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JOURNALISTS' TWITTER NETWORKS, PUBLIC DEBATES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Peter Verweij and **Elvira van Noort**

Journalists at major media houses in South Africa use Twitter as a journalistic tool for crowd sourcing, breaking news events, live blogging and to balance, check and cultivate sources. This paper analyses the use of the social network platform by the top 500 South African journalists. The findings suggest that pluralism and openness are important characteristics of the South African Twitter network. Although two strong sub-networks can be detected, we conclude that they give structure to the network and enhance the role of journalists in public debates and democratic decision-making. This is shown in the analysis of three trending news topics related to politics and crime. The last trending topic of the study questions the process of the individualization of journalism through Twitter. The paper concludes by confronting its generic findings from the perspectives and opinions of leading journalists and editors.

KEYWORDS authority; branding; crowd sourcing; individualization; public debate; news source; social network analysis; Twitter

Journalism and Social Networks

The “network paradigm” relates to fundamental characteristics of modern society (Castells 2000). This paradigm does not only refer to physical structures, the worldwide digital connections associated with the internet, but also to our social relationships and our myriad ways of communicating. Our social relationships are transforming from face-to-face relations to a broader-based network of contacts wherein basic constraints like time and space are no longer important. After the mass introduction of computers and computer networks in the 1990s, e-mail appeared as an easy way to communicate. In contemporary times, social media have been added to our communication mix: with Twitter considered a “newsy” tool, Facebook predominantly used for social events and LinkedIn for professional contacts. These platforms share the same characteristic as they are forms of social network-based communication (Huberman et al. 2009). Huberman revealed that there are few actual interactions between people on Twitter except for those few that matter and reciprocate their attention.

The analysis of social networks was deeply influenced by these developments. First, because our social relationships became more and more network based. And second, the technology or the toolbox to conduct a social network analysis was further developed. From more academic tools like UCINET and Pajek to easy-to-use tools like NodeXL (Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith 2011), which is an add-on for Microsoft Excel, and open source-based Gephi (Hirst 2011). The initial centrality measures used in

analysis were refined and listed (Wasserman and Faust 1994). With these developments, it is safe to say that these tools can now be effectively handled by journalists to produce data-driven stories (Meyer 2004; Verweij 2012a).

Network-based communication through social media transformed the classical model of mass communication. Society moved from a sender–receiver model with a two-step flow (Baran 2011) to *We the Media* (Gillmor 2004). The differences between these two models can be summarized in the following keywords: one-way versus two-way (interactive); top-down versus bottom-up; closed versus open; institutional journalism versus individualized journalism; former public versus we media; atomized public versus community building and individual versus crowd sourcing (Rosen 2012).

Twitter is a fitting illustration of these characteristics of change in communication. The tool includes all “we-media” aspects. New media in general (from online newspapers and blogs to social media) transform the process of communication by making it more open, pluralistic and democratic because it gives more room to engage in public debates. In addition, the changes in the way we communicate have consequences for the media, in general, and for journalism, in particular (Bardoel and Deuze 2001).

There are three interesting trends in academic research: the position of the journalist, the changes in journalism practice and the role of the public. First, in the transition from old to new media the position of the journalist becomes more individualized (Bardoel 2010), whereas previously their position was strongly based on the position of the medium he or she worked for. The media houses and titles are not the only brands, individual journalists are becoming more and more brands in themselves.

Second, there are the changes in journalism practice. A topic that has been the subject of wide research is how media, journalists in general, use Twitter (Pew Foundation 2011). One aspect in these growing researches is the role Twitter plays in the journalistic process of newsgathering (Cohen 2009; Farhi 2009). Twitter is a source for news, which is miles away from the classical approach (Hermida 2009; Gans 1980). Hermida’s ideas about Twitter as an “alarm bell”, and crowd sourcing, open up a new era for journalism (Verweij 2010). In addition, Twitter is not only a source but also a medium. Media use it to enhance their digital news first strategy to broadcast the latest news and headlines on Twitter.

Finally, there is the interactivity of the medium, which opens up new ways for starting, engaging and deepening the public debate. A first attempt to bring together Twitter, public debate and social network analysis was an analysis of connections between political reporters and members of the Parliament in The Netherlands (Verweij 2012b). It was interesting to notice that the connections between members of parliament and reporters were not exclusively ordered along the traditional ideological and religious lines. The idea of a political communication elite (Luyendijk 2010) could not be confirmed, but instead the study showed a multi-centered network of different groups of journalists. An open, non-elite structure of the political reporters’ network is a condition for democracy and public debate. This research builds on this earlier work while focusing on the South African context.

South Africa, Journalism and Social Networks

Theories and research findings discussed above mostly originate from studies based on journalism and reporting in the Western world. Transferring them without

reflection to another context, especially Africa, is not without problems. However, post-independence South Africa shares a number of characteristics with Western countries: such as their organization of the media and standards for journalism practice. Nonetheless, the involvement of the public in debates is different because of the social deprivation of the bulk of its citizens, a challenge directly connected to South Africa's apartheid past.

The permeation of digital technologies into various social structures in Africa has given rise to discussions around the so-called "digital divide". However, in the specific case of South Africa, the gap is smaller than in other African countries. Second, the internet revolution, or the creation of a network society, is facilitated and bridged by the wide distribution of cell phone networks across Africa.¹ Thus, the digital revolution in (South) Africa is a mobile revolution. LAN-based connections to the internet were a prerogative of universities, governmental institutions and companies while mobile internet and WiFi conquered the rest of the population. Nowadays visiting websites, news portals, sending e-mail and using social media like Twitter and Facebook is shaping a new routine for South African professionals such as journalists. This is reflected in an interesting moderated list of over 500 journalists on Twitter.²

Besides professionals, the public is also active on the internet and in particular Twitter; 5.33 million South Africans are using Facebook on the Web and 2.43 million were on Twitter by the end of August 2012 (WorldWideWorx 2012). When compared to South Africa's general population of 51,770,560 (Stats SA 2011), just under 5 percent of South Africans are tweeting. This number might seem relatively small but according to the South African Social Media Landscape 2012 study, Twitter shows a growth rate of around 100,000 new users a month—which is equal to Facebook (WorldWideWorx 2012). Together these users sent 9.6 million tweets on average on Mondays and again on Fridays (WorldWideWorx 2012), while the rest of the week is slightly below that figure.

The role of journalism in public debates is influenced by the political context in South Africa. This context has the following characteristics (Harber and Renn 2010). The African National Congress (ANC) became the leading political party after apartheid. After 10 years in government it became clear that the political promises that were made were not realized. In other words, the socio-economic situation of the majority of people has not fundamentally changed. The situation has only changed for a small part of the black population. But at the same time the government on all levels struggled to spend money according to the budget, which raised discussions of fraud, nepotism and the misuse of power. Corruption, fraud, crime, the misuse of public money and mismanagement became trending topics in politics and the media is eager to expose the wrongdoers (Harber and Renn 2010).

Confronted with this situation and the critical and leading role of journalism, the government proposed a bill for regulation of the press that was passed by Parliament in April 2013. All the negative PR sits uneasily with the government which is expected to pass the "Protection of State Information Bill" in June 2013. This Bill aims to protect state secrets against whistle blowers and investigative journalists. Just under 400 civil society organizations have joined in the Right2Know campaign to protest against the Bill. The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) argues it makes investigative journalism more difficult and may silence potential whistle blowers in corruption cases as it criminalizes knowingly accessing classified information that could be potentially in

the public interest. This Information Bill could have a chilling effect on public debates by the media, including the activities on social media platforms such as Twitter.

Research Design

The emergence of a network society in South Africa, indicated by the use of Twitter by the public and journalists, in the context of the political problems of a one-party democracy, makes it interesting to apply social network analysis to the use of Twitter by journalists in South Africa. Such an analysis could give an impression of the openness, transparency and pluralism of the public debates and the role of journalists. Twitter is, of course, not identical with that debate but can give an indication of the involvement of journalists. The leading question of this research is: What is the structure of the Twitter network among journalists in South Africa and how does this network contribute to public debate?

There are various important aspects that need to be studied. First there is the Twitter network between the journalists. What is the structure of this network? Is it open or closed? Is there a leading elite or are there different centres or groups? From the perspective of democratic decision-making, it would be important to have a pluralistic network. If the network is closed and in the hands of an elite, the public debate could completely be controlled by that elite. And that would have a chilling effect on public debate. Therefore, we start with the analysis of the structure of the Twitter network of South African journalists. Out of the 500 selected journalists on Twitter, we reconstructed the social network. We used two tools for analysis: Gephi and NodeXL. Both resulted in the same network graph and centrality measures such as In-Degree and Page rank. Especially In-Degree is interesting, because it lists the number of followers of a journalist on Twitter and could therefore be interpreted as being an important news source. A higher In-Degree could therefore be interpreted as a higher ranking on authority in the network.

Details of the structure of the network can be found by paying attention to the medium- print or audio-visual the journalists are working for. Finally, we pay attention to different sub-groups in the network using an algorithm (developed by Wakita and Tsurumi 2007). This algorithm creates sub-groups by adding these individuals to a sub-network of a group under the condition that it enlarges the density. So the algorithm tries to find groups with a higher network density than the total network density. The problem of course is the interpretation, which is a general problem in network analysis. Groups are the result of a mathematical calculation and that figure representing a group needs to get a meaning in the real world.

Second, is this Twitter network different from other journalism Twitter networks? We compare the general characteristics of the South African network with British and Dutch journalism Twitter networks (*Guardian* 2011; Verweij 2012b). The dimensions for comparing the networks are limited to general network measures as density and distance of the network.

Having analyzed the journalistic Twitter network in general, we confront questions on how involved journalists are in the various public discussions. In order to analyze the role of journalists on Twitter in public debates, we selected three examples. These examples are typical for major political issues in South Africa and are related to

issues like corruption, fraud or crime. Our focus on the role of journalists and the public is based on three examples: the case of the former premier of the Eastern Cape province Balindlela; the debate over the use of public money for President Zuma's new home: Nkandlagate and the Oscar Pistorius murder investigation.

This academic approach is not complete without views from journalism practice. We conducted four detailed and intensive interviews with leading journalists focusing on their views about Twitter and public debates. The conclusions form the last part of this research.

SA 500 Journalists Twitter Network

This data set of 500 South African journalists on Twitter was available from the Hacks List, a project of South African journalist Alastair Otter. Otter explains on his website that the list is largely self-moderated and that any South African journalist can sign up. All the information is pulled from public data (Twitter profiles) except for the media house they work for—that is provided by journalists themselves.³ We downloaded their connections in August 2012 and analyzed them in two open-source programs: Gephi and NodeXL. The network consists of 506 individuals who share 2503 connections between them—this gives a density of 9 percent. This figure means that only 9 percent of all possible connections in this particular Twitter network are realized. It is a low figure, meaning that this Twitter network is not closely connected. The average distance in the network is almost two steps (1.9). Although the network is not highly connected, a majority of the members could easily be contacted in less than two steps. Meaning contacting a person is possible via another person who is in between. So journalists on Twitter in this sample can easily contact one another as they are closely following each other.

Authority

Having 506 journalists in the network, the first question is who is the most important; or who has the highest authority? There are various measures but they all come to the same result. In-Degree (number of incoming contacts; i.e. on Twitter the number of people following) gives a measure for being an interesting news source. Table 1 gives the top 20 for In-Degree. It is interesting to note that the majority of journalists in this top 20 are connected to print journalism or the online edition of a print newspapers. In their tweets they are adding information to a news event or commenting on the event. Two reporters of Radio 702 are on the list, because they use Twitter in their radio broadcasting to communicate with their listeners. There is one newspaper, the *Mail & Guardian* (M&G), a weekly, that has a leading position in this top 20. The implication is that for the M&G Twitter is an important tool and because they are very active on Twitter, their presence on this list is higher. Secondly, they are an important source of news, scoring highly on authority. The position of two journalism academics, Guy Berger and Anton Harber, is remarkable on this list. And finally, freelance journalists are also very active on Twitter and enjoy considerable authority.

TABLE 1
Top 20 for authority in the SA 500 network

Twitter profile name and In-Degree	Medium	Group
ferialhaffajee 361	<i>City Press</i>	5
nicdawes 327	<i>Mail & Guardian</i>	0
gussilber 298	Freelance	1
mandywiener 288	<i>EyeWitness News</i>	4
phillipdewet 269	<i>Mail & Guardian</i>	1
stephengrootes 268	<i>EyeWitness News</i>	4
maxdupreez 264	Freelance	4
hartleyr 262	<i>Sunday Times</i>	4
adriaanbasson 234	<i>City Press</i>	4
702johnrobbie 227	Radio 702	4
bruceps 227	<i>Business Day</i>	1
verashni 217	<i>Mail & Guardian</i>	3
mandyldewaal 217	<i>Daily Maverick</i>	0
antonharber 217	Freelance	4
carienduplessis 214	<i>City Press</i>	4
art2gee 213	Freelance	1
guyberger 211	Personal	0
shapshak 207	Stuff	1
akianastasiou 205	Radio 702	1
brankobrkcic 205	<i>Daily Maverick</i>	1

On average the individuals in this top 20 have written 10,000 tweets (with a maximum of 23,000 and a minimum of 2300). Although the range is quite broad, the high average indicates that these individuals are active on Twitter; and as representatives of the journalistic profession it measures the importance of Twitter for journalists.

Figure 1 is a visualization of this top 20 list. The size of the font for name is set so the vertices (individuals) with the higher In-Degree are bigger. The impression from the number of edges (connecting lines) that this top 20 network is highly connected is correct. The density in this sub-network is 83 percent and the average distance is 1. The conclusion is that this group is an elite or clique in the bigger network of 500. These individuals listen to and follow each other on Twitter closely. They take the lead in discussions between journalists and the wider public on Twitter. However, their position should not be overestimated, they have a leading role but in respect to the "openness" on Twitter it is not the case that they control the debates. Secondly, the importance of each member of the top 20 is not equal, as reflected by the font size. Finally, it is clear that a journalist who wants to become an authority on Twitter, should at least be connected to individuals in this sub-group. Journalists could become important on Twitter by connecting to some of these high-ranking individuals.

Table 2 lists the number of tweeting journalists per media house or title. For example, the M&G has 20 tweeting journalists, which is 4 percent of the total number in our sample. The last column lists journalists with the highest authority and Nic Dawes takes the lead at the M&G. In terms of authority on this list, we notice first the importance of freelance journalists. They probably use Twitter for getting jobs, finding news or commenting on news, as well as for referring or linking a wider readership to their published stories. In second position is the M&G, a weekly which is a hard-copy newspaper as well as online. The *EyeWitness News* (EWN) is an online news organization

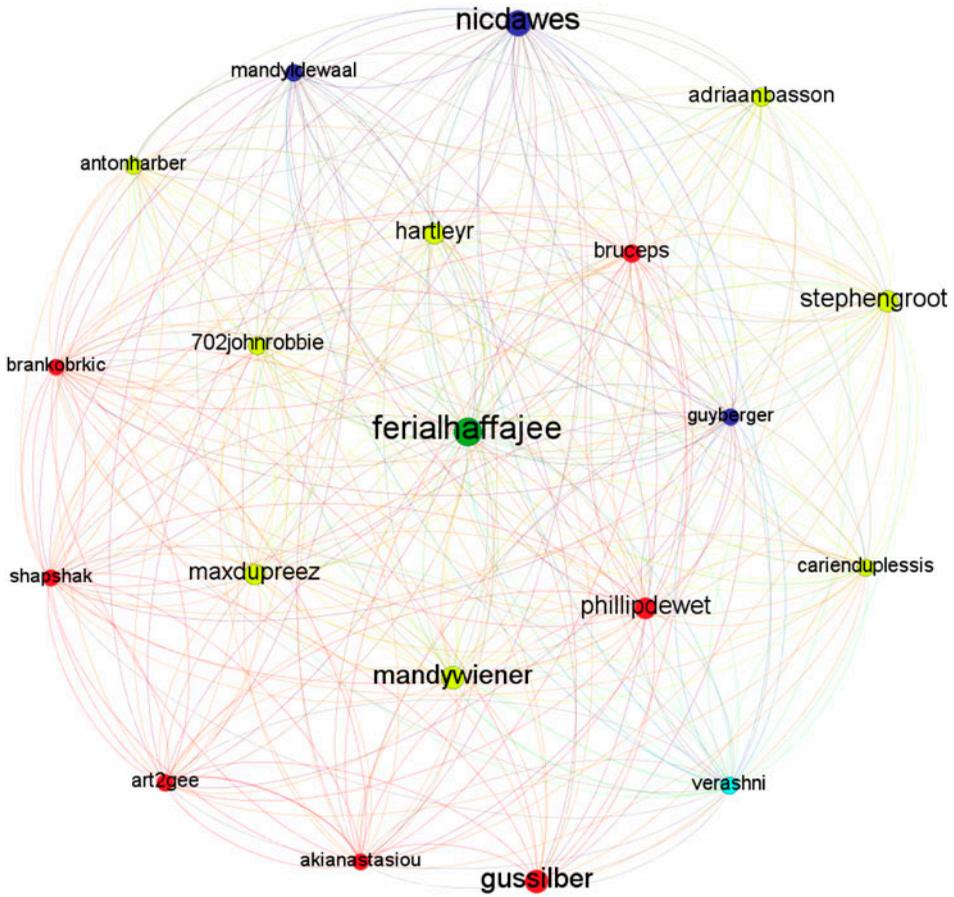


FIGURE 1
Top 20 authorities in the SA 500 network

TABLE 2
Top 10 media on Twitter

	N	%	Twitter profile name
Freelance journalists	89	18	gussilber
<i>Mail & Guardian</i>	20	4	nicdawes
<i>EyeWitness News</i>	16	3	mandywiener
<i>Business Day</i>	14	3	bruceps
<i>eNews</i>	14	3	nbikitsha
<i>Caxton</i> , local and community	12	2	amandzing
<i>The Star</i>	12	2	kevinmccallum
<i>Daily Maverick</i>	10	2	mandydewaal
<i>New Age</i>	10	2	rylandfisher
<i>News24</i>	9	2	janniemom
<i>Nuus24</i>	9	2	mynus24

only with a strong following on the Web, while *Business Day* is both online and print. Interestingly, radio/TV journalists are not represented here.

While journalists are being followed on Twitter through inbound connections or the In-Degree, they are also following other people. That is the number of outbound connections, or the Out-Degree. Out-Degree could be interpreted as looking outward to find news. A high Out-Degree is an indicator for being a news hound. Although we think there is a limit to the number of individuals it is possible to follow, it is interesting to examine closely the difference in the Out-Degree in the top 20. It is not the case that a high score on authority goes together with a high score on being a news hound. On the contrary, if we consider authority and news hound as ideal types each at the end of a scale, then we have the pure authorities on one end and the pure news hounds at the other.

When we look at a top 20 on Out-Degree, there is only one journalist scoring high on both In- and Out-Degree: @art2gee or Arthur Goldstuck, a writer and online freelancer. The leading position in the top 20 for outbound, the top news hound, is Alastair Otter, a journalist at the Independent Media Group, but also a hacker and founder of the Hacks List, the list of names of 500 South African journalists on Twitter. He is positioned 26 for In-Degree.

If we calculate the difference (DIO) between the sum of the In-Degrees minus the sum of the Out-Degrees: $DIO = \text{SUM}(\text{in}) - \text{SUM}(\text{out})$, then DIO could be used as a measurement for being more authority/news source or news hound. Although DIO as a measure is not stable and standardized, if DIO is strongly positive it refers to being a key news source; if the outcome is strongly negative it points to being a news hound. Calculation of DIO for the top 20 on authority gives +3063, which points to a key news source, as expected because we selected the highest In-Degrees.

Groups

This section directs attention to the sub-groups in the network of the 500 tweeting journalists. The construction of sub-groups in the network is based on the algorithm developed by Wakita and Tsurumi, trying to enlarge the density in each sub-group. It should be noted that the density in these groups is in general not more than twice the density in the total network (18 percent maximum). These groups are more closely related than the total network, but they are far away from the density of the top 20 authority network.

In the Twitter 500 network six groups or clusters can be constructed, as shown in Table 3. The problem is naming the groups resulting from the calculations of the algorithm. We have named them on the basis of the employer or media house of the tweeting journalists. Group 0 has 145 members, of which 28 percent of the total number in the network and DIO score refer to news hound. The group mainly consists of journalists working for newspapers. The leading "Twitterati"⁴ is Nic Dawes of the M&G. M&G return again in group 3, where the @Verashni (Deputy Editor Verashni Pillay) plays a similar role as Dawes in group 0, but this group is mostly composed of journalists of Media24 and has a DIO score referring to news hound. Gussilber, a freelance journalist, is heading the sub-group of business and financial newspapers. This group is smaller, because it is more specialized and their DIO score refers slightly to being a news

TABLE 3
Groups in the Twitter network

Top Twitterati	Group	DIO score	N Twitterati	%	Composition
nicdawes	0	-478	145	28	News and background
gussilber	1	+90	91	18	Business/finance/ICT
edenvalejourn	2	-56	10	2	Local and community papers
verashni	3	-295	56	11	Media24 newspapers
mandywiener	4	+251	169	33	News and analysis
ferialhaffajee	5	+211	35	7	Sports

source. Sub-groups are not homogeneous, composed of journalists of one media house or newspaper. The biggest group, group 4, has 169 members and is dedicated to news and analysis. The DIO score refers to news source. It is remarkable to see that a journalist, Mandy Wiener, of the online news-only EWN, takes the lead here. This points to the fact that online media are more active on Twitter.

Mail & Guardian

So far our analysis has revealed an important and leading role for M&G. The question, however, is how are the journalists of M&G divided over the various groups? Table 4 attempts to provide an overview of this.

Table 4 shows a division over the different groups in the network. Six M&G journalists are connected to the news and opinion group where freelance journalists are in the majority. Nine of them are connected to the news and analysis group where other leading media are represented as well. The DIO score indicates news hound. Journalists at the M&G are connected to various sub-groups in the network, related to different beats and topics. This spread is important to have a variety of sources, which add to balanced reporting.

Because of the pivotal role of M&G in the 500 network it is important to analyse their network. The mutual connections within the M&G Twitter network are shown in Figure 2. The size of the profile photo corresponds with the authority within that group, with @NicDawes being the biggest. It is obvious that the number of connections in this graph is higher than the average in the network. The M&G Twitter network consists of 20 individuals. Their average distance is 1.2 and the density is 45 percent. This is another closely connected group. Remarkable is the fact that the DIO score for

TABLE 4
Number of *Mail & Guardian* journalists per group

Group	N
0 News and background	6
1 Business/finance/ICT	3
3 Media24 newspapers	2
4 News and analysis	9

Although the general structure of the South African Twitter network is not fundamentally different from European networks, there are a few remarkable positions. First, we constructed a top 20 on authority. What is striking is the density in this group, together with the distance. The conclusion drawn from this top 20 group is that the Twitter elite is inescapable. However, one should be careful not to attribute too much power to this group. Given the openness of the Twitter network in general, it is safe to conclude that this group can set the agenda for discussion, and also influence the directions of discussion. This is an important role in South Africa's political discussion, especially given the lack of a strong political opposition rendering it a *de facto* one-party democracy. Their Twitter ratings are giving them the opportunity to voice criticism and opposition against the government.

Second, the M&G network is characterised by a high density and short distance. What makes the M&G network influential is the relations with the top 20 on authority. And on top of this, their connections with the other subgroups in the Twitter network. The position of the M&G group provides a firm basis for investigative journalism and political debate related to main problems in South African society and government. The position of M&G as one of the influential newspapers of the opposition is reflected by their Twitter ratings.

It is tempting to conclude that the M&G and its journalists are leading in the Twitter network. But one should not overlook other factors in the network that tone down M&G's top position. First, the number one spot in the Top 20 is reserved for the Editor of the *City Press* (@FerialHaffajee); and second, journalists from other media, like EWN, rank highly as well; and finally, a number of freelancers have a similarly high position. The graph of the top 20 for authority shows a more connected network of journalists from various other media. Journalists at the M&G are also closely related to other groups in the Twitter network. The South African Twitter network can therefore best be characterized as open and poly-centered, consisting mostly of newspaper journalists, but with radio and TV in second position.

One can conclude that the South African Twitter network of journalists is characterized by pluralism; notwithstanding the leading role of the top 20 on authority and the M&G sub-network. The openness and pluralism expressed by the various sub-groups in the Twitter network are important prerequisites for shaping public debate and in the end democratic decision-making.

To show the role of these groups of journalists in the Twitter network in public debates, we conducted three case studies of the role of journalists and the public focusing on Balindlela, Nkandlagate and Pistorius.

Case Studies

Balindlela

Nosimo Balindlela is the former Premier of the South African Eastern Cape province. She was a member of the ANC but lost ground in the struggle for the presidency between Zuma and Mbeki and joined the break-away party Congress of the People (COPE). In November 2012 she joined yet another party, the Democratic Alliance (DA)—South Africa's main opposition party led by Helen Zille. Balindlela's political transformations—changing parties three times—triggered a raging discussion

on Twitter. Our analysis shows a network of 1350 individuals sharing 2215 connections. This is a totally unconnected network with a density close to zero, which is very typical for a discussion on Twitter. Also the average distance between the individuals is large.

Of interest is that within a couple of hours 1350 individuals took part in the heated online discussion. The most important topics in this Twitter discussion included the following issues:

- Balindlela was not a very effective Premier, especially in fighting fraud and balancing the budget.
- This attitude was enforced by her personal style: the traditional dress and walking bare feet.
- Her move to join the DA was explained as political opportunism, a political rolling stone switching alliances from ANC to COPE and finally DA.
- Is joining the DA an asset? Does this move make the DA a more acceptable party for the black population in the Eastern Cape?

If we take incoming connections on Twitter—In-Degree—as a measure, we notice that there are two leading groups in this discussion on the Twitter network: a group of individuals around the DA and its party leader Helen Zille, who are welcoming Balindlela and are defending her decision. Second, there is a group of various journalists from different media, who are questioning the decision, and are firing up the debate. The rest of the participants (although they can be split up in more detailed groups) are citizens, party members and activists, adding positive and negative comments to the debate.

The position of the following journalists on Twitter is worth paying attention to: @ewnreporter (EWN team), @stephengrootes (Stephen Grootes, host of Radio 702 and Cape Talk radio, political reporter at EWN), @mandywiener (Mandy Wiener, reporter at EWN) and @city_press (*City Press* newspaper online team). They all play a central role in the discussion. Notice that Grootes and Wiener score high on authority as news sources; and Wiener also leads group 4 about news and analysis, also with a news source character. Zille's DA party has a majority in Cape Town, where EWN has one of their head offices.

Nkandlagate

President Jacob Zuma's renovation of his rural home in Nkandla using 248 million rand of the taxpayers' money leading to accusations of misusing public funds sparked a wild outcry on many fronts including on Twitter. The case is dubbed "Nkandlagate". The Twitter network of individuals focusing on this scandal is again a snapshot, this time taken on November 24, 2012. In this discussion 841 people who share 1321 connections took part. As is expected, the average distance between the individuals is large and the density is low. Of particular importance is the role of journalists: when we look again at In-Degree we can see most of the individuals involved are journalists trying their best to get attention for their publication about this topic but also crowd sourcing through asking the public for comments to use in their stories.

Several journalists from our top 20 on authority play a leading role in this ongoing discussion; e.g. @adriaanbasson (Adriaan Basson, assistant editor at *City Press*) and @ferialhaffjee. Interestingly radio talkshows took a leading role in the Twitter

discussion of this scandal; e.g. @capetalk567 (Cape Town news and talk station), @702johnrobbie (John Robbie, host of Radio 702), generally using Twitter for crowd sourcing and presenting the tweets during the programme.

From both examples it is evident that journalists on Twitter play an important role in public debates. Although journalists from our top 20 network and from the M&G network are participating, their role is limited. It is important to notice the influence of other media organizations, for example, the *City Press* and various radio programmes as noted above.

Pistorius

Oscar Pistorius became the first amputee to win an able-bodied world track medal in 2011 and in 2012 he was the first double leg amputee to participate in the Summer Olympics. In that same year he set world records in the Paralympics. The rising star was charged with the murder of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp after he had fatally shot her in his home on February 14, 2013.

Between February 14 and 20, 2013 the hash tag #OscarPistorius was trending worldwide on Twitter. In total 1,306,313 tweets with the hash tag #OscarPistorius were sent in seven days—that is 130 tweets per minute. The Pistorius case reveals other aspects of journalists in the Twitter network (Verweij 2013a, 2013b). It is a perfect example of the “alarm bell” concept (Hermida 2009). The Twitter alarm bell goes off when *Beeld*, an Afrikaans newspaper, tweets: “Oscar Pistorius skiet sy vriendin in sy huis dood omdat hy glo dink sy is ‘n inbreker” (translated: “Oscar Pistorius fatally shoots his girlfriend in his home because he believes she is a burglar”). Journalists dive into the breaking news story. Within no time the number of tweets is up to a quarter million. There is a familiar pattern: the first tweets share the news, and later on they shift to reasoned opinions and statements as well as jokes and comments (Verweij 2010).

During the Magistrate’s Court hearing about Pistorius’ bail application, Twitter becomes the only direct news source because cameras and microphones are not allowed in the courtroom. But on Twitter all the information/facts need to be spread in 140-character tweets. This takes special skills for a court reporter: the ability to be concise but detailed, to be able to describe emotions and observations, to keep the facts straight and to make sure each tweet is a follow-up on the previous message so that the audience can keep track of the unfolding story. These skills were displayed by a cross-section of journalists. EWN reporter Barry Bateman played a leading role in this case. His followers on Twitter went up from 17,429 on February 15 to 122,743 on February 21. His mentions went up to 89,592.

From this one can conclude that he became an important source on Twitter, broadcasting the latest news from the court, and explaining to the public what was going on. This shows that Twitter gives individual journalists a strong platform for connecting with their various stakeholders. It further demonstrates that the quality of reporting is not related to the reputation of a media house. The journalist is the brand and he or she builds their own reputation, thus on Twitter the credibility of a medium is transferred to the individual reporter. The Twitter network therefore drives “individualization” among journalists. This implies that in public debates and discussion within society the role of the media could decrease in favour of the increasing centrality of individual journalists who have the skills to tell a story on Twitter.

Journalism Practice: Perspectives from Practitioners

To give these findings a perspective from journalism practice, we conducted interviews with four journalists selected from the top 20 leading on authority as noted earlier (see Table 1). We spoke to Ferial Haffajee of *City Press* (No. 1), freelance journalist Gus Silber (No. 3), radio journalist and host of Radio 702 Aki Anastasiou (No. 19) and his colleague Stephen Grootes (No. 6). Their opinions about Twitter reflect both the role of the news hound and news source.

Haffajee stated that Twitter “has enhanced my journalism and enriched it in many ways”. She argued that she is now “faster, sharper and perhaps more interesting because of Twitter.” As editor, Haffajee noted that she uses Twitter to “break news, float opinions, fine tune editorial thinking [and] take the pulse of a section of our reading public”. These developments pointed to a changing news routine and the way news is assembled, including the expansion of ideas and setting of an agenda. Similarly, Silber highlighted that Twitter is unique in that in the mainstream media “you can’t allow for debates like this, in which so many different groups of people are heard, for example on television.” Further comparing Twitter to television and other traditional media Silber stated that “it will be a while before Twitter is seen as just another media channel. It still has a powerful air of novelty and trendiness about it”. But “hardly any major news event these days goes unaccompanied by analysis, in other media, of what people are saying about it on Twitter”.

For Silber, media houses need to have journalists who are capable of “filter[ing] information and spread[ing] both news and commentary that is easy to digest ... It’s still a relatively new tool and journalists still struggle to switch from the traditional media mindset to publishing online”. Anastasiou from Radio 702 agrees that using Twitter as a journalistic tool is a different kind of reporting. “With the Pistorius case the pace was so quick you could easily get lost in the conversation”. He adds that journalists need a different set of skills as Twitter is what radio was 20 years ago. “It is where people get their breaking news and it is fascinating to see how it has changed the way we do journalism”.

Some of the characteristics of Twitter are new to journalists: its immediacy, the direct connections with the public and the skill to tell a story in 140 characters. For Anastasiou this professional transformation is “like having your finger on the button of a nuclear missile, if it goes wrong it goes horribly wrong and you can’t stop the missile!”. His colleague at Radio 702, Grootes, similarly argued that:

Twitter gets information out so quickly, it is much harder to control. This means that facts get into the public domain before any gatekeeper, whether an editor or otherwise can stop it. This has some risks but is generally a very positive development, information wants to be free. Twitter allows for that and keeps it cheap!

Anastasiou was the second journalist to tweet about the Pistorius incident (referred to earlier), on the day of his arrest, and the first one to tweet about the incident in English. He posited that Twitter provides a different context for reporting “If you as a journalist don’t use it, you do yourself a disservice as news breaks on Twitter, radio, television, newspaper—in that order.”

However, despite all the positive arguments, Haffajee also points out that Twitter can be “a time and productivity drain” and that one has to be aware of the real value

of time spent on Twitter as there is no line of revenue. Adding to the skills that Bateman showed us, journalists also need to be able to “discern between personal and professional views”. Haffajee stated: “I am occasionally wild on Twitter and I’ve had to tame this voice because what I say here can be seen as the opinion of the newspaper.”

Conclusions

One of the problems of social media research is that the research object is constantly in flux. Numbers of followers are changing significantly—and by the day. With data only from a specific position on the Twitter timeline, this sets certain limitations to the conclusions one can draw from a study such as the one explored in the present research. If your data are a snapshot, your conclusions will partly be as well. Secondly, while Twitter is an important social network that drives public debates, it is not identical with that debate as a single platform. However, using this platform as an indicator, we have tried to draw conclusions about South African journalists’ Twitter relationships and the connections with the public debates.

The first impression from the South African Twitter 500 network is that its structure does not differ very much from journalists’ networks on Twitter in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands (Verweij 2012b). A close examination of the structure of the South African Twitter network shows that it is composed of different groups, consisting of journalists from various media. Although the M&G takes up a strong position, and the top 20 on authority revealed a highly connected group, we concluded that neither of these two groups have complete control over the Twitter network; and further, based on the construction of various sub-groups, that the network has different solid centers and an open structure in which references to news source and news hounds are equally important. This pluralistic and open structure of the South African Twitter network is one of the important conditions for a space in which there is a free and open debate in South African society. Further, the role of the M&G and the top 20 on authority creates a strong platform for voicing and leading criticism and opposition.

Looking into three more detailed case studies, we concluded that the media and journalists on Twitter played a leading or central role in the debate. The role of the journalists was not limited to finding and bringing the news, but also extended to commenting and inviting the public to take part in topical discussions. Twitter, as a journalistic network, therefore strengthens the independence of public debate in a situation where the government aims at more control. The importance of this role of social networks like Twitter is growing in a situation where the government is trying to control the public debates through their “Protection of State Information Bill”. The traditional media are easy to control, since they are centralized. Controlling these media is, therefore, equal to controlling the source. Social media, however, are decentralized and, therefore, far more difficult to control by governments. Shutting down social—“we media”—as recent history in the Middle East has shown, is almost impossible.

Credibility is an important yardstick for judging the quality of news and reporting. Traditionally credibility was attached to the media houses and titles that journalists were representing. Twitter shows that journalists can now easily become “famous” as a brand unto themselves, where they are no longer related to the media house or title. The result of this could be that the role of individual journalists in public

debates increases and that his/her credibility becomes an important condition for an open and independent public debate. On the other hand, the position of individual journalists as a brand in public debate could be weaker than journalists working for well-established media houses and newspaper titles. Whether this positive outlook on Twitter and the public debate is enough to escape the growing control of the South African government and their Information Bill remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. World Bank data (<http://data.worldbank.org/country/south-africa>) show the number of broadband networks.
2. For a Twitter list of 500 South African journalists, see <http://hacks.mediahack.co.za/>.
3. See <http://hacks.mediahack.co.za/about.php>.
4. "Twitterati" as used here refers to the "Tweet elite", whose 140-character tweets attract and capture the attention of thousands of followers. The term is part of a whole new vocabulary predominantly peculiar to the Twitter subculture.

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