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# The Emerging Viewertariat and *BBC Question Time*: Television Debate and Real-Time Commenting Online

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## Abstract

This paper advances the study of microblogging and political events by investigating how one high-profile broadcast acted as a stimulus to real-time commentary from viewers using Twitter. Our case study is a controversial, high-ratings episode of *BBC Question Time*, the weekly British political debate show, in October 2009, in which Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party, appeared as a panelist. The “viewertariat” emerging around such a political event affords the opportunity to explore interaction across media formats. We examine both the structural elements of engagement online and the expressions of collective identity expressed in tweets. Although many concerns noted in previous studies of online political engagement remain (inequality in the propensity to comment, coarseness of tone), we find certain notable characteristics in the sample, especially a direct link between the quantity of tweets and events on the screen, an ability to preempt the arguments offered by panelists, and ways in which viewertariat members add new content to the discussion. Furthermore, Twitter users commenting online express a range of overlapping identities. These complexities challenge broadcasting and political institutions seeking to integrate new, more organic models of engagement.

## Keywords

media audiences, political participation, television debates, public opinion, public sphere, news events

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## Introduction

The tools and practices of communication have undergone a rapid evolution in recent years. The white heat of Internet technology seems to have fundamentally changed the way we consume information and interact with each other. As Livingstone and Das observe, "Once, ordinary people occupied much of their leisure time sitting on the sofa, often together with others, watching prescheduled hours of mass broadcast television, then talking about it the next day. Today, they increasingly supplement such moments by sitting, generally alone, in front of the computer so as to multitask music downloading, peer to peer chat, social networking, information searching and participation in multi-user games or civic forums" (2009: 1). The low barriers to entry and corresponding potential for collective engagement offered by new communication technology, especially so-termed web 2.0 social publishing environments, raise important questions about the evolving nature of the audience.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that these developments have wholly superseded older modes of communication. Instead, new technologies can be seen as augmenting and renewing more traditional media rather than superseding them. Now, for example, viewers can share their views on a television broadcast while it occurs, and debate content and interpretation in real time. We term this phenomenon the emergence of *the viewertariat*, which we define as viewers who use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it. The viewertariat is an example of media hybridity, meaning a blurring of old and new processes to form new systems and practices (on hybridity, see Chadwick 2011a, 2011b; Chadwick and Stanier 2010; cf. Jenkins 2005; on renewal see Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2007: 13–17; Merrin 2009: 18). As a result, what emerges retains elements of what went before, but also has the potential to fundamentally alter how people experience media. This shift in practices raises important questions and challenges both for media researchers and practitioners. This is especially true in political broadcasting, where the interaction of traditional program formats and new technology creates a host of opportunities for forms of popular engagement in what have historically been closed formats.

This article offers an analysis of these emerging audience practices in a hybridized political broadcasting environment. Our case study is one of the most significant and divisive programs in recent British history, the edition of *BBC Question Time* broadcast on 22 October 2009. This particular edition of the show was controversial because Nick Griffin, leader of the far-right British National Party (BNP), was invited to be a panelist.

The BNP's invitation to appear on *Question Time* was the product of a concerted period of electoral success for the party, unprecedented in the history of the British far right (on the causes of the rise of the BNP, see Ford and Goodwin 2010; John et al. 2006). Griffin's planned appearance provoked a national debate about whether it was appropriate for the far right to have access to such a high-profile platform. Writing in *The Guardian* newspaper the day before the program, BBC Director General

Mark Thompson argued that for the BBC to fulfill its obligations as an impartial broadcaster, the BNP had to be invited to appear (Thompson 2009). However, the invitation was publically opposed by many, including one member of the Cabinet, who described it as “extraordinary . . . [and] a fundamental error” (Hain 2009). These heated discussions between high-profile figures certainly did not harm interest in the program. More than eight million people tuned in, three times the normal audience share (Deans 2009).

In order to understand the controversy the invitation to Griffin caused, it is necessary to understand the role of *Question Time* within the British political system. First aired in 1979 and broadcast on BBC1 (the BBC’s most viewed entertainment-focused channel), *Question Time* is a central part of the BBC’s current affairs broadcasting timetable. The format is modeled on a “townhall” type of discussion. Each week, a panel, consisting of five people, including politicians from across the party spectrum and commentators, answers topical questions posed by an audience made up of members of the general public. This proximity between the governing and the governed makes the program unusual, both in the United Kingdom and also in an international context. Very few politicians around the world expose themselves to such direct public scrutiny, making the program the most high-profile political discussion show on British television (McNair et al. 2003: 39, 67). Thus, *BBC Question Time* is, in both senses of the word, an “institution” (Cottle 2003: 164): a venerable and reliably predictable part of the British current affairs broadcasting setup, but also a political event of note, attracting very senior figures from the major parties each week. As a result, the invitation to Griffin implied an increase in his and his party’s status within the body politic. As well as dividing the nation’s leader columns, discussion of Griffin’s appearance was occurring in a variety of web environments, especially newspaper sites, blogs, and social media. Prominent in this process was the microblogging service Twitter, a simple publishing service allowing user to publish 140-character status updates (known as tweets) and interact with networks of others.

This paper is concerned with how Twitter augmented the 22 October 2009 edition of *BBC Question Time*, especially in real time, as people watched the program. We approach this in two ways. First, we will look at the actual interactions that occurred on Twitter and the nature of the network formed. We find that although Tweets are posted disproportionately among the viewertariat, the shared experience of the program catalyzed the social aspects of Twitter and interactions increased. Second, we will use a more granular discourse analysis to examine and understand attributions of social identities among the viewertariat, exploring how individuals understand their relationship with the group and the activity they are engaged in. We find a distinction between those eager to engage and identify with a mass audience and those trying to exempt themselves from “all the fuss”—while still commenting on that very phenomenon. Some viewertariat associated themselves with identity groups mentioned by panelists in the broadcast, showing how television can drive commentary. Some viewertariat called for action, suggesting the possibility of participation and mobilization being triggered through this television–Twitter hybrid experience.

In our conclusions, we offer a discussion of these findings, and in particular understand how they relate to contemporary discussions of the audience and public participation in media events. We note that this particular incident is indicative of a broader pattern in the development of broadcasting, at the same time encompassing continuity, change and challenges. Most importantly, we argue the prime challenge facing politicians, policy makers, broadcasters, and regulators is institutionalizing developments in social media into traditional broadcasting formats.

## **Television Audiences, the Internet, and Political Participation**

The role of television in politics has long been disputed (van Zoonen 2005: 11–15). Arguably, the dominant strand of opinion has been negative, arguing that television undermines democratic citizenship. For example, writing polemically, former Howard Dean campaign manager Joe Trippi firmly laid the blame for the declining quality of American democracy at the door of television:

I was born right when everything was starting to go to hell. It was 1956, full dawn of the television age . . . and when, not coincidentally American political and civic involvement was beginning its long downward spiral. . . . Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century were a culture in danger of being ruined by Must See TV. (Trippi 2004: 3)

The impact that television is having on democracy has also provoked more scholarly criticism, including claims that the nature of coverage leads to a lack of trust between politicians and citizens, creating a so-called videomalaise (Robinson 1976); that the entertainment requirements of broadcasting inevitably lead to a focus on the sensational and superficial, over the substantive (Brants and Neijens 1998; Postman 2006); and that it undermines real-world relationships, leading to a decline in social capital (Putnam 1995, 2001). None of these processes seem very good for democracy.

At the heart of concerns about the effect television is having on civic society is the concept of the audience, and how its members engage with politics. Crucially, in this reading of events, citizens are seen to “watch” rather than “do” politics, moving from being participants to being viewers (Jones 2010: 23; Swanson and Mancini 1996: 16). This is an idea re-enforced by studies of media effects, which frequently present the audience as passive, or at best reactive, when viewing (Carey 2008; Krugman 1965; Webster 1998), and by the idea that television often positions citizens as spectators to events they cannot influence (Chouliaraki 2006).

The view that television is an impediment to active viewer engagement in politics has been challenged. Many scholars have argued that the audience cannot be treated as a passive or homogenous entity. This challenge proceeds on a number of fronts. First, change has been driven by the evolution of broadcasting technology, which has given viewers greater choice and, in the process, opened up more creative opportunities for

their participation (Blumler and Gurevitch 2005). Second, this burgeoning of choice has led to a realization that civically valuable programming need not take a traditional public-service or news-focused form, but can cross genres, for example including comedy and satire (Hermes 2006; Jones 2010; van Zoonen 2005). Third, and even within “traditional” current affairs programs, there has been a shift toward greater citizen involvement, what has been termed “mediated access” to politics (McNair et al. 2003). This takes two forms. Either, citizens can participate directly in the program. Indeed, *BBC Question Time* has been in the vanguard of this process, greatly increasing the role of the studio audience in the years that it has been run (McNair et al. 2003: 58). Alternatively, and overcoming the limitations of a studio that can only hold a few hundred people, programs such as *Question Time* are argued to invite the audience “to think of themselves as participants in a political debate, and as citizens with a stake in the political process” (McNair et al. 2003: 7–8). Finally, and most broadly, television and media generally can provide the resources—political information, awareness of current issues and debates, and historical analyses—which citizens can apply in their formal and informal political engagements and which can contribute to the formation of their political identities (Gillespie 1995). Given the range of media literacy and competence held across an entire broadcast audience, it is perhaps most important to recognize that beyond the initial active/passive audience construction, contemporary research of audiences and citizenship is marked above all by ambivalence (Livingstone 2005b).

This evolving understanding of television and its role in political life has coincided with other hugely significant developments in the instruments of communication, especially the development and proliferation of the Internet. Scholars have offered mixed readings of the impact this will have. Some hope that the Internet will reinvigorate the traditional institutions of representative democracy such as elections and parties, to more extreme statements about the rise of more deliberative Athenian modes of participation (for various strands of these views, see: Coleman and Blumer 2009; Lupia and Sin 2003; Morris 1999; Rheingold 2000; Trippi 2004). The reality is, inevitably perhaps, more complex than the most extreme optimistic accounts suggest. A group of scholars, known as the “normalisers” argue that political life will change little, with institutional arrangements and distributions of power changing little (Gibson, Resnick, and Ward 2003; Margolis and Resnick 2000; Resnick 1998). Others argue that the Internet does create changes in the nature of citizen participation, but they are for the worse, with the loudest and most controversial voices dominating discussion, as opposed to the most informed (Davis 2005; Keen 2007). Another reading of the emergence of new communication technologies posits that the impact the Internet has on political life is contingent on the institutional environment, which creates the opportunities and barriers to its use (Anstead 2008; Anstead and Chadwick 2008).

We would contend that the emergence of the viewertariat shows that new technology is having an impact on the way at least some of the audience watch and digest the program. This characterization of the phenomenon supports Livingstone’s emphasis on ambivalence; the passive audiences assumed by many of television’s detractors

are recast as more active citizens, but not all citizens, all of the time or in the same way. In particular, we pay attention below to how viewertariat members conceive of their powers to act. Moreover, those interactions are still occurring in response to a very traditional broadcast environment.

Media studies helps us understand structures of participation through attention to *form* as much as the content of mediated politics (Lorenzo-Dus 2009). This again helps us move beyond the passive/active audience distinction. Simon Cottle has argued that news, documentaries, and debate broadcasts like *Question Time* each have a structure that will “deepen or diminish the possibilities for public deliberation and understanding” (Cottle 2003: 153). “When we witness the dialogic encounters of others in a programme like *Question Time*,’ he writes, “we [citizens-cum-users] are able to consider the reasons and rhetoric, the claims and counter-claims, and the arguments and performances enacted by opposing interests and to evaluate these as they unfold in interaction” (Cottle 2003: 153). News and documentary rarely feature sustained interaction between individuals defending and attacking political positions. *Question Time*, as a studio debate broadcast beyond the studio, takes the form of a “double articulation” where what is said is heard by those present and an abstract non-present audience, shaping what is said (Scannell 1991: 1). Attention to form takes us past the passive/active distinction by acknowledging that media both constrain and enable the interactions of citizens-cum-users. The question is how this operates with different media formats, and, for us in this paper, how Twitter augments television broadcasting to create a hybrid media structure of participation.

Scannell’s (2000) conceptualization of media forms is particularly relevant here. Television news is a “for-anyone-as-someone” structure because a presenter speaks to a general, diffuse audience (anyone) but with an address suggesting each viewer is being spoken to personally (as someone). Empirical studies of audiences bear this out. In their studies of audiences’ engagements with news about terrorism, O’Loughlin et al. (2011) and Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2010) found British viewers feel part of a mass or mainstream audience but distinguish and describe themselves *as* individuals *within* that mass. Specifically, individual viewers feel that most of their co-audience are easily manipulated, made to feel afraid of a suggested terrorist threat, but *they* are not hoodwinked; interviewees presented themselves as “not-your-typical-viewer,” more skeptical than the diffuse audience they still feel very much a part of. This reflects Dayan’s (2005) argument that media act as “midwives” of publics, allowing citizens to represent themselves (as studio audiences, say), thereby delivering a representation of the public to itself and allowing individuals to consider themselves as part of a larger collective of strangers. As a public rather than audience, that collective is constituted by its members’ orientation toward a matter of shared political concern, such as the presence of a far-right political leader on the nation’s flagship debating program.

What happens, though, when citizens can communicate among themselves, their co-strangers, simultaneous to the very broadcast that is delivering them to themselves as a public? What happens when the broadcast form, conceptualized in the work of Cottle, Scannell, and Dayan, becomes augmented and extended by social media, and citizens-cum-users are also the viewertariat?



## The Sample and Research Questions

There are a number of ways of gathering data from Twitter. For this study, we used the *Twitter Search* tool for retrospective data gathering. To achieve this, a rudimentary Adobe Air–powered tool was coded.<sup>1</sup> Users can enter the search terms and specific time periods they are interested in, and the tool would then query Twitter Search and download any matches. This method did create certain problems. Twitter Search was originally set up by an independent company, Summize, which was established in November 2006, and then bought by Twitter in July 2008. This mixed parentage means that the two technologies are not wholly compatible. Notably, the user ID assigned to individuals by Twitter and Twitter Search are completely different. This creates problems when trying to attribute tweets from the sample to specific authors such as politicians or celebrities. More significantly, using Twitter Search ensures that samples will *never* be wholly complete, as it never returns all of the relevant content. Social networking blog Mashable, for example, suggests that the service's hit rate is sometimes as low as 50 percent (Herzog 2009). This difficulty can partially be overcome by using multiple search terms, but it guarantees that total coverage with this method is impossible.

For this study, we used a variety of search terms to ensure as complete a sample as possible. Unlike the most similar study examining the relationship between Twitter and live television events (Shamma et al. 2009), we wanted to go beyond simply extracting the “official” hashtagged content, but instead aimed to understand the broader use of Twitter in response to a broadcast event. Indeed, given previous work on the very limited use of hashtags by Twitter users (boyd et al. 2010), it seems fair to hypothesize that hashtagged content will only be a subset of a broader discussion taking place online.

To that end, we carried out multiple searches using different program related terms. These were: BBCQT (the dominant *BBC Question Time* hashtag); Question time; Questiontime; British National Party; BNP; Dimpleby; Griffin; Straw (Jack Straw, panelist and Labour Minister); Warsi (Baroness Warsi, panelist and Conservative Shadow Minister); Huhne (Chris Huhne, panelist and Liberal Democrat Spokesperson); and Greer (Bonnie Greer, panelist and cultural commentator).

There were some problems with this method. It can generate false positives, while search terms also present a particular difficulty when dealing with conversational threads, as later comments may not actually use predictable words, as has been noted in previous work (Hughes and Palen 2009). However, despite these difficulties, the sample we gathered was substantial. The total set generated from all the searches amounted to some 200,000 records. During the period of the broadcast itself, we gathered nearly 40,000 tweets, produced by 16,852 users. Given that political website Tweetminster estimated 53,500 tweets related to the program were published during its broadcast, this represents a very significant proportion of the content on Twitter related to the event.<sup>2</sup>

This data set does raise an important question. Given the size of the audience, how significant were the relatively small numbers of tweeters and tweets? We would argue that there is a double importance. First, it is wrong to assess the significance of Twitter



through the ratio of users and tweets to viewers. Instead, as noted by Chadwick (2011a), we also need to be mindful of the possible number of people reading Twitter content, which would multiply the importance of the content by a great magnitude. Second, we would contend, while participating as a viewertariat member may have been a minority pursuit and an activity very much in its infancy in October 2009, the time of this study, it is reasonable to expect this activity to grow in scope and significance as social media use continues to expand.

This sample will be used to understand the nature of collective discussion on Twitter around and in response to the program. In particular, it will seek to address this issue at two levels. First, we will examine the interactions that are occurring within the sample and how these relate to the program. This will address the structural collectivity of the sample. This aspect of the study will look to assess the viability of a number of hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1:* Tweets will be disproportionately distributed among the viewertariat, with relatively few users accounting for a significant majority of all posts. This hypothesis builds on findings noted in other Internet environments, such as blogs and forums, where users' propensity to comment is not evenly distributed. In reality, some individuals contribute far more than others.

*Hypothesis 2:* *The number of tweets related to the program will increase when the broadcast begins.* It would seem natural to assume that conversation related to the program will increase when the broadcast commences.

*Hypothesis 3:* *Tweets will peak after the broadcast is finished.* In their study of Presidential debates, Shamma et al. (2009) note that comments on Twitter actually peak in the immediate aftermath of the debate. They theorize that people engage in retrospective discussion immediately after the completion of the event.

*Hypothesis 4:* *Tweets will occur unevenly over the course of the program.* It seems likely that the number of comments on Twitter related to the program will not remain consistent but vary from minute to minute. Three possible explanations for this may independently play a role in shaping the distribution of tweets over time:

*Hypothesis 4a:* The number of tweets appearing per minute will grow as the program progresses, as more people engage online.

*Hypothesis 4b:* The number of tweets will be driven by elements of the broadcast, and the conversations and events occurring on the screen.

*Hypothesis 4c:* The number of tweets will be driven by discussion and content being shared online.

*Hypothesis 5:* *The shared experience of the program will catalyze the social aspects of Twitter, increasing the level of interaction between users.* Since the very nature of commenting on a program as it is broadcast is a shared experience, it seems likely that the social aspects of twitter will be more common than in previous studies, and may also increase over the period of the broadcast, as viewers become more engaged with the program and each other. It seems

likely this will occur with all three of the structural tools used to organize conversations on Twitter:

*Hypothesis 5a:* The proportion of directed tweets will increase during the broadcast.

*Hypothesis 5b:* The proportion of retweets will increase during the broadcast.

*Hypothesis 5c:* The proportion of hashtags will increase during the broadcast.

While testing the hypotheses above will give an indication as to the actual dynamics and structure of group engagement on twitter, we are also concerned with the perceived sense of group identity and connection to the broadcast held by users. To address this, we move to our second stage of research, a more granular discourse content analysis of users' descriptions of social identities and attributions of agency among members of the viewertariat. We searched for all tweets within our corpus featuring the terms *we*, *our*, *us*, *they*, *anyone*, and *everyone*. We then did a manual discourse analysis of 10 percent of that subset. By discourse, we refer to a system of knowledge in a certain field (law, medicine, political debate) in which certain statements are sayable and intelligible while other statements fall outside the discourse and are thus irrelevant or inappropriate. A discourse links certain subjects and objects, identities and issues, giving them meaning within the discourse as a whole. Discourse analysis is useful in political communication for illuminating how social boundaries, differentiations, and antagonisms are created, maintained, or disrupted. Our concern is to establish whether, within the broad structure of participation, the viewertariat considers itself as a social group or whether individual users only refer to themselves as part of other, traditional collectives such as an audience, public, or nation.

*Hypothesis 6:* Users identify themselves as part of collectives to a greater extent that identifying themselves as individuals. As a political debate program, we would expect users to respond as if from within political collectivities and broad interest groups, from ethnic, class, community, or religious groups to general public or nation. Yet as a broadcast event, we would expect users to respond as individuals within the "anyone-as-someone" form of address identified by Scannell (2000). How do users navigate this tension?

*Hypothesis 7:* Descriptions of social identities by the Question Time panel drive descriptions in the viewertariat. In our quantitative analysis, we will establish points in which broadcast content drives the level and foci of viewertariat comment. At that point in time, we hypothesize that descriptions of social identities by *Question Time* panel members will trigger reflections on those identities. That is, political leaders can stimulate debate about social and political identities in real time.

*Hypothesis 8:* In descriptions of social identities, users conceive of themselves within a viewertariat. Our structural data (Hypotheses 1–5) may demonstrate a viewertariat acting as such, but do users recognize and describe themselves as such? This would be evident from descriptions of not only what "we" think as a viewertariat but also what we want, what our opinions and interests are, and what we can do.

Quintile of tweeters	Mean no. of tweets	Proportion of content
Most prolific 20 per cent	7.1 per person	54.76 per cent
Second most prolific 20 per cent	2.48 per person	19.11 per cent
Third most prolific 20 per cent	1.39 per person	10.71 per cent
Forth most prolific 20 per cent	1 per person	7.7 per cent
Bottom 20 per cent	1 per person	7.7 per cent

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Tweets among Commenters, Divided into Quintiles

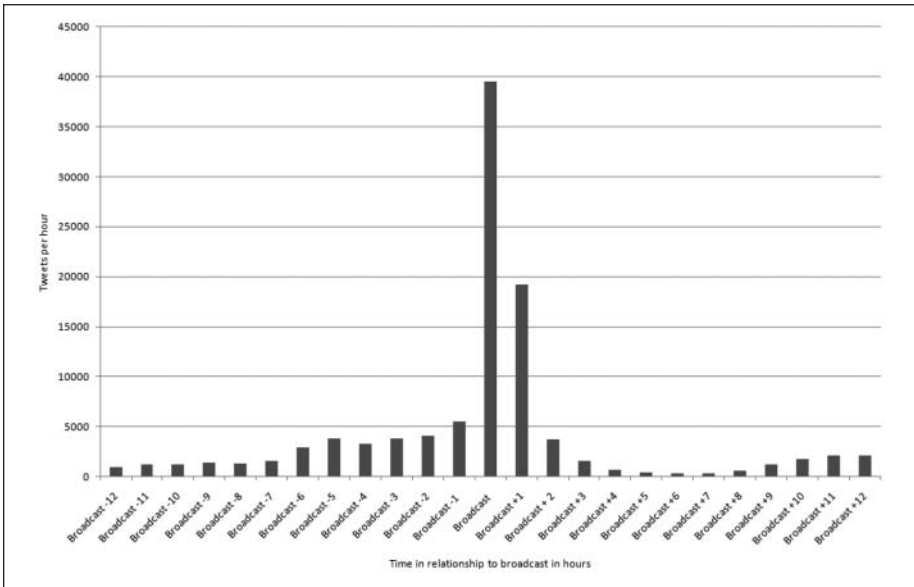
## Commenting Characteristics and Structural Networks Among the Viewertariat

Replicating patterns found in research on different aspects of online discussion, comments on Twitter about this episode of *Question Time* were far from evenly divided by their authorship. The breakdown, divided into quintiles, is shown in Figure 1. The data would suggest that there is a lopsided distribution among commenters. More than half the tweeters commenting during the broadcast (8,803) only commented once during the program. As a result though, they only accounted for 20 per cent of the content. In contrast, the most prolific individual tweeted eighty-four times during the broadcast. In all, the most vocal 20 per cent of commentators produced more than half the content. Thus, hypothesis one would seem to be correct.

While consistent with the idea of “the long tail” (Anderson 2006), this uneven distribution has important implications for any claims that new communication technology has the potential to foster enhanced democratic participation. It replicates a pattern noted in other online environments: Davis (2005) found that a huge proportion of comments on listservs tended to come from very few individuals, while Wright (2006) noted the same patterns on web forums. This inequality is even built into the very fabric of the web, as Hindman’s study (2009) of linking structures indicates. We should therefore not be surprised to see it appearing among those commenting about *Question Time* on twitter. It does, however, undermine some of the claims that the web will be a great equalizer among participants.

Hypothesis 2 would suggest that in the period the program was broadcast there occurred an increased use of Twitter to discuss the issues it raised. Certainly, Figure 2, which shows the number of comments twelve hours before and after the broadcast would suggest that this is the case. While there are comments appearing before 21:35 GMT on Thursday when the program began, they remain fairly limited in number.<sup>3</sup>

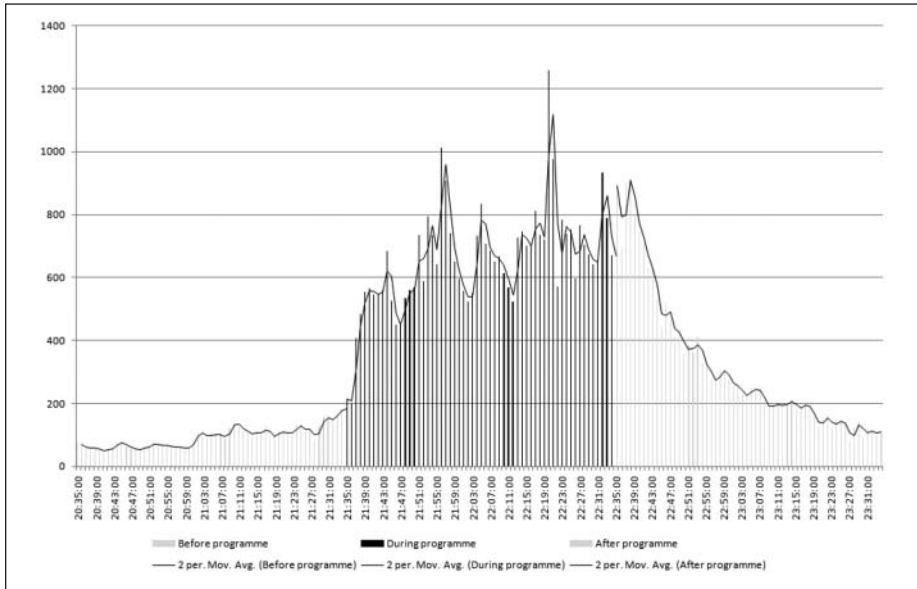
Figure 2 also allows us to address Hypothesis 3. While a sizable number of comments do occur in the hour after the program, they do not reach the same levels as during the



**Figure 2.** Tweets over time, relative to broadcast of *Question Time*

broadcast. Furthermore, after 23:35 (one hour after the program ended), the numbers drop rapidly. Of course, this may simply be because it was getting late. In support of this argument, there is a slight resurgence in commenting the following morning, although not at the levels of the previous night. Both these findings are significant, as they clearly demonstrate the interaction between the actual broadcast and the use of social media to comment on and engage with it, showing that hybridization is occurring. Figure 3, which shows the tweets per minute in the sample during the broadcast, as well as one hour before and after it, provides further evidence of this pattern, although it is notable that the increase and decline in tweets around the broadcast is more gradual than Figure 2 might suggest.

Figure 3 would also seem to validate Hypothesis 4—specifically that the quantity of comments did indeed fluctuate over the course of the program. A more complex question is to explain what might have driven these changes. Hypothesis 4 offers three separate explanations for this. All three of them are validated to an extent. There is certainly a gradual rise in commenting over the duration of the program (as suggested by Hypothesis 4a), although the pattern is far from uniform. In the first ten minutes of the program, the average number of tweets per minute is 492. Between minute 40 and 50, this figure has risen to nearly 800 (this segment includes 22:20, the most commented on of all minutes, where the sample contains 1,258 tweets). While this drops slightly in the last ten minutes of the program to 717 tweets per minute, the overall pattern is one of greater commenting as the program progresses.

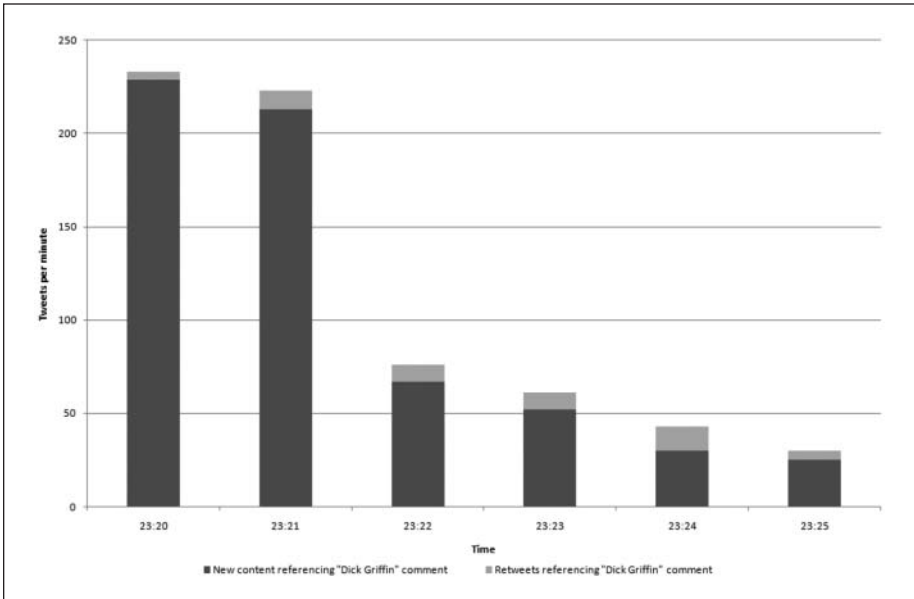


**Figure 3.** Tweets per minute before, during, and after broadcast

The content of tweets published at 22:20 gives us some insight into Hypotheses 4b and 4c. The viewertariat seem to be commenting on both the content of the program and adding their own annotations with additional information. In this subsection of the sample, a large number of the tweets mention panelist Bonnie Greer. Indeed, this is a particularly unusual minute, as it is the only point where Griffin is supplanted as the most mentioned individual in the whole sample. This rise to prominence is due to an extended comment by Greer, commencing at 22:17, where she attacked the historical grounding of the BNP's policies, as well as mocking Griffin's academic qualifications (*BBC Question Time* Transcript 2009: 18). The response to these comments was very positive and saw a great increase in positive language being used. An examination of these comments shows that Greer was specially mentioned in 59.4 percent of these approving words. In contrast, Nick Griffin was mentioned in only 12.1 percent of positive comments. However, a quick examination of these particular tweets finds that commentators do not actually contain a single positive comment directly on Griffin, but instead are using positive terms about his discomfort at Greer's comments or are celebrating what is claimed to be his lackluster performance on the program thus far.

22:20 also sees the emergence of a new meme. The origins of this are to be found in a question from a member of the audience (who was also a member of an ethnic minority community), which started as insult, and evolved into a more stinging question:

*Audience member:* [23:18:26] This is a question to . . . er . . . Dick Griffin, oh . . . er . . . beg your pardon Nick.



**Figure 4.** Tweets including the phrase “Dick Griffin”

*(laughter)*

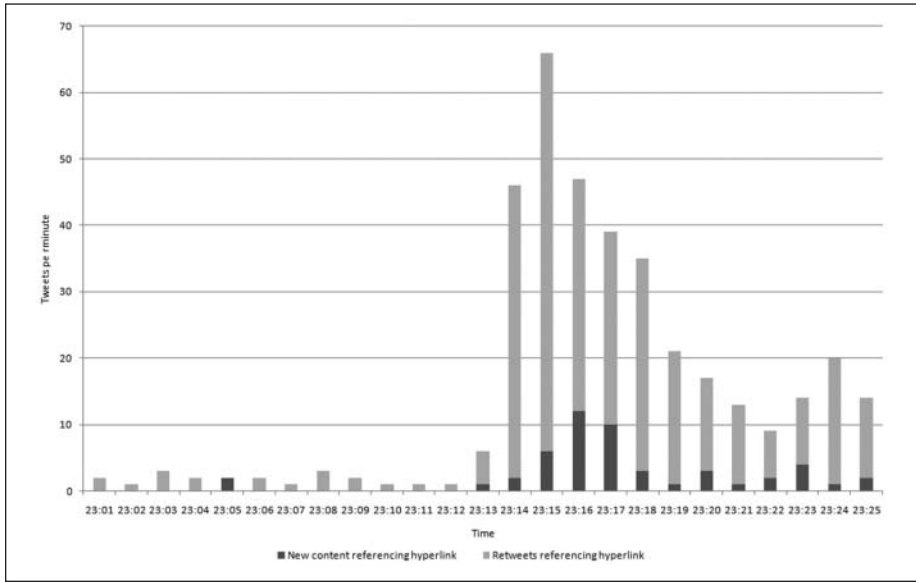
*David Dimbleby:* No, no. He’s made a mistake.

*Audience member:* You’re committed to reversing . . . er . . . you’re committed to stemming the flow and reversing the flow of immigration into the UK so we revert back to a white Britain. Where do you want me to go? This is my country, I love this country, I’m part of this country. You know what? I was born here, I was educated here. You would be surprised how many people here . . . we could have a whip round to get you a ticket and your supporters . . .

*(wild applause)*

*Audience members:* . . . to go the South Pole. It a colourless landscape, you’ll find . . . (*BBC Question Time* Transcript 2009, p. 19)

Comments in the 22:20 sample draw special attention to the slip at the opening of the sequence, with the phrase “Dick Griffin” appearing a total of 233 times. Aside from indicating the ability of the viewertariat to laugh at an incident on the screen in much the same manner as the studio audience, it also give us the chance to understand the way virality works when people are using Twitter to comment on real-time events. The emergence of the term is shown in Figure 4. The nature of this viral event is interesting, because the peak level of comments relating to it is in the immediate aftermath, when there are 223 comments using the phrase “Dick Griffin.” These figures then rapidly decline in the following minutes. By 22:25, it features in only 30 comments.



**Figure 5.** Nick Griffin photograph viral

While the proliferation of comments on Bonnie Greer and “Dick Griffin” would seem to suggest that content can arise directly from the broadcast, an alternative viral was circulating during the same period. This was the hyperlink *Twitpic.com/mie5s*, which leads to a photograph of Nick Griffin at a National Front demonstration in the seventies. This is a very different kind of viral as, while obviously related to the content of the program, it does not replicate a comment on screen, instead annotating the discussion with extra information. As a result, it has a distinct pattern of dissemination. Early comments featuring the link are fairly isolated events, and the content only goes viral after it has been circulating for quite a few minutes. As is shown in Figure 5, the hyperlink is being shared at the very beginning of the program. However, it is a long time before it starts to feature as one of the most frequently cited terms. This suggests a different model of information production—in this case, a specialist piece of research outside the bounds of program content is found and then gradually circulated. This necessarily requires more effort and knowledge on the part of an individual than quoting an incident that occurred on the screen, so it is not surprising that the information would be passed round in a different way. The example of this photograph would seem to indicate that content can emerge independently of the broadcast, as suggested by Hypothesis 4c.

Chadwick argued that the Internet was capable of facilitating a variety of modes of communication: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many (Chadwick 2006). Twitter contains three distinct methods for structuring content, all of which equate to different models of communication. Directed tweets include the name of



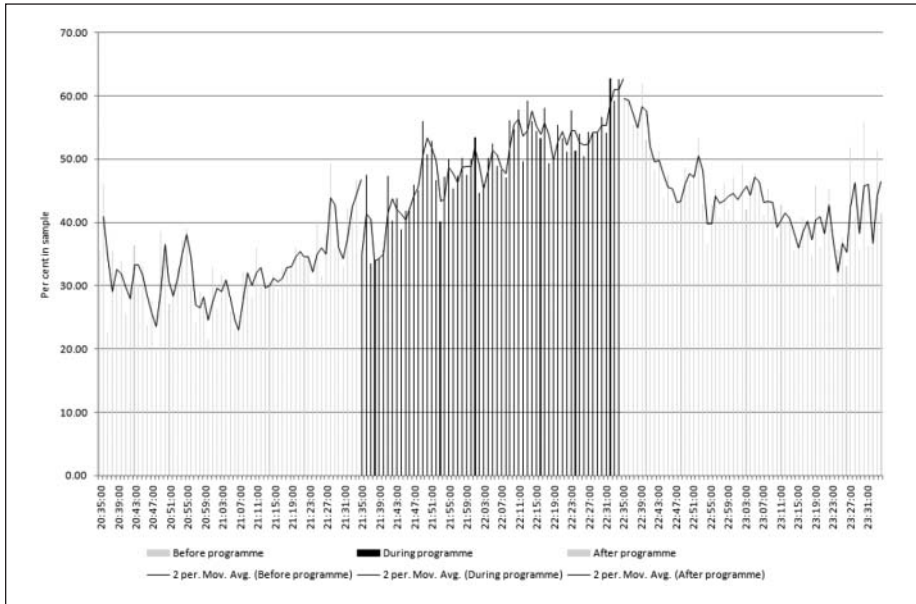
	Boyd et al (2009)	Before prog	During prog	After prog
@	36	38.39	26.56	35.74
RT	3	21.70	15.86	19.01
#	5	27.08	49.92	39.92
#BBCQT	N/A	19.15	47.16	35.76

**Figure 6.** Use of social aspects of twitter

another user, proceeded by the @ symbol, going directly to that account. In the context of Chadwick's typology, this can be seen as one-to-one communication (although, because they are publicly available, they are not a pure version of this form). Retweets allow users to share content created by others, by copying a user's comment and publishing it as their own status update, with attribution. Retweets facilitate one-to-many communications, distributing information through a user's network. They are certainly a potent tool. As Figure 5 indicates, retweets played an important role in disseminating the photograph of Nick Griffin. Finally, hashtags are codes inserted into a message preceded by the # symbol. These are used for categorization purposes, or, as McNely puts it, to make content "agreeable and searchable" (2009). *Question Time* has a semiofficial hashtag, #BBCQT. Hashtags are close to providing a form of many-to-many communication, facilitating both mass input and mass output of information.

Figure 6 shows how viewers used these social tools during and in the period around the broadcast. For the sake of comparison, boyd et al.'s (2010) data on a general sample of Twitter is also included. The context of the broadcast seems to decrease the use of directed tweets, both relative to the general sample examined by boyd et al., and the period before and after the program. It therefore seems that the viewertariat is far less likely to engage in one-to-one communication than other users of Twitter, disproving Hypothesis 5a. In contrast, more complex modes of communication become more common than in the general sample. The one-to-many communication created by retweets increases greatly, validating Hypothesis 5b, although it is notable that it is more common in the period around the broadcast, rather than during it, suggesting that viewers are more likely to create content at this point, as opposed to sharing preexisting information.

The many-to-many communication mode of hashtagging is also considerably more common in our sample than in the general study. Furthermore, use of this technique peaks during the actual broadcast, when nearly half of all tweets contain a hashtag, the vast majority of them using the semiofficial #BBCQT. This would suggest that the program catalyses this particular social aspect of Twitter. Further evidence for this is offered in Figure 7, which shows the use of hashtags before, during, and after the broadcast. Note how the proportion increases over the duration of the broadcast, indicating that the longer people watch, the more engaged they become in the many-to-many collective environment.



**Figure 7.** Hashtagged tweets per minute before, during, and after broadcast

## Collective Identity on Twitter: The Viewertariat Emerges

However, it is open to question whether this finding is reflected in the viewertariat's perceptions of their activities. Our sixth hypothesis aimed to address this matter by examining whether users identify themselves as part of collectives to a greater extent than identifying themselves as individuals. We found a dichotomy between users engaged and self-describing as part of a range of collectivities, and users who identified themselves as individuals not used to watching a political discussion show and slightly mystified by "all the fuss." The latter set of users performed the "not-your-typical-viewer" distinction. They are clearly part of the viewertariat, as they tweet about *Question Time* and have a sense of the large number of people watching it. Consequently, they have an awareness of the mass they are distinguishing themselves within. Such comments were typified by "Everybody is watching Question Time except me. It's like Battlestar Galactica all over again. :(" and the imposition of private tastes against public concerns, as in "RT @unicorngirl: Take it question time is on now? LOL I'm off to knit and watch a movie on the computer.>>>knit???? wassat?? LOL." The social collectivities users identified with included the British electorate, political parties, nation, ethnic group, religious group, audience, as an immigrant, as part of humanity, and even as an indefinite mass ("Everyone just wants to butcher this racist dude").

Our seventh hypothesis is supported: descriptions of social identities by the *Question Time* panel drive descriptions among the viewertariat. The most notable comments by panel members elicit use of, and discussion of, key descriptors of social identities. Recall that the point of the broadcast that elicited most comments occurred at 22:20, following Bonnie Greer's extended attack on Griffin's use of history to justify his policies, in particular his claim that "the indigenous people of these islands are the English, the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh. . . . We are the aborigines here" (*BBC Question Time Transcript* 2009: 17).

We have established that Greer's response drove comment levels up, but it is also striking that users offered similar responses, for instance criticizing Griffin's intelligence and use of history: "this is classic idiocy . . . 'we are the aborigines here!'—seriously starting to feel sorry for Griffin . . . no not really!!!!" This was an opportunity for users to establish their view of the nation to which they belong, through comments such as "does nick griffin not realize that 'indiginous british' do not exist! how many times have we been invaded and integrated? history matters ppl!" Until then, "we" as nation had only featured in users' comments sporadically, in relation to an earlier comment by Straw that "we only won the First World War, and we only won the Second World War, because we were joined in those wars by millions of black and Asian people from around the world" (*BBC Question Time Transcript* 2009: 1). Hence, political leaders can stimulate debate about social and political identities that users will respond in real time.

Our final hypothesis was that users do conceive of themselves as within a viewertariat, as evident from their descriptions of social identities. Clearly, in many cases users did refer to themselves as part of a diffuse collective using Twitter: "stop mentioning Twitter Dimbleby—you can follow us if you want to!"; "at least everyone on Twitter agrees the nazi squirmer is an idiot"; and "I love that pretty much everyone on Twitter is watching Question Time and commenting on the idiot that is Nick Griffin." Conceptually, however, we chose to investigate the identification of this collective as meaningful by examining how users attributed the possibility of *action*. Calls for action fell consistently into two types, action-of-audience and action-of-public. The former is evident from requests for a spectacle, such as, "Can we have another hour of racist-bashing? Please?" and "can we have Bonnie Greer ripping the shit out of Nick Griffin on telly every night?" Invoking the reality television talent show format, several users asked if they could vote Nick off the TV. This is a request for action with no agent, conceiving of users as spectators, audiences, or even TV producers or controllers. In contrast, we also find requests for public action: "Just thinking that if everyone asked the BNP to post them their election material we could bankrupt them," and "Everyone apply to join the BNP. Black, White, brown, yellow, green whatever. See what the dicks do." Some of these calls to action were driven by offline groups, such as the anti-far right organization Hope Not Hate, which encouraged the use of retweets to disrupt a subsequent Griffin appearance on national radio: "RT @hopenothate: Keeping the BNP off Radio 5 after Question Time. Ring 0500 909 693 and shut them up!"

The viewertariat therefore overlaps with the audience, public, and campaigners. This is no surprise: as with any media experience, individuals have different purposes, contexts, and relationships to the medium/text/artifact/event they are engaging with, leading to divergent behavior. The viewertariat augments established roles of audience and public, of spectatorship and political action, and does so in real time, simultaneous to the event itself.

## Conclusion: Continuity, Change, and Challenges

The episode of *BBC Question Time* broadcast on 22 October 2009 and the reaction it provoked online was not unique. The following year, the United Kingdom had its first ever televised leaders' debates during the general election campaign. These too were significant broadcasting events focused on politics, which attracted audiences of more than ten million (Foster 2010). In addition, citizens used new communication technology, including Twitter, to offer their views in real time as they watched (Ampofo et al., forthcoming; Chadwick 2011a). This event indicates that the forms of engagement triggered by Griffin's appearance on *Question Time* are likely to be a recurring element of political television in Britain and in other parts of the world.

This points to an important continuity between the broadcast era and television in the new media era, especially the survival of event television. For this reason, we would contest Castells's formulation that "the mixing of times in the media, within the same channel of communication and at the choice of the viewer/interactor, creates a temporal collage, where not only genres are mixed, but their timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning, no end, no sequence" (2000: 492). In contrast, our analysis indicates how changing audience practices can still generate centripetal dynamics that pull disparate and often-distanced individuals into a mainstream political event.

While "event television" persists, our findings suggest that social media can also bolster that assembly, by engaging with viewers' responses to events on screen and adding new information to annotate the broadcast, as tested in Hypothesis 4b and 4c. As such, this is a powerful case study of Chadwick's idea of media hybridity. In particular, the development of real-time social publishing platforms such as Twitter suggests a substantive change in the nature of media consumption. As a result, debate among scholars about audience must evolve. As Jones notes, "In the era of media convergence, including social networking, streaming video, email, blogging, and so forth, the conception that television is synonymous with passivity is no longer tenable" (Jones 2010: 25). For instance, we can rethink McNair et al.'s idea of *mediated access*, since the two-part typology offered—first, citizens who get to interact directly with politicians in a studio audience or phone-in, and second, citizens who sit at home, thinking and discussing a program's content—now seems outmoded. Instead, we propose a qualitatively different third type of access, wherein viewers can use social media to publish and learn new information, and engage in discussion. Perhaps the most important evidence for the distinctiveness of this development is to be found in Hypothesis 5c, which notes the increased use of hashtags during the broadcast period. This would suggest a propensity

to many-to-many communication, the form of interaction that is most distinctively associated with social media.

That said, we must be careful in making grand claims about the significance of this development. As with other online environments, our findings suggest that the citizens who use Twitter during television events are a vocal minority. This would seem to undermine the democratic significance of this development. However, it should also be noted that, despite being a minority, members of the viewertariat constitute a pluralistic network. Our research points to a multifaceted group of commenters with a range of motivations, associations, and identity: to persuade, educate, bond, have fun, provoke, and so on (for a further discussion of these tendencies, see also Ampofo et al., forthcoming). For this reason, it would therefore be wrong to regard content produced online in real time as uniformly banal, coarse, or ill informed; diverse viewertariat activity can enrich democratic deliberation.

Indeed, given the normative value “the public” has in democratic thinking (Livingstone 2005a), the emergence of the viewertariat raises fundamental questions about if and how the data created online around events such as *BBC Question Time* can be recognized and institutionalized. This is the challenge posed by our findings. These questions encompass a number of actors and function both in an informal and formal manner.

It certainly seems likely that the emergence of the viewertariat can lead to informal institutionalization, created through the interactions and networks created online. Our findings suggest that social media allowed viewers to articulate their collective identity against Griffin and the British National Party, as well as advocate specific action to be taken. This echoes research that examines the relationships between political talk and action online and offline (e.g., de Zúñiga et al., 2010).

More problematic is the question of formal institutionalization. For political leaders and parties, real-time social media commenting may lead to better ways to understand public opinion. Similarly, it remains an open question how broadcasters will respond to this development, since it offers a very different model of participation to that found on programs like *Question Time*. Whereas discussion and panel shows have rules, employ a chairperson to keep order and screen questions in advance, users of Twitter are not bound by any such rules. The emergence of the viewertariat extends existing tensions between elite-led and -regulated institutionalized modes of discussion and bottom-up, organic forms of participation. How these two worlds are integrated will become a vital question if programs of this type are not to look increasingly outmoded. In addition, there is also the question of whether rolling social media data can be integrated into governance. The BBC journalist Nik Gowing argues we need to understand “how the new real-time information flows impact on institutional power, governance and therefore policy making or responses” (2011: 15), a point echoed by scholars, such as Bang and Esmark, who ask, how will mediatized public opinion be treated in today’s “network-based mode of good governance”? (2009: 8).

These possibilities of formal institutionalization also create tensions. In particular, the social media space is currently unregulated, with the viewertariat having no formal say in how its content and emergent properties are monitored, analyzed, and integrated into broadcasts or governance. Indeed, while members of the public appearing on *Question*

Time in the studio audience are aware of the public role they are performing, adapting their behavior to assumed norms of being “on TV,” the public–private character of social media, including Twitter, is ambiguous, without the convergence of norms and roles present in traditional broadcasting.

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1. The technical work necessary to gather the sample was done by Edward Anstead. The authors would like to thank him for his efforts and patience with our requests. Queries related to the tool and requests for further technical information should be directed to him at edwardanstead@gmail.com.
2. This figure was calculated by Tweetminster using a combination of searches for tags and relevant terms, such as panelists' names. In addition, patterns of posting, both by individual users and in exchanges between users, were used to predict if content was related to the program, even if it lacked key terms.
3. All times in this article are given with reference to the Greenwich Mean Time, as this is used by Twitter to organize data. However, at the time of the broadcast, the United Kingdom time was using British Summer Time, which is one hour later than GMT.

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