that the reputation or brand of a news organisation remained the most important factor in determining where consumers went for news, particularly on mobile devices.

In an article for *Guardian.co.uk*, reporter James Ball explored the reasons behind the apparent dominance of more traditional, mainstream media names on Twitter.

*Established journalists, young and old, can network more easily than ever before [on Twitter], and their combined follower count and willingness to share each other's work can quickly drown out less established competition.*⁸⁶

⁸² M Cha (et al) "Measuring user influence in Twitter: The million follower fallacy," in *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*, (Washington DC: 2010)

⁸³ A Leavitt (et al) "The Influentials: New Approaches for Analyzing Influence on Twitter," accessed January 29, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/lzjlzq>

⁸⁴ R Bandari, "The Pulse of News in Social Media: Forecasting Popularity", paper presented at the International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, (Dublin: 2012)

⁸⁵ Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2012

⁸⁶ James Ball, "Social media has its own class divide," accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/dec/08/social-media-blackberry-messenger>

User-generated content, re-packaged

Twitter can also yield content from others that is in some way news-worthy when recycled on other platforms.

The BBC has employed a whole team of journalists to harness “user-generated content” (UGC) across its multiple platforms. The BBC’s UGC team sits at the centre of the newsroom sifting through emails, comments on stories, tweets, pictures and posts on Facebook.

Looking at the content they see, the journalists make an editorial judgement about what’s serious and relevant. They verify the sources of the content coming in. Once it’s cleared it can be used by all BBC media.⁸⁷

The tweets gathered by the BBC’s UGC team may be useful to help guide news gathering, but they could also feature directly as part of the coverage of a story.

During the riots, both the BBC and *Guardian.co.uk*, published verified tweets from non-journalists as part of the coverage on their websites.

After the third night of riots, as part of its live blog cover, the Guardian published:

9.16am: A Twitter user called [Lovecat McAwesome](#) — probably not their real name — tweets this:
[Beckenham Sainsburys and Bromley Top Shop have been looted, late last night.](#)⁸⁸

Ball had responsibility for selecting tweets for publication at *Guardian.co.uk*.

I sat next to the person doing the live blogging ... when we had someone [a reporter or contact] already there we could say, I know that is that street, this photo is clearly fine, we can use those.⁸⁹

The publication or broadcast of raw audience tweets has been pursued by some news organisations more heavily in relation to a discussion or debate on a story. This has taken the form of a live ticker-tape rolling along the bottom of a screen. Some are also reading out tweets on air. Applications such as TweetRiver are

⁸⁷ Nadja Hahn, “Ten (at least) Ways That Putting Social Media At The Heart of The Newsroom Improves Public Service Journalism,” accessed February 4, 2013, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2012/10/13/ten-at-least-ways-that-putting-social-media-at-the-heart-of-the-newsroom-improves-public-service-journalism/>

⁸⁸ “London and UK riots day three aftermath – Tuesday 9 August 2011,” accessed January 29, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/09/london-riots-violence-looting-live>

⁸⁹ Ball interview

suggested by Twitter to harness the most relevant tweets for a news broadcast or publication.⁹⁰

According to Howie, there are a growing number of instances where it is necessary to quote tweets verbatim in a news story.

*We often do quote a tweet verbatim ... usually it would be when there is a kind of element of celebrity to the story.*⁹¹

Moreover, Bell notes, the size of the audience on Twitter is now so significant that an exchange or incident of any nature on the medium can stand up as news-worthy.

*Twitter sometimes becomes a story. ... We'll pick something up that a newspaper reports but we don't worry that people don't read that newspaper. So we think it's fair to pick up something from Twitter even though not everyone is on Twitter. I think Twitter is relevant to everyone now, even if you're not on it.*⁹²

What to tweet?

While it is clear that reliable, mainstream media will be sought out as sources for news on Twitter, it is equally plain that some journalists and organisations enjoy more of a following than others. The differences in follower count, and therefore influence, invariably return to questions of content. Accounts consistently producing tweets with content that is in some way in demand will find their influence growing farthest.

News of any nature has the potential to find a strong following on Twitter. However, journalists who covered the UK riots found Twitter a particularly potent medium in the circumstances.

Matthew Taylor, like Lewis, noted a surge in followers as he tweeted a long stream of straight, observational content on the riots.

*It was really basic, stripped down reporting of just bearing witness and not going beyond what I'd actually seen. ... A useful function of journalism at that time was to say 'this is what I've seen, I'm bearing witness to this'.*⁹³

Taylor was relieved of any formal writing duties and left to tweet the riots unfolding in front of him. This meant his followers had the first look at his reporting and those not on Twitter or following him could see the best of his observations repackaged in copy on the *Guardian's* website or in its print edition.

⁹⁰ "Twitter for Newsrooms: #Report," accessed January 29, 2013, <https://dev.twitter.com/media/newsrooms/report>

⁹¹ Howie interview

⁹² Bell interview

⁹³ Taylor interview

The fluidity and speed of the event was really made for Twitter. ... I was tweeting stuff and that was giving an ongoing description of where I am and what's going on and I'm not shackled by the idea of having to sit down and structure a longer piece. ... It felt very much like that was the most useful and efficient way not only of getting the information out to the wider population but also really to get it back to the newsroom.⁹⁴

Examples of Taylor's observational tweets include:

[@mrmatthewtaylor](#) Currys in [#brixton](#) cleared out. Ppl carrying flat screen tvs etc away or loadg into cars.

[08/07/2011](#)

[mrmatthewtaylor](#) Matthew Taylor

Apocalyptic scenes in [#croydon](#). Smoke too thick to drive through and still someway from fire

[08/08/2011](#)

[@mrmatthewtaylor](#) rising tensions in Eltham, police forming a kettle

<http://twitpic.com/63m7l3> [#londonriots](#)

[08/09/2011](#)

Such tweets detailing the riots gave followers information they could not get elsewhere, according to Lewis.

In parts of London, they could hear the riots happening, they would turn on their television and they were watching repeats of what was happening earlier on in the evening because it was too dangerous to have journalists, so it was particularly potent for that reason. The geographical scale of it meant lots of people wanted to know what was happening near them and national news organisations tend to cover kind of the big picture. What Twitter enabled people to do was to treat it like a source of local news.⁹⁵

The Mumbai terror attacks, credited as the first major news event to be reported on Twitter, presented a similar scenario to the UK riots, Lewis says. Much of the city was closed off to citizens and journalists and Twitter filled an important space for information.

Taylor also noted a surge of followers when covering far-right political demonstrations. Again, the tweets relayed live, intimate details that were hard to find elsewhere.

I could earwig on conversations and give a sort of flavor of what it's like to be on a march and people were sort of really in to that.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Taylor interview

⁹⁵ Lewis interview

⁹⁶ Taylor interview

Examples of Taylor's tweets from far-right demonstrations include:

[@mrmatthewtaylor](#) Tense at liverpool st. [#edl](#) and anti fascists v close. Bishopgate closed. Pol helicop overhead.
09/03/2011

[@mrmatthewtaylor](#) Big police presence in Luton for [#edl](#) demo. Town boarded up.
02/05/2011

[@mrmatthewtaylor](#) [#edl](#) performing for the media outside luton pub. 'Allah allah who the fuck is allah' 'we are the famous edl'
02/05/2011

A study of the Twitter accounts of 150 journalists and media organisations found such concentrated, live tweeting strongly increased following and influence.

Posting a concentrated number of tweets in a short time span – 'tweet burstiness' – live tweeting an event, for example, can increase your engagement 50 percent more than your expected baseline.⁹⁷

The daily news cycle does not consistently yield dramatic breaking news scenarios such as extremist political demonstrations and wide-spread rioting, however. Media organisations and journalists often, therefore, revert to tweeting "a bit like headline writers,"⁹⁸ which creates a risk of becoming mundane. However, as Hahn notes, a tweet can be written in many different ways.

Twitter's study of 150 journalists and news organisations showed accounts with a growing number of followers were "tweeting their beat". This means exploiting specialist knowledge to deliver unique content not readily available elsewhere. According to the study, tweets including the handles of other users as well as hashtags also extended influence.⁹⁹

All of the journalists who tweeted coverage of the UK riots received replies from followers. Sometimes followers asked further questions, corrected information or personally attacked the journalist for encouraging or glamourising the riots. The extent to which journalists should engage with replies is a matter of debate.

All three *Guardian* journalists interviewed for this study suggested they liked to engage with followers as much as possible. However, this was not considered a priority and conversations via Twitter were less frequent during the riots.

⁹⁷ "Twitter study: Hashtags and URLs can double engagement," accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/mediawire/189021/twitter-study-hashtags-and-urls-can-double-engagement/>

⁹⁸ Hahn

⁹⁹ "Twitter study: Hashtags and URLs can double engagement."

As a general rule, I do try to reply to anything that's not [crude personal abuse]. ... But if I'm honest, during the riots I didn't [reply] that much because I was getting so many replies and I was so busy that it wasn't my primary concern at the time.¹⁰⁰

The journalists saw some value in responding, where possible, to encourage worthwhile discussion and to nurture potential future sources.

Tweeting with personality

There is a consensus among the *Guardian* journalists interviewed for this study that a successful Twitter account must portray personality.

All three journalists felt tweets directly in relation to rioting activity had to be responsible and mostly straight in tone. However, outside of the bounds of a civil emergency, there was a common view in favour of more colour, sharp analysis and wit.

Even during the riots, after a night of reporting, Lewis posted tweets that were humanising.

[paullewis](#) Paul Lewis

Off to bed now. Thanks for valuable help and support. Something tells me we'll all be back here tomorrow. [#londonriots](#)
[08/07/2011](#)

Lewis explains:

You don't want to be an RSS feed. I kind of think it operates in the same way as normal social worlds do. The fact that at the end of every night, at 7 in the morning when people were waking up, [I was] going to bed and saying 'exhausted' and talking about the places I'd been, made people connect far more than if I'd just been a kind of @guardian report of what was happening. I think that really is key – it's Justin Bieber who has got a record number of followers, not his record label.¹⁰¹

Ball, a prolific tweeter known for a mixture of wry and often opinionated tweets, agrees “edgy” tweets “work better in the medium”.

It's very, very easy when you're doing short, terse messages to just sound like an android. I think in that kind of medium, people actually want a bit of personality and so on.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Taylor interview

¹⁰¹ Lewis interview

¹⁰² Ball interview

This more personalised approach tends to place a journalist more inside of a story. It can risk compromising any claims to objectivity a journalist may make. Posetti argues that it amounts to a “transformation of journalistic practice and identity being effected via Twitter”. Journalists are re-cast as “individual reporter-brands” with a focus on follower-engagement and the crowd-sourcing of research, verification and story dissemination.¹⁰³

Some journalism educators are actively encouraging this approach. At Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, students are advised to use Twitter to “add value to their online identity”.

*Sometimes the value is revealing yourself as a nice, maybe even witty, person they’d like to be around (do this in small doses). Other times, you might add a comment to a link you’re forwarding or further discussion in a meaningful way.*¹⁰⁴

While in agreement with the approach, Matthew Taylor of the *Guardian* finds it does not sit comfortably with him.

*Often, to be good on Twitter, you have to quite like being a personality, slightly informal and chit-chatty and opinionated. I’m slightly old-fashioned about reporting and I don’t really want to be the story. ... I’m not really that comfortable with being a character on it and using it to build up an online personality or profile.*¹⁰⁵

A richer narrative

While less inclined to inject his personality in to his tweets, Taylor has found it a strong platform for publishing particular details during news incidents. In a modern digital news environment with continuous deadlines, it is an excellent medium for continuously feeding audiences short, sharp and interesting news details.

For instance, Taylor tweeted during the riots about a telling exchange he had with a police officer who did not know he was a journalist.

[@mrmattthewtaylor](#): Police office just told me "we can't cope. We have passed breaking point" [#londonriots](#)
[08/08/2011](#)

¹⁰³ Julie Posetti, “Twitterising Journalism and J-Ed: An Australian Political Reporting Case Study,” paper presented at World Journalism Educators Conference, (Boston: 2009)

¹⁰⁴ Leslie-Jean Thornton, cited in Kelly Fincham, “What every young journalist should know about using Twitter,” accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/journalism-education/188408/what-every-young-journalist-should-know-about-using-twitter/>

¹⁰⁵ Taylor interview

Tweets of this nature represent a new and additional layer of story telling that offers the audience more. Journalists can use Twitter to reveal particular details about an event that, by the end of the day, would not always make it in to a straight news wrap for a newspaper, broadcast or website.

Some Australian political journalists discovered this side to Twitter during coverage of a leadership coup against the then leader of the opposition, Malcolm Turnbull.

In a paper by Posetti, *Sydney Morning Herald* Political Editor Annabell Crabb explained how Twitter offered a more detailed picture of the story over time.

A story filed for a newspaper at the end of the day would, of necessity, be obliged to edit out some of the stranger twists and turns that occurred during the day; the deals that fell over, the partnerships that formed and disintegrated all within the space of an orthodox news cycle.¹⁰⁶

For readers that want more and journalists that have more to give within a daily news cycle, Twitter is a very effective medium.

Safe tweeting

Journalists tweeting coverage of the UK riots faced strong criticism from some for allegedly encouraging the violence by their contributions. From the first night of his work on the story, Taylor says he received online abuse over his tweets.

To try and counter the criticism and avoid glamorising or encouraging rioting, *Guardian* reporters say they tweeted in a very sober, straight tone.

I was much calmer during the riots. The one thing I constantly tried to do was read it twice for dual meanings because you often found when people were quite high dudgeon and so on ... with certain bits of phrasing, people are often leaning towards the calamitous. So there was that double read to make sure you were saying absolutely no more than you knew and as a tweet in your own voice, trying not to be sarcastic or tongue in cheek because I wasn't sure the mood was right.¹⁰⁷

While journalists have been encouraged to include colour, comment and creativity in their tweets, there have been instances where the medium seems to have encouraged an overly casual approach. Journalists have run in to trouble on Twitter when neglecting the normal professional standards of ethics and the law.

Several British journalists cite the Lord McAlpine case, in which the baron was falsely slandered by hundreds of Twitter accounts for having committed child

¹⁰⁶ Posetti

¹⁰⁷ Ball interview

abuse. The Twitter accounts of some professional journalists were among those to have spread the libel.

*A fair number of the people who were wrongly identifying him were journalists who undoubtedly would have never even considered doing something like identifying a pedophile in their publication without prior legal consultation or establishing that it's really true. Somehow, they viewed Twitter as a broadcast tool that demanded a lower threshold for truth, and I think that's really dangerous. Through experiences like that, we're all starting to learn that we have to be people, but we can't be lazy and sloppy.*¹⁰⁸

Journalism educators have advised students to mitigate against such errors by clearly defining the purpose of their Twitter account as a serious platform and staying away from rumours and SMS language.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Lewis interview

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Lieb, cited in Fincham

4. CONCLUSION

Part of the jigsaw

There appears to be some ambiguity about the importance of Twitter as a broadcast platform for traditional news media. There is no disputing that it is already a popular source of news for many people. However, it is not clear that this poses a direct threat to more traditional forms of online news reporting. In fact, mainstream media organisations appear to be in a strong position to capitalise on the strength of their brands in the large and growing Twittersphere. How this is achieved and how much of a priority it ought to be are the leading questions to emerge from this study.

There seem to be established patterns to the most influential news media Twitter accounts – they are fast with the news, they offer original insights, and they are often specialised for a particular audience. Yet this new form of journalism casts a shadow over any claims to objectivity and appears to have prompted some unprofessional lapses among otherwise professional journalists. Moreover, while the platform has undoubted value to audiences, it remains unclear exactly how significant value is created for proprietors.

The argument is simpler when it comes to news gathering, however. The 2011 UK riots underlined the strength of Twitter as an essential reporting tool. Journalists covering the story had to be alert to any number of hoaxes and remain vigilant about reporting in an essentially anonymous medium. Reporters could also not pretend that Twitter was providing anything like the full picture of what was going on during the riots. But, when used carefully, it was possible for reporters to be guided through the mayhem towards stronger reporting. The riots showed that Twitter could yield very localised information, quality eyewitnesses and breaking news before it was published anywhere else.

I think it's a really important and significant piece of the overall jigsaw, and it has changed the way we do things to some extent. But the basics of going out and reporting what you see accurately and interrogating it and finding out and making judgement calls on what's important and what's not ... is all the same. It's just another tool with which to do that. It has helped to do that but it's not transformed the basics.¹¹⁰

News gathering first, broadcast second

Because Twitter has shown itself more clearly to be a force for news gathering, this study suggests it has more immediate value for reporting than broadcasting the news.

¹¹⁰ Taylor interview

For an agency like the Associated Press, the traditional news wire remains the most important part of the business and Twitter is considered almost entirely a tool for news gathering tool.

*It's an element of our news gathering process, it's not the only thing. ... Twitter is the news gathering tool that leads us to the story.*¹¹¹

Similarly, the *London Evening Standard* currently puts emphasis on Twitter as a “widely used” news gathering tool, as opposed to a broadcast tool.¹¹²

However, journalists at the *Guardian* appear to have shown during the 2011 riots that an established presence on Twitter, through skillful publication on the medium, enhances Twitter’s news gathering power. Reporters Paul Lewis, James Ball and Matthew Taylor all had established followings on Twitter before the riots broke out and were therefore comfortable, skilled and effective at leveraging the medium when it was at its most potent.

In order to extract the full value of Twitter for news journalism, it is not enough to simply observe. Modern journalists must carve out their own space in order to keep up when the next major story breaks on Twitter. Only with experience, influence and skill with Twitter will journalists have the best chance at improving their output covering the next UK riots, Egyptian Revolution or Mumbai terror attacks.

¹¹¹ Bell interview

¹¹² Howie interview

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