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‘There’s a Starman Waiting in the Sky’ⁱ: Mourning David #Bowie on Twitter

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Twitter responses to the death of musician David Bowie as an inroad to a discussion about characteristics and functions of Twitter in the mediated relationships between celebrities, fans and the popular culture industry. The study focuses on questions regarding the nature of the Twitter community, types of emotions as well as expressions of fan creativity, and the composition of online mourners. To this end, it provides a broad analysis of all tweets with #Bowie in the first 48 hours after Bowie passed away (N=252,318) and in-depth, quantitative and qualitative analysis of tweets with 100+ retweets (N=130).

Results show high levels of retweeting and a limited number of tweets retweeted exceptionally often, suggesting a Twitter ‘elite’ leading the online mourning. This elite consists predominantly of media figures, celebrities, artists and music industry representatives rather than ‘regular’ individuals and fans, resulting in limited expressions of parasocial relationships. Besides being conduits of expressions of grief and information exchange, tweets focus on positive affirmation in tribute to Bowie’s work. Results confirm that Twitter provides a virtual gathering of mourners who are [presumably] looking for recognition of loss and for expressions of support.

‘THE MOMENT YOU KNOW’ⁱⁱ: DAVID BOWIE’S DEATH ON TWITTER

This contribution analyses the Twitter responses to the death of musician David Bowie as an inroad to a discussion about key characteristics and functions of Twitter in the mediated relationships between celebrities, audiences and the (media and) creative industries.

On 10 January 2016, David Bowie (real name David Robert Jones) passed away at the age of 69. His death ended a decades-long, productive and successful career in music and popular culture. With an estimated sale of 140 million records to his name, his musical legacy ranges from debut album *David Bowie* (1967) to *Blackstar* (2016), released two days before his death, and included albums identified as ‘game changers’ in popular music. According to Buckley (2005: 1), Bowie was ‘a heroic heretic, who in the 1970s redefined what it was to be a star, in the 1980s became a hugely successful, Hollywood-styled mainstream pop icon and in the 1990s ended up a self-reinvented cultural aesthete’. Indeed, peers and critics considered Bowie a popular cultural icon, praised as an innovator and ‘master of reinvention’, pioneering unique combinations of music and visual presentation, thus paving the way for future generations of pop artists (Stevenson, 2006). Bowie's early hybrid androgyny provided a space for fans to experiment, to cross borders and build an original identity, while his most recent work allowed older fans to reconnect with their own, evolving identities (Redmond, 2013).

Bowie’s death was very unexpected for media and audiences, following a battle with cancer that was fought away from the public eye, which was indicative of Bowie’s efforts in recent decades to keep his private life just that: private. As such, Bowie was a global star but not a ‘typical’ celebrity, defined as a well-known person of which the private life attracts as much or more attention than public endeavours (Turner, 2004). In keeping with this, upon Bowie’s death, his family and close circle remained silent, with the exception of a press release and a single tweet from his son, film director Duncan Jones, confirming Bowie’s passing. (<https://twitter.com/ManMadeMoon/status/686441083648212992>). In contrast, Bowie’s death was followed by an upsurge in Twitter activity, generating 252,318 tweets with the #bowie hashtag within the first 48 hours of his passing.

Such Twitter ‘explosions’ have become common phenomena in the wake of major events, precipitating a body of work that analyses Twitter not just as a web-based microblogging service (Java et al., 2007) but as a social network (e.g. Bruns, 2010). Most relevant to the Bowie case is research into the role of Twitter in so-called ‘iMourning’: audiences and fans using Twitter and other social media as means to unite virtually and share their grief, mourning the famous person’s passing. Examples include research into social media responses to the deaths of singer Michael Jackson (Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee, 2011; Sanderson and Cheong, 2010), Apple founder Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013), singer Amy Winehouse (Lansdall-Welfare et al., 2012) and actor Robin Williams (Mallow, 2015), amongst others. These studies tap into insights from fan studies relating to fan communities, fan creativity and parasocial relationships. They provide varying evidence for a notion of Twitter as a ‘democratic’ communicative space where fans and wider audiences create communities of mourners, express parasocial ties, perform creative acts and engage in worthwhile communication.

However, there are findings in these and wider Twitter studies that question certain aspects of Twitter as a democratic communicative space. First, it remains unclear how and to what extent reactions to major events (i.e. breaking news) on Twitter constitute a community of conversing users (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), a collaborative effort to ‘work the story’ (Bruns and Highfield, 2012) or simply a mass of individual reactions. Second, beyond rudimentary insights into online grieving as an exchange of information and an expression of emotions (Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee, 2011), relatively little is known about the types of emotions and fan creativity involved, themselves indicative of the depth of celebrity-fan (parasocial) relationships. Finally, little or no research has looked at the composition of the online mourners. Are Twitter mourners reflective of a ‘Twitter of the masses’ or steered by a

popular culture industry-related elite, reflective of a level of commodification of online mourning (Kyllonen, 2010)?

These questions are developed theoretically by taking inspiration from research into Twitter and wider insights from the fields of celebrity studies and fan studies, journalism studies and political communication. Subsequently, the research questions are addressed empirically through analysis of Twitter data at two levels: a broad quantitative analysis of all (N=252,318) tweets with the #bowie hashtag in the first 48 hours after his death was announced, and a more in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of every tweet that was redistributed more than 100 times (N=130) in those first 48 hours.

A case study such as this can only say so much, as it involves just one event (death of David Bowie) and its aftermath in one medium (Twitter) in a short period of time (48 hours). Yet it is also precisely this combination of a spatial, temporal and substantial limitation which gives meaning to the case study, as it allows us to understand very specific processes and functions through detailed de- and re-construction (Flyvbjerg, 2006). As such, our case study aims to be both descriptive, interpretative, and theory-testing (Vennesson, 2008), and its findings should provide insights that have relevance beyond understanding the particulars of Twitter responses to the death of Bowie. Indeed, we believe that the relevance of this case study is threefold. First, the analysis bridges the gap between studies of Twitter in journalism studies and in celebrity and fan studies. Up to this point, no efforts have been made in that regard. Second, the study goes beyond the Big Data analysis that dominates Twitter research. While this approach has proven very valuable, our combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of a smaller, key sample enables a more in-depth understanding of what is being said by whom on Twitter. Third, different from earlier studies into mourning a celebrity death, this case focuses not on a dramatic or spectacular passing, such as M. Jackson's, but on what is to be one of many old-age-related (causes of) death of a generation of popular culture

artists and icons. As such, we believe it provides insight into returning functions and characteristics of Twitter in the mediated relationships between celebrities, fans and the popular culture industry.

‘WE CAN BE HEROES’ⁱⁱⁱ: TWITTER, CELEBRITY AND MOURNING

Celebrity death on Twitter

The role of Twitter in mourning a famous person must be understood in the context of the relationships between the various actors that together make up celebrity. Celebrity is here considered as a construct, created through negotiations between the famous person and his/her entourage, the media and audiences. Celebrities need the media for (controlled) exposure of their public endeavours, even if they are fiercely protective of their privacy, like Bowie. In turn, celebrities help media compete for audience (and thus advertising) shares by providing news that draws audiences’ attention. The latter by and large depend on media for (indirect) access to and information about celebrities. This allows them to build parasocial (i.e. one-sided and ‘virtual’, yet deeply felt) relationships with their favourite stars (Claessens & Van den Bulck, 2015; Marshall, 2006). Together, this so-called celebrity apparatus ensures the (ongoing) process of celebritization (Turner, 2004).

Social media, including Twitter, have become key players in the mediated relations between celebrities and audiences. Twitter has been heralded as a means to bridge the real and symbolic distance between celebrities, media, and audiences. It allows celebrities to communicate (seemingly) directly, intimately and authentically with audiences (Marwick and boyd, 2011). At the same time, Twitter provides audiences and fans with the tools to discuss celebrity news with the celebrity and others (Holiman, 2013), to strengthen parasocial

relationships with the celebrity (Click et al., 2013) and, in the case of real fans, to engage in reactive activity (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014).

The latter role is most prominent when a celebrity is involved in a dramatic event like a celebrity scandal (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2013) or, indeed, a celebrity death. The relationship with the famous person may be only parasocial, yet the feelings of loss and grief are 'real'. As celebrity culture has become ever more pervasive, an interest in and a feeling of closeness to a celebrity is no longer restricted to the - once believed 'special' - category of fans but has become part of everybody's lives (Sandvoss, 2005). At the same time, not everybody engages in fan behaviour to the same extent or in the same way (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), and the depth of feeling generated by and expressed at the loss of a celebrity will depend on the intensity of the parasocial bond (Eyal and Cohen, 2006).

Radford and Bloch (2012) observe that, increasingly, audiences engage in a very public display of grief at the passing of a celebrity; they see the 1997 death of Princess Diana as a turning point in this phenomenon (see Brown et al., 2003; McGuigan, 2001). In recent years, Twitter and other social media seem to have created a space for (geographically and otherwise dispersed) people to come together to publicly grieve and mourn the deceased celebrity (DeGroot and Leith, 2015). Studies into social media responses to the death of Michael Jackson (Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee, 2011), Steve Jobs (Holiman, 2013), Amy Winehouse (Lansdall-Welfare et al., 2012) and Robin Williams (Mallow, 2015) show the eruption of Twitter responses with hashtags referring to the deceased becoming Trending Topics within hours of the event. It is the nature of these Twitter reactions, their content, senders and interrelations that this study wishes to analyse for the first 48 hours after the death of David Bowie was announced.

Grieving, fan creativity and information exchange

In their analysis of Twitter reactions to Michael Jackson's death, Sanderson and Cheong (2011: 329) observe that social media provide audiences with opportunities to actively and publicly communicate their parasocial relationship and feelings with others, reminiscent of Meyrowitz's (1994) notion of a parasocial break-up. Other research (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014) has identified several types of parasocial relationships, ranging from considering the celebrity as an acquaintance ('I felt I knew him quite well'), as a friend ('he was like my best friend') or close relative ('he was like a father/brother to me'), to identification with the celebrity. This leads to the research question: What kind of parasocial relationships with David Bowie were expressed on Twitter in the first 48 hours after his death was announced?

Sanderson and Cheong (2010) see this sharing of emotional attachment as part of a wider process of audiences mourning a celebrity. They point in particular to fans that use social media to communicate their 'grief and interact with other fans who also are mourning for the loss of a parasocial partner' (Sanderson and Cheong, 2010: 329). DeGroot and Leith (2015) draw parallels between (research into) stages and types of grief regarding a social (family, friend) and a parasocial relationship (celebrity), and found similar coping mechanisms. In both cases, people showed 'emotional expressions, reminisced, mentioned heaven or the afterlife, and discussed the deceased's positive characteristics' (DeGroot and Leith, 2015: 5; see also DeGroot, 2012). Sanderson and Cheong (2010: 327) suggest such social media practices help people to accept the celebrity's death. This begs the research question: What kind of expressions of grief can be observed on Twitter in the first 48 hours after the death of David Bowie was announced?

A key aspect of expressing grief is that of creativity-performativity, which is also considered a key characteristic of more intense fandom (cf. Fiske, 1992; Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Hills, 2002). This, too, has been observed in reactions to a celebrity's

passing. In the physical world, this involves leaving flowers and gifts at a celebrity's homes or grave (Brown et al., 2003), impromptu ceremonies, or naming a place or product after the deceased (Radford and Bloch, 2012). Radford and Bloch (2012) see these expressions becoming 'cherished and sacred' (140) and, as such, they function as 'remedies for feelings of loss' (140). In a Twitter context, creativity can refer to the tweeting of visuals of such acts in the physical world, but also of memes and other art designed to commemorate the deceased. Commercial and social-profit organizations as well as individuals can play into this by offering products related to the celebrity, encouraging a level of commodification (Radford and Bloch, 2012; Gibson, 2007). This study analyses if and how the death of David Bowie ignited creativity on Twitter in the first 48 hours after his death was announced.

However, Goh and Lee's (2011) analysis of a sample of 50.000 tweets following the death of Michael Jackson revealed that more than half concerned information gathering/dissemination. This suggests that next to grief-sharing, people look for and share information. This follows insights from journalism studies that recognize Twitter as a medium for ambient news, strengthened by the coming of age of Twitter (Bruns, 2010; Hermida, 2010). When a major news story, such as a celebrity's death, breaks, Twitter users exchange and curate information regarding the event (Bruns and Burgess, 2011). This suggests that Twitter activity around these events focuses on news as much as on emotions and grieving, resulting in the research question: to what extent did the death of David Bowie ignite an exchange and curation of information on Twitter in the first 48 hours after his death was announced?

Community, Cooperation, Conversation

Bruns and Burgess (2011) refer to Twitter users engaged in information exchange regarding major events as 'ad hoc publics' (Bruns and Burgess, 2011), suggesting that

hashtagged use of the service assists cooperation and community building around the event. For Recuero et al. (2012), social media move beyond such ad hoc publics, as they are instrumental in creating longer lasting communities. Such communities, also considered typical of fandom, are seen as crucial in building a bond which, in turn, is believed to result in increased engagement and cooperation (Putnam 2000). Twitter, then, is seen to help create a support system that allows people to find solace with fellow mourners in case of a celebrity death (e.g. Holiman, 2013).

However, little is known about the characteristics of the community generated by social media in terms of networked connectivity. Twitter's potential to connect users and to increase the spread of messages warrants a better understanding. Does such a community consist of individuals united by the shared use of a particular hashtag (in this case #bowie) or does it go beyond that? Are there indications of a virtual 'conversation' as Honeycutt and Herring (2009) suggest? For one thing, it can be interesting to understand the relevance of spreading messages through retweets and the popularity it generates for certain Twitter accounts. This study analyses the ways in which responses on Twitter to the death of David Bowie constituted a community in the first 48 hours after his death was announced.

Twitter Democracy or Twitter Industry?

As one of the social media, Twitter is seen as a place where 'ordinary citizens', become key actors on stage as they engage with Twitter to seek and discuss news, express emotions and engage in fan behaviour. Such a view of Twitter as a grassroots democratic space is reflected in work on the impact of digital and social media on the relationship between celebrities and audiences (e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2011), but also in discussions in journalism studies regarding the role of Twitter in allowing ordinary people to help shape the news (cf. supra on ambient news). This is reminiscent of the technological democracy

paradigm that has surrounded the introduction of social media against the top-down paradigm in which traditional mass media are situated (Loader and Mercea, 2011).

However, certain academics question Twitter as ‘democratic medium of the masses’. For instance, regarding celebrity culture, authors like Thomas (2014) consider Twitter as just another medium in a marginally evolving celebrity culture that does not alter the celebrity-audience hierarchy. Similarly, recent work on hard news such as election coverage suggests that Twitter ‘tends to be dominated by established actors (journalists and politicians), whereas citizens only play a modest role’ (Harder et al., 2016: 1). In an attempt to analyse in general ‘who says what to whom’ on Twitter, Wu et al. (2011) distinguished between ‘ordinary’ and ‘elite’ users, the latter referring to ‘celebrities, bloggers, media outlets and other formal organizations’. They found that half of all URLs consumed on Twitter are generated by a relatively small group of elite users, including media. They further point to the role of bloggers in redistributing information, indicative of a new form of the old two-step flow in communications. This confirms earlier observations that not all users share the same amount of power and influence on Twitter (Deller, 2011). This results in the research question: What type of actors (ordinary citizens, professionals, elites) dominate the Twitter coverage of Bowie’s death in the first 48 hours after his death was announced?

‘TAKE YOUR PROTEIN PILLS AND PUT YOUR HELMET ON’^{iv}: RESEARCH SET-UP

Inspired by previous, similar studies (e.g. Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee, 2011), data collection focused on the #bowie hashtag as employed on Twitter. Hashtags are thematic keywords included by users to relate messages to a specific event or topic. Discussing Twitter research in the field of political communication, Jungherr (2014: 244) suggests that focusing on one or several relevant hashtags can function as a ‘discriminatory device [that] allows to

filter messages that users posted with the clear intention of contributing to the political discourse'. While Twitter data are essentially public, potential privacy matters were taken into account by focusing on hashtagged tweets, signalling a desire on behalf of the sender of each individual tweet to be seen in a context related to the death of David Bowie (see Larsson, 2015) for further elaboration on the suitability of the hashtag based approach to Twitter data collection). While several hashtags could be expected in the wake of a major celebrity's death, we opted for the broadest and most straight-forward hashtag: #bowie.

Focusing on the first 48 hours after Bowie's death was announced – 11-13 January 2016 – all tweets including the #bowie hashtag were retrieved. As the volume of tweets was expected to overrun the capabilities of free tools (Giglietto and Selva, 2014) and the tweets were procured in retrospect (Borra and Rieder, 2014), retrieval was done by means of Texitfer (Shulman, 2014), a service allowing for full historical access to the archives of Twitter through their subsidiary Gnip. This resulted in a data set containing 252,318 tweets which were subjected to delimitation and analysis as described in the following section.

Messages sent on Twitter – tweets – can take many forms. Beyond text, images or videos provided in the tweet, users can employ a series of techniques to engage with other, specified users. The @ character is key. So-called @mentions – e.g. including '@USERNAME' in a tweet – allows users to enter into conversation with one another (Marwick and boyd, 2010). Our interests, however, are geared towards the practice of so-called retweeting, i.e. redistributing tweets sent by others. This practice, recognizable by the included 'RT@ USERNAME' formula in tweets, allows to cite or amend content and redistribute it on one's own Twitter profile. Depending on the scale of use, those being redistributed can reach the coveted status of having 'gone viral', i.e. reaching audiences beyond their own followers. Described by Nahon et al. as 'network-enhanced word of mouth' (2011, 1) or 'social information flow process' (2013: 16), our focus is on tweets that proved

viral or at least highly popular within the #bowie hashtag. In the data set, 137,950 (55 %) of all tweets were retweets.

Remembering Wu et al.'s (2011: 4) claim that 'less than 0.05% of users attract almost 50% of all attention in Twitter', the analysis focused on the very top users as expressed through these retweets. We heed Mahrt and Scharkow's (2013: 20) advice that 'researchers need to consider whether the analysis of huge quantities of data is theoretically justified' and assess a series of variables for tweets that were redistributed to higher degrees than others: all tweets in the data set redistributed more than 100 times were analysed. As a result, the final data set contained 129 tweets made highly popular through extensive retweeting by others. These 129 tweets together were retweeted 56,442 times - accounting for 40.1% of all 137,950 retweets.

The selected 129 tweets were analysed by means of a quantitative content analysis, focusing on variables detailing the user behind the original tweet (individual, Bowie's family and entourage, media (including bloggers with +1000 followers), celebrities, member of the music/popular culture industry, government and other officials) and the content of the Twitter message. Building on previous work on Twitter and celebrity death (Hoe-Lian Goh and Lee, 2011; Holiman, 2013), the tweets were gauged for textual, visual and audio-visual content, looking at (types of) parasocial relationships expressed (seeing him as an acquaintance, a friend, a relative or identifying with Bowie), at emotions expressed (ranging from anger to sadness, reflections on the musical legacy, general information and gossip) and at fan creativity (ranging from texts over visuals to audiovisual material). This was complemented by a qualitative analysis through close reading and thematic analysis of data representative of the main quantitative findings.

Both authors coded all 129 tweets, and inter-coder reliability was assessed by means of Krippendorff's Alpha (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007). Coefficient Alpha varied between

.657 and .883, which was deemed satisfactory given the rather conservative nature of the measurement (e.g. Lombard et al., 2002).

‘ALTHOUGH I WASN’T THERE, HE SAID I WAS HIS FRIEND’’: RESULTS

Parasocial relationships

Much research on Twitter reactions to celebrity deaths suggests Twitter provides fans with a platform to express thoughts and feelings regarding the passing. We therefore looked for indications that tweets were generated by people who consider themselves as fans through the expression (of types and intensity) of parasocial relationships of Twitter account holders with David Bowie. However, and somewhat surprising, we found just one expression of a (para-)social relationship with Bowie and this was a retweet of a tweet of Bowie’s wife Iman - sent before the passing of Bowie himself - expressing affection towards her husband. No mention was made of Bowie being considered as a close or distant friend. This can be explained by looking at the composition of the Twitter account holders that most successfully reacted (in terms of gaining retweets) to the death of Bowie (see further). There were two Twitter account holders indicating they had met Bowie but both were celebrity musicians, while the only tweet expressing a level of identification with Bowie was from a Channel 4 business journalist tweeting a link to the obituary piece he had made for the channel. The lack of parasocial relationship expressions suggest that most of the tweets were generated by various types of account holders that did not consider themselves as fans or did not feel the need to express their fandom. No negative parasocial relationships were expressed, suggesting a lack of criticism of the deceased, confirming that Bowie’s controversial years were well behind him (Stevenson, 2007).

Expression of emotions, commentary and information

As shown in table one, the lack of explicit references to parasocial relationships with Bowie does not mean no emotions were expressed.

- Table 1 about here -

Looking at the themes expressed in the 129 most retweeted tweets concerning #bowie, it appears that, while not the largest group of topics, 18% contain explicit expressions of emotions. They range, in descending order of occurrence, from sadness (7%), over acceptance (3.9%), condolences (3.1%), love (1.6%), to negative emotions of hatred (1.6%) and shock (.8%). These are mostly emotions that relate to a process of grieving and mourning, as pointed out by Sanderson and Cheong (2010). However, other emotions that come with coping with the death of a loved one such as denial, confusion, longing and bargaining did not occur. Regarding longing, this may be due to the fact that the tweets are from the early (first 48 hours) period in the process of mourning. The absence of denial and confusion can be explained by the fact that, while unexpected, it did not involve the death of a young person or death through a freak occurrence, as in the case of singers Amy Winehouse or Michael Jackson. The (limited) negative emotional expressions were not against Bowie but against the illness that befell him and against death itself. In sum, emotional expressions on Twitter were sad but positive towards the deceased.

A similar share (17.9%) of the most retweeted tweets involved exchange of information as such (10.1%) and of what was going on with oneself or other events (7.8%). The latter category consisted almost exclusively of references to offline events commemorating Bowie, providing an opportunity to take part vicariously in the coming together of mourners. At first sight, the low number of informative tweets contradicts results of Goh and Lee (2011) who found that a majority of tweets following Jackson's death were

informative. However, differences between the two cases can explain this. First, while Bowie's death was unexpected, the cause of death was straightforward and not uncommon for his age. Michael Jackson's death was equally unexpected but the cause of death was less straightforward and prone to speculation, resulting in a higher need to ascertain exactly what had occurred. Second, the analysis of tweets following the death of Michael Jackson was based on a random sample of tweets, whereas this study focused on the most retweeted ones. The limited presence of informative tweets amongst these popular tweets suggests that people are more keen to retweet/share emotional expressions and commentary than information. This relates to the idea that Twitter serves as a space where people come together to mourn and acknowledge the deceased celebrity, perhaps more so than a space for information exchange.

The largest group of tweets are comments of various kinds, making up over half (52.9%) of the most retweeted tweets. These mainly deal with Bowie's musical legacy (23.3%), often constituting of quotes of song lyrics, and with his ground-breaking role as an artist and (visual) chameleon (19.4%), including quotes from lyrics or visuals illustrating the ever-changing nature of Bowie's persona. Some of the latter contain an explicit reference to how this helped people find themselves, as in 'Many of us - myself included - would have died if it weren't for him. He was proof that freaks like us could survive. Rest in Power' (<https://twitter.com/margaretkho/status/686698041449918465>). To a lesser extent, these tweets deal with his lasting impact on the popular culture industry (4.7%), for instance commenting on how Bowie 'changed everything' (<https://twitter.com/bornsmusic/status/686605072654991360/photo/1>). Some commentary comes in the form of compassionate humour, for instance art portraying a British road sign referencing a Bowie song lyric (<https://twitter.com/JamesMAviation/status/686465029609230336>). Such personal reflections suggest a level of (fan-like) involvement with Bowie that goes beyond that of general

interest. However, just one tweet (.8%) could be considered as a truly ‘personal’ commentary and, interestingly, this involved BBC news providing an overview of Twitter reactions to Bowie’s death (https://twitter.com/BBC_HaveYourSay/statuses/686518038770880512). This is a form of curating or harvesting of social media content by legacy media that has become part and parcel of contemporary news reporting (Bakker, 2014).

Creativity

Beyond themes, we wanted to gain insight into the amount and type of original material in the sample of most retweeted Twitter reactions. While journalism studies (into Twitter) mainly are concerned with users as information gatherers and disseminators rather than creators (Bruns and Burgess, 2011), fan studies consider creativity as a key indication of how (intensely) people relate to an object of fandom (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). While the fact that people express themselves on Twitter regarding the death of a particular celebrity does not necessarily make them fans, the time, effort and knowledge regarding a celebrity that is involved in more advanced Twitter creativity suggest a level of fan performativity. To obtain an appreciation of the presence of creativity in #bowie tweets, we analysed the original 129 retweeted tweets for the number and nature of textual, visual and audio-visual expressions that could be considered as original creations by individual account holders rather than ‘copy-pasting’ of e.g. old photos of Bowie or of LP covers, music videos or other professionally produced media products.

With regards to **textual** expressions, 106 of 129 tweets were identified as original individual creations (see table 2).

- Table 2 about here -

Analysis of these original textual expressions shows that almost 40% were an original comment regarding Bowie's music ('He released THIRTEEN classic albums on the trot, No other artist has done that', <https://twitter.com/theJeremyVine/status/686469328359788544/photo/1>) or persona ('Shit. We didn't just lose another General in the war against mediocrity. We lost the commander in chief', <https://twitter.com/tommcrae/status/686456909352824832>), and an additional 6% on his impact on the industry, while just over 20% involved the sharing of information. The rest of the original textual messages were mainly emotional expressions. The high number of original textual tweets is not really surprising, considering Twitter is in essence a textual medium, allowing for short, spontaneous outbursts of emotion - in this case, sadness and the like. As such, little can be derived from this in terms of fan activity, as textual, hashtagged tweets make up the brunt of general audiences' Twitter behaviour.

To discern any behaviour that could be considered a clearer expression of behaviour beyond that of general audiences, **visual** creative expressions, which require more time, effort and knowledge regarding the celebrity, provided more interesting insights. Of all 64 (of 129 retweeted) tweets containing images, only 15 were coded as original (see table 3). This small number of originals suggests a lot of 'borrowed' and 'retweeted' images in the sample.

- Table 3 about here -

As table 3 shows, the images dealt with various topics. By far the most popular original visual was the artwork by Helen Green showing the changing face/image of David Bowie over time (<http://helengreenillustration.com/Time-May-Change-Me>). There were a number of accounts that tweeted this gif and these, in turn, were amongst the most retweeted

accounts. This indicates that creativity is left to a small group of Twitter users that manages to catch the attention of others.

Just 25 tweets were coded as containing **audio-visual** material, but 15 hereof were original, i.e. made by the account holder (see table 4).

- Table 4 about here -

In four instances this involved footage taken by participants in or onlookers at the coming together of mourners at the house in Brixton where Bowie spend part of his early life. Whereas the original visuals predominantly were created by media (8) and celebrity/artists (4), in the case of audio-visual material, besides eight media products, four were created by accounts that belonged to individuals while only two were created by artist/celebrities. While the relative success of individual creators may suggest high levels of fan creativity, this deduction must be modified. For instance, one of the original videos from Brixton was posted by a restaurant opposite the house mentioned, observing what was going on rather than participating as fans

(<https://twitter.com/SmokeandSaltLDN/status/686647520282411008/video/1>).

Twitter of the masses or elite?

The limited original productivity by ‘ordinary citizens’ in the most retweeted tweets draws attention to the composition of the retweeted accounts. The high numbers of retweets for a small number (129) of tweets – with 11 tweets each retweeted more than 1000 times - suggest that a limited group of Twitter users took the lead or, in an alternative interpretation, were given the lead by other Twitter users. To obtain a better understanding of who constitutes this small but influential group, we analysed the identity of the accounts that were

retweeted (see figure 1) as well as other accounts being mentioned in the retweeted posts (see figure 2).

- Figure 1 about here -

Figure 1 shows that more than three quarters of the popular tweets originated from media (45.7%) and celebrities/artists (30.2%). The media category included (announcements of Bowie's death by) legacy media such as BBC Brazil (retweeted 416 times), France-Culture of Radio France (391), Sky News (245), CNN Newsroom (226), and La Republica (137). The geographic diversity of these media outlets suggests that Bowie's fame resonated across continents. Despite this presence of legacy media, the topmost retweeted media consisted of popular bloggers. BBC academy trainer and popular blogger Marc Settle provided the overall most retweeted entry (retweeted 10,643 times), while other bloggers such as James Martin (1945), cartoonist-blogger Nawak (805), and Jenny Klein (564) beat legacy media in grabbing the attention of Twitter users.

The celebrity/artists category included celebrities such as actor Todd Stashwick (retweeted 3,045 times), American professional wrestler, rapper and actor John Cena (1,393), and fellow musicians such as British girl band Little Mix (2,824), Muse lead singer Matt Bellamy (2,529), rock band Queen (1,982) and British singer-songwriter Tom McRae (725).

In the 'other' category, a notable Twitter account was the previously mentioned '@SmokeandSaltLDN', a restaurant in Brixton tweeting a video of a fans gathering across from the restaurant. The category further consists of a few marketing and communication agencies and some commercial Twitter account selling Bowie-related and other products.

Interestingly, the death of Bowie was also discussed in oft-retweeted posts of official organizations, including two government websites (of Germany and France) that provided

official statements regarding the artistic legacy of Bowie, a political activist organization (@PoliticsPunked) and a political blogger working in a government organization (@lauritalonso), one military organization and one governmental astronomy organization. The latter two made reference to the Major Tom persona and songs of Bowie.

Bowie's family remained silent following his death, so they feature very little in the list with just two retweeted posts. One was a tweet of Duncan Jones confirming his father's death, and one was of Bowie's wife Iman (@The_real_IMAN) consisting of an old post of 15 December 2015 - weeks before his passing - and contained fan art rather than a personal message. These retweets illustrate people's need to hear from those near the deceased.

With only 14 out of 129 entries, regular Twitter users represent just a small part of this 'elite' group of retweeted accounts and can mainly be found in the lower half of lesser retweeted posts. The most retweeted 'ordinary person' is @Mubly with 368 retweets, taking up 21st position from the top of retweeted posts.

The relative absence of 'ordinary people' from those leading the reactions to the death of Bowie becomes even more pronounced if we look at the actors being mentioned in these much-retweeted posts (n=33) (see figure 2).

- Figure 2 about here -

Here 'ordinary people' are more or less absent. The other categories largely reflect the observations regarding the identity of the most retweeted Twitter accounts. With regards to the category of celebrity/artists, particular mention should be made of the multiple references to the artist Helen Green, who was responsible for the much-retweeted artwork showing Bowie's image transformations throughout his career (see above).

‘WHERE ARE WE NOW?’^{vi}: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Analysis of Twitter reactions to the death of David Bowie in the first 48 hours after its announcement has generated insights with relevance for journalism studies, celebrity and fan studies, and beyond. The data show, on the one hand, a Twitter storm with more than a quarter of a million tweets with #bowie following the announcement - confirming earlier research into the way people flock to Twitter to publicly engage in a major breaking news event such as a celebrity death. On the other hand, it showed a small core of tweets - retweeted more than 100 and up to 10,643 times - that, moreover, originated from what can be considered as a Twitter elite of mainly traditional media, bloggers, celebrities and artists.

From a broader Twitter studies perspective, these findings, for one, contradict the idea of ‘ad hoc publics’ (Bruns, 2010), i.e. of ordinary citizens taking a key position in information gathering and dissemination in cases of breaking news. It rather appears that the elite of media, celebrities and artists constitute something akin to ‘opinion leaders’ that wider audiences turn to when dealing with major breaking news, suggesting that a two-step flow of information extends to the networked social media environment.

From a journalism studies perspective, the findings modify the idea that the move towards digital platforms has undermined the influence of traditional journalists. While bloggers and celebrity/artists take up top positions in the Twitter elite, legacy media and their professionals maintain a certain position when it comes to framing, explaining and emotionally detailing events such as the death of David Bowie and his legacy. Indeed, the most retweeted account belongs to a BBC professional (Settle).

Interestingly, though, it appears that the exchange is first and foremost concerned with expressing love and respect for the favourite celebrity and with the emotions that come with the loss hereof, rather than with the exchange of information. It is the tweets expressing commentary and emotions that people flock to and share/retweet. Even within the category of

informative tweets, a considerable portion consisted of (re)tweets of a commemorative event in the physical world, suggesting that people look for ways to take part - albeit vicariously - in this event. All this suggests that Twitter is a space for the expression of emotions as much as a platform for information, thus confirming earlier work on the role of social media in the public mourning of deceased celebrities (Mallow, 2015; Holiman, 2013; Lansdall-Welfare et al., 2012; Hoe-Lian Goh and Sian Lee, 2011; Sanderson and Cheong, 2010).

However, this expression of emotions in itself cannot be considered a confirmation of Twitter reactions as the behaviour of Bowie fans. While the use of #bowie indicates a desire to identify with the topic, indicative of Sandvoss' notion that a certain level of fandom is part of everybody's life, it is not necessarily an expression of more in-depth fandom, as the use of hashtags in other areas such as economic or political news as well as the absence of expressions of parasocial interactions in the Bowie case indicate. The relatively limited number of expressions of fan creativity further questions the idea that reactions are dominated by fans. What is more, a majority of the creative expressions within the small group of much retweeted tweets were mainly the product of media and celebrities/artists rather than 'ordinary' audience members. This does not mean that Bowie fans were only present among the elites. Others may simply feel no need to make their fandom explicit, or may not have the means or inclination for fan productivity, at least not in the short term (first 48 hours). This does not necessarily undermine the relevance of Twitter for fans in mourning, it just questions the creative aspect of fan behaviour on Twitter. So, while the study suggests a distinction between general audiences and elites, this dichotomy cannot be extended to fans and non-fans, an issue that requires further investigation.

A question that has relevance for both journalism studies and celebrity and fan studies is: do Twitter mourners constitute a (ad hoc or stronger) community? A range of arguments can be put forward: the fact that more than 250,000 tweets used the hashtag #bowie suggest

the need to at least identify with the topic. Next, the limited number of much retweeted tweets suggests that users look towards others and want to share with others in dealing with this unexpected loss. Seen from a celebrity studies perspective, the fact that these retweeted tweets mainly originate from media and celebrity/artists does not come as that much of a surprise as the relationship between celebrities and audiences is fundamentally mediated and people are used to looking at media and other celebrities to guide them both in remaining up-to-date about celebrities and in many other aspects of their lives (Turner, 2004; Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2014). The Twitter community thus seems to show a certain hierarchy of opinion leaders and followers, something that has been observed in other contexts as well (Hills, 2002). Whether this Twitter community around the #bowie goes beyond an ad hoc community similar to the notion of ad hoc publics rather than a deeply felt, long lasting community typical of more traditional fan communities, is something to be dealt with in further research.

The paper has a range of shortcomings. One pitfall is that we only focused on one hashtag: #bowie. While this was deemed the most suitable approach towards data collection, we thus have probably missed out on certain material related to grieving David Bowie on Twitter, for instance in tweets dealing with Bowie's death that included no or a different hashtag. While broader search criteria would have been possible, the ethical ramifications of data gathering on Twitter suggested the chosen approach as the most suitable (cf. Larsson, 2015). What is more, focusing on just the first 48 hours has prevented us from analysing how reactions evolve over time, for instance, how the process of mourning evolves on Twitter, and from understanding the longevity of the community around #bowie. However, this has not prevented us from obtaining a good understanding of the range of reactions that can be discerned and the key building blocks of the #bowie community.

Another pitfall is the focus on a single case, i.e. Bowie. However, we believe that this has allowed us to show the relevance of an in-depth de- and reconstruction of Twitter reactions that cannot be obtained with large, multi-case datasets. What is more, analysis of the death of a celebrity through an illness not unusual for his late stage in life has allowed us to move beyond the tendency in celebrity studies to focus on ‘spectacular’ cases such as that of celebrities dying at a very early age (Amy Winehouse) or in unusual/suspicious circumstances (Michael Jackson) to get an understanding of the role of Twitter beyond the extreme and highly unusual. As a considerable generation of popular culture celebrities seems to have reached the final life stages – having turned 2016 into the *annus horribilis* of celebrity deaths - Twitter responses to the death of Bowie may well prove typical of contemporary public responses to celebrity deaths in a networked society.

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Table 1: topic of tweets retweeted 100+ times. N, % reported.

	N	%
Comment on musical legacy	30	23.3
Comment on Persona (legacy)	25	19.4
Other	15	11.6
Report on status of oneself or events happening currently	13	10.1
Share of news and info	10	7.8
Express sadness	9	7
Comment on impact on industry, culture (legacy)	6	4.7
Compassionate humour - joke without being cruel	6	4.7
Express acceptance	5	3.9
Express condolences	4	3.1
Express love	2	1.6
Express anger/ hatred	2	1.6
Provide personal commentary	1	.8

Expression of shock	1	.8
TOTAL	129	100

Table 2: Textual original material. N, % reported

	N	%
Music-oriented	22	20.8
Persona-oriented	20	18.9
Report status of oneself or events happening currently	12	11.3
Share news and info	10	9.4
Other	9	8.5
Sadness	9	8.5
Impact on industry, culture	6	5.7
Compassionate humor	6	5.7
Acceptance	5	4.7
Express condolences	2	1.9
Negative: Express anger/ hatred	2	1.9
Provide personal commentary	1	.9
Shock	1	.9
Love	1	.9

TOTAL	106	100
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Table 3: Original visual material by topic. N, % reported.

	N	%
Music-oriented	3	20
Acceptance	3	20
Express condolences	2	13.3
Report status of oneself or events happening currently	2	13.3
Share news and info	1	6.7
Provide personal commentary	1	6.7
Persona-oriented	1	6.7
Other	1	6.7
Compassionate humor	1	6.7
TOTAL	15	100

Table 4: original audio-visual. N, % reported.

	N	%
Report status of oneself or events happening currently	4	26,7
Music-oriented	3	20
Persona-oriented	3	20
Other	3	20
Share news and info	1	6.7
Sadness	1	6.7
TOTAL	15	100

Figure 1: identity of actor being retweeted (N=129). %, N reported.

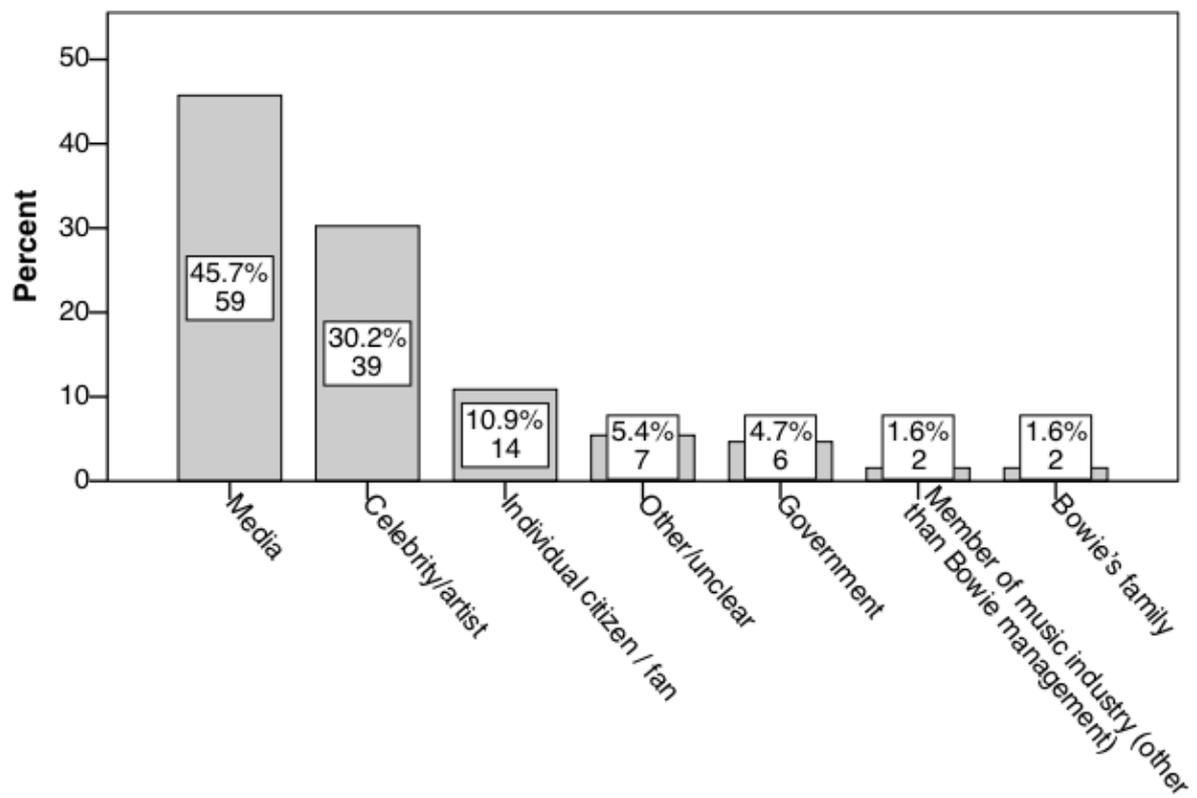
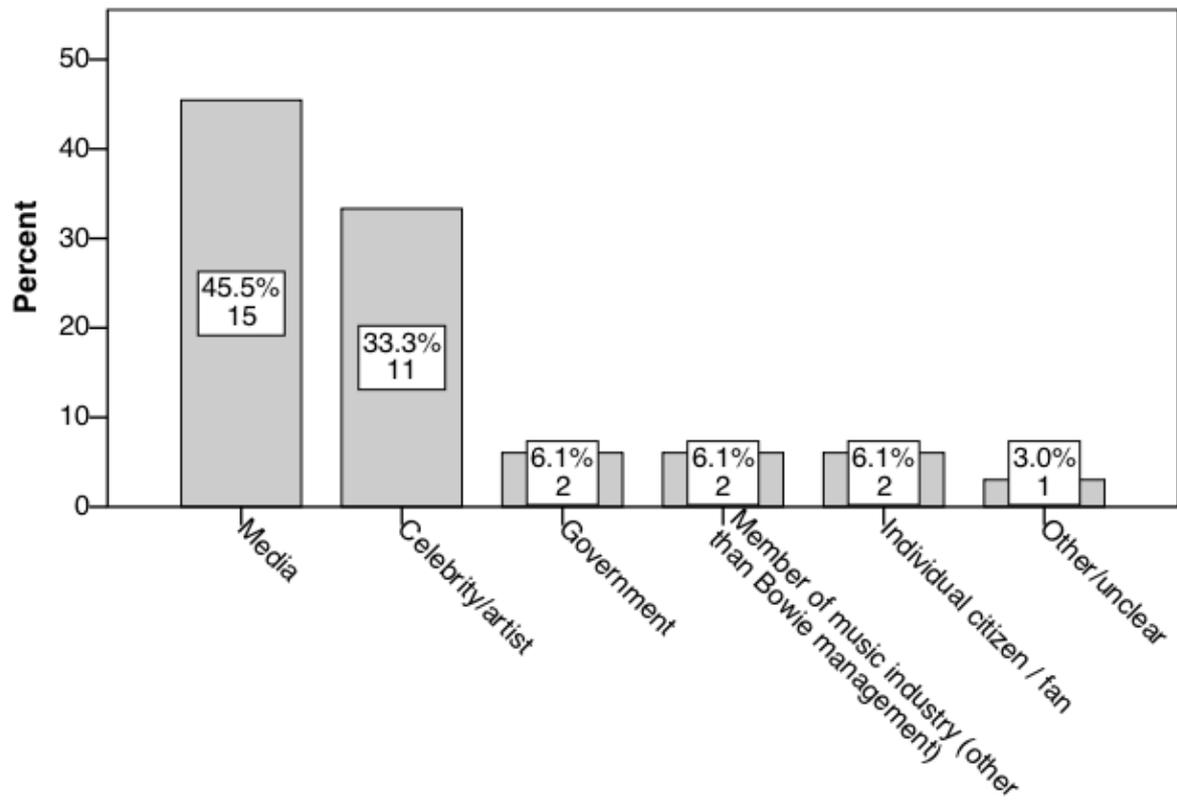


Figure 2: Identity of actors being mentioned in the retweeted posts (N=33). %, N reported.



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- ⁱ From 'Starman' (1972)
 - ⁱⁱ From 'Where Are We Now' (2013)
 - ⁱⁱⁱ From 'Heroes' (1977)
 - ^{iv} From 'Space Oddity' (1969)
 - ^v From 'The Man Who Sold the World' (1970)
 - ^{vi} 2013