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“TWITTER JUST EXPLODED”

Social media as alternative vox pop

Kathleen Beckers and **Raymond A. Harder**

News media regularly include the voice of the “man or woman in the street” alongside that of the actors involved in a news story. Journalists use these vox pops to give an impression of public opinion. With the coming of social media, access to people’s opinions has never been so easy. Little research exists about how social media (Twitter in particular) are used by journalists to describe public opinion. This is the question this research aims to answer by using a combination of a qualitative and a quantitative content analysis of Dutch and Flemish news websites. We found several patterns regarding the use of Twitter vox pops. First, we found Twitter to be regularly used as a representation of public opinion. Second, many items generalised these opinions to larger groups with strong –mostly negative– emotions. Third, when referring to Twitter, the articles used (abstract) quantifiers and hyperbolic terms (commotion, explosions) to imply an objective basis for these inferences about the “vox Twitterati”.

KEYWORDS online journalism; public opinion; social media; sourcing; Twitter; vox pops

Introduction

News media frequently include the voice of the “(wo)man in the street” alongside that of actors who are directly involved in a news story (Pantti and Husslage 2009) to provide an impression of what the public thinks. Surveying people to gather these “vox pops”, especially for television, traditionally required physical effort by journalists, but this situation has changed. The vast increase of social media use in recent years (Pew Research Center 2015) now enables journalists to tap into the opinions of laypeople by merely entering a search string. This is especially true for Twitter, which is easily searchable and has a public character by default (in contrast to Facebook). Since media representations are the primary source of information for audiences to get an idea of how other people think about an issue (Moy and Scheufele 2000), this begs the question of how these “social media opinions” are presented in the news. How do journalists include Twitter when describing the attitudes that live among the population? By means of a combination of a qualitative and quantitative content analysis of Flemish and Dutch news websites, this paper aims to investigate which specific formal and substantive patterns are adopted when including tweets as vox pop in news coverage, and to examine the frequency in which these occur in online news items.

Public Opinion, Vox Pops and Social Media

The very notion of “public opinion” has drawn a considerable amount of scholarly attention – from the question of whether it even exists to how it can be adequately measured (e.g. Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Despite these difficulties, journalists regularly refer to what “the people” think. To do this, journalists include opinion polls, images of interactions between audiences and officials (i.e. protests), vox pops, or their own inferences about public opinion in their coverage (Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen 2004; Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Vox pops, one of the most prevalent means to represent public opinion (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005), can be defined as apparently randomly chosen common persons with no affiliation, interviewed by

media, making a statement about the news item (Bosch 2014; De Swert 2013; Lefevere, De Swert and Walgrave 2011). Contrary to other news sources, vox pops are defined by the fact that they are interchangeable with any other person from the population they represent. This distinguishes them from other citizen sources such as eyewitnesses, who provide unique information about a news issue (De Swert 2013). Because of the replaceability of vox pops, journalists can be more selective in which voices (not) to include and thus have more control over the message that is eventually broadcast or published.

Vox pops can be a means to balance traditional elite sources and allow regular, non-elite people to express (political) opinions in the news (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 72). Daschmann (2000) found vox pops to have more influence than opinion polls on voter judgment, perceived public opinion and even own opinion. Moreover, vox pops are found to influence audiences' perceived public opinion and individual opinion more than statements from elite actors such as politicians and experts (e.g. Lefevere, De Swert and Walgrave 2011). These effects might be attributed to the representativeness heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman 1971), which theorises that a small number of examples that seem randomly distributed would reinforce the belief that the whole population is represented and that these examples are an accurate rendition of public opinion. Research shows that audiences take vox pops seriously because they perceive them as representative of the public in general (Lefevere, De Swert and Walgrave 2011).

To collect vox pops, journalists always had to go onto the streets and approach individuals. With the rise of social media, however, this changed. Selecting a number of opinions from the wide array of voices on social media is possible without much effort. This is especially true for Twitter, given its public and searchable nature. Having become "part of the everyday toolkit of journalists" (Hermida 2013, 296), Twitter is regularly used as a source of information or inspiration for a story. Studies across different European countries show that the voice of "common people", or "vox populi", accounts for a considerable share of the tweets that make it into newspaper coverage (Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014; Hladík and Štětka 2015). Moreover, Twitter vox pops have been employed as a public opinion tool on television news and in newspapers during election times (Anstead & O'Loughlin 2015). While we know vox pops are influential and that Twitter vox pops are used in news media as a public opinion tool, so far no research has studied specifically *how* Twitter is used to represent ordinary citizens in the news. This study addresses this topic and elaborates on the ways in which Twitter posts are used as vox pops and how these vox pops are contextualised, asking the following two research questions.

RQ1: Which formal and substantive patterns are present concerning the use of Twitter as vox pop in news coverage?

RQ2: How often do these patterns occur in a sample of online news items?

Methodology

Qualitative Analysis

Our research is divided into two parts. The first part consists of a qualitative analysis of website news items. Since there was no previous research available on this subject, its purpose was to find specific patterns relating to the use of tweets as vox pop in news coverage.

We have two reasons to use online coverage as our sample. First, the production deadlines disappear for news websites (Quandt 2008, Rosenberg and Feldman 2008). Instead of having one fixed deadline per edition (as with newspapers or television newscasts), articles have to be published around the clock with competition between different outlets, resulting in ever-faster reporting. Therefore, website journalists may have more incentives to use social media content than their peers who produce content for traditional media. In addition to these constant deadlines, online news

media also provide the technology to easily include social media in their articles (e.g. the possibility to include tweets directly from Twitter).

Using Dutch and Flemish news websites, we constructed a dataset of news items that included Twitter vox pops from the year 2014. The items were found through Google News, website-specific search engines and by following websites' RSS feeds on a daily basis. This resulted in a sample of 33 Dutch and 29 Flemish news items (n=62). We did not strive for representativeness in terms of sample size, but rather aimed at attaining a point of theoretical saturation, at which we did not encounter any new patterns. The items were imported in NVivo 10 software and coded manually. To code, we used the sensitising concepts "quantities", "emotions" and "groups". Problematic cases were discussed between the authors.

Quantitative Analysis

The second part of the study consists of a quantitative content analysis of website news items. The purpose was to complement the findings of the qualitative study and determine how the patterns we found related to a sample of news items.

A sample of 800 news items from the first semester of 2015 was used, again retrieved from Dutch and Flemish news websites. The Google search engine was used to retrieve the website items. For each country, we selected four news websites with a different profile (See Table 1). For each website, we used the search query "*op Twitter*" *site:[website]* and specified the period between January 1, 2015 and July 1, 2015. The first ten pages¹ of search results were saved, amounting to 100 news items in total per medium. We manually verified whether the article was *about* Twitter (the company or website in general) or featured information *from* Twitter. In some cases, the search query yielded results where Twitter was not mentioned in the article itself, but only in the header, footer or in a sidebar of the site. An overview of this assessment is presented in Table 2. In addition, we coded whether the article featured celebrity tweets ("Kanye West says something on Twitter") and/or whether it featured references to common persons on Twitter. The articles containing vox pops (27.6%, n=221) were used for further analysis.

[Table 1 here]

Variables

Coding of the news items was conducted on two levels. First, on the level of the news item, we determined whether Twitter served as a *trigger* (something that happened on Twitter triggered the news story) or an *illustration* (activity on Twitter was used to support a news story). Also, we listed the *emotions* and *groups* that the news items mentioned. These emotions were coded as either "positive", "neutral" or "negative". Next, we coded whether or not the displayed opinions showed unanimity and if a (trending) *hashtag* was mentioned. *Hyperbolic markers* used in the articles were also coded. With this term, we refer to words that signal 1) a large impact or quantity, 2) have a negative valence and 3) carry an image of incontestability (e.g. "storm on Twitter", "Twitter explodes").

Second, variables were coded on the level of the individual Twitter message. For each tweet mentioned in the news items, we determined whether it was sent by a *known* (celebrity, politician) or *unknown* person ("(wo)man in the street") and checked whether the name of the Twitter user was mentioned. Next, we determined the *format* of every tweet (paraphrase, direct quote, embedded tweet). Last, we coded whether there was a hyperlink (pointing directly to the tweet) present. Inter-coder reliability was calculated on a sample of 10% of the news items containing vox pops and reached Krippendorff's alpha scores between .70 and 1.

[Table 2 here]

Findings

Although this paper is comprised of two separate studies, we present the results together for reasons of clarity. They are structured according to the formal and substantive patterns derived from the qualitative analysis, which were also used for the interpretative assessment of the findings. The statistics provided refer to our quantitative analysis.

Prevalence of Twitter as Vox Pop

In general, we found that when a news item included Twitter as a source, Twitter was used as a means to represent “common people” in 38.2% of the cases (e.g. “the ordinary Twitter user”, *Newsmonkey.be*, January 25, 2015). When comparing the news websites, we found that Flemish news websites used Twitter vox pops on average more often ($M=.42$, $SD=.49$) than Dutch news websites ($M=.34$, $SD=.47$); $t(597.98)=-2.07$, $p<.05$. We also found an association between the “type” of the news websites and their use of Twitter vox pops. Popular websites ($M=.48$, $SD=.50$) used Twitter vox pops more often than websites with an elite character ($M=.31$, $SD=.46$), $t(561.75)=4.29$, $p<.001$. The 221 website articles that contained Twitter references to common people mentioned 1323 individual tweets. Of those, 1,053 (79.2%) were written by ordinary citizens, the remaining 270 (20.8%) were posted by celebrities, companies or media outlets. We discard the latter group of tweets for the remainder of the paper and focus on the tweets written by ordinary citizens.

The vast majority (69.2%) of the news items featured Twitter as the trigger of the news item. This means that the news item covers a situation that takes place entirely on Twitter and which would not have existed without the social medium. Examples hereof are Twitter reactions (“#JeSuisCharlie: Twitter condemns attack on Charlie Hebdo with mass of support tweets”, *Newsmonkey.be*, January 7, 2015) or when the news item focuses on someone’s post on Twitter (“Bruno Tobback launches #ikwilwerk”, *Standaard.be*, March 27, 2015). In only 30.8% of the news items, Twitter serves as an illustration – a function that is comparable to that of traditional vox pops (“Also on Twitter calls for action appear”, *Volkskrant.nl*, January 7, 2015).

Formal characteristics: attribution and presentation

There are several ways in which journalists can include Twitter posts in a news item. Tweets can be quoted directly, meaning that their text is copied without changes, or they can be paraphrased, meaning that the journalist phrases the content of a tweet in his/her own words. Table 3 shows that the latter is used least often by journalists, while direct quotes are used more frequently. Notwithstanding the presence of traditional forms of source inclusion, we found that Twitter’s specific “embed”-option is used overwhelmingly (90.2%). When embedding a tweet, its content is displayed in a frame that features the characteristic Twitter layout, including “follow”, “retweet” and “favourite” buttons, as well as hyperlinks to both the Twitter user and the tweet itself. In terms of source attribution and tweet retrievability, it is clear that embedding tweets provides the most transparency and possibilities for interaction with the public. An embedded tweet ensures that readers are able to verify the exact source. In 53.4% of the cases in which the tweet was paraphrased or quoted, it was virtually impossible to retrieve the original tweet, as it featured neither author nor hyperlink. Adding to this, some were translated, making it impossible to find the tweet using a search query.

[Table 3 here]

Emotions

When referring to Twitter, an inference of the emotions of Twitter users is often made by the journalist. In 29.4% of the cases, the news item mentioned one or more emotions relating to Twitter

users. Three aspects of these described emotions stand out. First, the emotions usually relate to a group of people, even though it is often unclear what this assessment of “group emotions” is based on (also see the next sections). Second, the emotions are mostly very intense, with news items talking about “shock” or even a “hate campaign” on Twitter. Third, the described emotions are predominantly negative in tone. There is “anger”, “frustration”, “outrage” and “disappointment” (e.g. “This statement infuriates Twitter users”, *Newsmonkey.be*, April 22, 2015). On the other hand, we did find a minority of cases that described emotions such as “hilarity”, “contentment” or “madness with joy” (e.g. “Immediately after the tweet was posted, twitterers went crazy with enthusiasm”, *Standaard.be*, April 24, 2015). In total, 89 emotions linked to individuals or groups on Twitter were mentioned in the news items. 22.5% of these emotions were positive, 76.4% negative and 1.1% neutral in tone.

Twitter as a Group

As with traditional vox pops, it is physically impossible for journalists to survey more than a small subsection of the population. Yet, 148 (67%) of the news items referred to the common (wo)man in the street in collective terms. In total, 212 references were made about groups when talking about common people (See Table 4). The majority (60.4%) of the news items referred to a group as if it were the reactions of an entire group transcending Twitter, although we notice that they display reactions and emotions as expressed on Twitter. These groups were specified in different ways, such as “people”, “Belgians”, or “fans”. Other news items do refer to groups on Twitter (37.3%), for example “Twitter users” or “Twitter enthusiasts”. These Twitter group references make it easier for audiences to form an idea of the scale of the opinions and emotions displayed in the article, although it is still difficult to get an impression of the size of the group. Lastly, a small group of news articles (2.3%) referred to a group in other terms, such as “the internet” or “internet users”. These groups transcend Twitter, but are still located in the online realm. To conclude, most articles make very broad generalisations, ascribing reactions to an entire group. The impact therefore seems large, even though an unverifiable generalisation is made.

[Table 4 here]

Next, we looked at the portrayed unanimity of these groups. In 18.2% of all articles mentioning groups, we found an explicit mention of dissent among the described group (e.g. “The news was met with mixed reactions”, *Standaard.be*, January 30, 2015). In the other news items, a certain group of people was either explicitly (2%) or implicitly (79.8%) presented as being unanimously in agreement (e.g. “Everybody in the Netherlands loves coach Radmilo”, *Ad.nl*, May 18, 2015).

Quantities

To describe the scope of a given phenomenon or to introduce an embedded or quoted tweet, quantitative markers were used. By this we mean terms such as “many”, “some” and “a lot”, which are used to quantify a certain group of people (“a lot of Belgians”) or tweets (“many tweets”). Thereby, the reader is supposed to get an impression of the prevalence of a phenomenon on Twitter. While most articles (57.9%) do not feature any quantifiers, 42.1% features at least one, with a maximum of four.

The nature of these markers varies in concreteness, but they are usually abstract in nature. Only 16 of the 128 markers (12.5%) referred to a specific number (“15,160 retweets”, “2,000 followers”), which can be verified objectively, at least in theory. The remaining quantifiers, however, cannot. This is less problematic for terms such as “some”, which are incontestable (yet vague), but all the more so with terms such as “many” and “en masse”, which require a journalist’s judgment. However, the readers do not learn what this judgment is based on. Moreover, it remains unclear how the quantity marker relates to the full population that is described. An example of this is the sentence “Only a tiny proportion agrees with Shepherd” (*Nos.nl*, October 22, 2013). This statement

may or may not be true, but cannot be verified based on information provided in the article.

Another way of giving a quantitative assessment of tweets is the statement that something was “trending”, which we saw in 18.6% of the news items. Again, this seems to be an incontestable indicator of impact, but we have very little knowledge of the underlying algorithms that govern the composition of the list of current trending topics. This is even more problematic as these “trends” differ between countries and cities.

Hyperbolic Markers

The final pattern we found in our sample was the use of what we call “hyperbolic markers” in news coverage about Twitter. Examples include “commotion”, “fuss” and “storm”. There is no predetermined threshold to what a “fuss” or “storm” constitutes, both in terms of intensity and number of tweets. In 26,7% of all items, we found at least one term of this type (e.g. “Yesterday, Twitter exploded during the RTL-show *Obese*” *Ad.nl*, May 15, 2015). We also found some recurring patterns in these hyperboles. First, we found that many of these terms refer to natural phenomena. Examples are “storm on Twitter”, “a wave of outrage” and “reactions poured in”. Furthermore, references were made to the explosive nature of the Twitter phenomenon, for example “the whole thing exploded” and “exploded like a bomb”.

Conclusion and Discussion

The goal of our research was to explore how journalists use Twitter to describe the sentiment among the population. We found Twitter to be an important public opinion tool. Of the news items mentioning Twitter, 38.2% used the medium to refer to common people and 69.2% of the news in our sample was Twitter-initiated. The first pattern we found is that the tweets are generalised to larger groups stretching beyond Twitter and/or the digital realm and that these groups are linked to intense, negative, emotions. In doing so, (abstract) quantifiers are used that imply an objective basis for these inferences. In 81.8% of the articles mentioning groups we found (implicit) claims of unanimity. 26.7% of the news items used hyperbolic markers when talking about public opinion (e.g. a Twitter storm, a fuss, commotion). These markers imply objectivity and seem very matter-of-fact.

This generalisation of singular opinions to larger, unanimous groups of people has been observed before in public opinion research (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Ignoring the complexity and diversity of opinions that exist in that group of people, these inferences “serve to create a vision of public opinion as unified and comprehensible” (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 97). However, questions can be raised about Twitter’s suitability for measuring the “vox populi”. First, Twitter has a specific user base, which makes it non-representative of the general public. Second, when journalists gather opinions from Twitter, the users who do not speak out on a certain topic are by definition ignored. Journalists function as passive gatherers of opinions and do not actively seek new ones. This is understandable, as showing tweets of people who had no opinion would not be very interesting in an article. This issue applies to other public opinion tools also. Even more representative tools in which transparency is more common, such as opinion polls, often lack information about non-response and other statistics (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Third, when writing a tweet, people usually do not bear in mind that it might be used as a vox pop. People’s reactions may be impulsive and more emotional than their actual opinion is. This is amplified by the 140-character limit, which restrains the possibility to be nuanced. To sum this up, Twitter is a poor measure of the “vox populi” in general, but even the “vox Twitterati” is virtually impossible to estimate.

When journalists use generalising terms and hyperbolic markers to refer to public opinion, the basis of the journalist’s assessment, or his/her frame of reference when discussing a “fuss” or “Twitter storm” is not made clear, which makes it also impossible for readers to verify these claims. Consequently, we arrive at a “double layer” of uncertainty. The first are the journalists themselves who, by definition, cannot tell how their interpretation relates to the “true” *vox populi*. The second is

the reader, who is neither able to deduce nor verify the journalist's assessment. In contrast, while these general assessments cannot be verified, the content (or even existence) of the individually cited tweets oftentimes can. The vast majority (94.8%) of these tweets was accompanied by a hyperlink to the tweet in question. Yet, although providing transparency of sources increases journalists' accountability, there is some tension between this and respecting the privacy of Twitter users.

While our study demonstrates the prevalence of Twitter vox pops and the ways in which they are presented, our empirical data do not allow us to infer why journalists employ this feature routinely. To reflect on this question, we suggest that future research builds on the typology of media logics that Brants and Van Praag (2015) put forward. From the *public interest logic* point of view, we may hypothesize that journalists deem opinions from Twitter inherently valuable and as much part of democratic deliberative discourse as organised protests or opinion polls. It should be noted, however, that the Twitter vox pops in our study were mostly found in "soft" news items such as celebrity and sports news. This contrasts with other forms of public opinion representation, which are also used to illustrate "hard" news (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). The *media logic* perspective offers a more critical explanation, namely that the use of Twitter vox pops is driven by economic considerations. Creating news items on the basis of tweets requires few resources. Media workers may therefore conclude that this is an efficient way of dedicating their time in a news ecology characterised by virtually round-the-clock news demand (Rosenberg and Feldman 2008). At the same time, entertaining news items written in a certain forward-referencing style ("clickbait", see Blom and Hansen 2015) tend to generate high volumes of website traffic, thereby bringing in more advertisement revenue than other articles. Finally, the *logic of the public* suggests that journalists have altered their perceptions of what the public expects of them. With audiences now able to both inform and express themselves via the internet, "[l]arge segments of the public (...) are now used to speaking and being listened to" (Brants and Van Praag 2015, 9). A view of journalists as having "the sole right to 'the' truth" (10) is no longer tenable. By consequence, journalists may consider it arrogant, if not elitist, not to include these voices in their coverage. Indeed, we may even hypothesise that the public "force[s] [journalists] to listen and take their preferences into account" (Brants and Van Praag 2015, 10).

As these logics are not contradictory, they reinforce one another to some extent. A complete explanation of why journalists choose to use Twitter vox pops in their coverage might therefore incorporate these motivations. Again, our study does not allow to determine the extent to which these motivations lie behind the use of Twitter vox pops. It does, however, shed some light on the ways in which public opinion is represented in the contemporary news ecology. In doing so, we hope to have provided some pointers for further inquiry into this topic.

NOTES

1. The results were ordered for relevance and not by date, since sorting by date resulted in an unworkable list of pages mentioning the text "op Twitter" anywhere but in the news item on the page. We are aware that how Google's algorithms determine what "relevance" entails is unclear, but we believe our relatively big sample mitigates the representativeness question.

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TABLE 1: Overview of news websites and their profiles

Profile of news website	Dutch	Flemish
Online only (popular)	Nu.nl	Newsmonkey.be
Website of public service broadcaster (elite)	NOS.nl	Deredactie.be
Website of popular newspaper	Ad.nl	Nieuwsblad.be
Website of elite newspaper	Volkskrant.nl	Standaard.be

TABLE 2: Overview and assessment of Twitter items

Dutch media	About Twitter	Twitter as source	Twitter not mentioned
Nu.nl (n=100)	28%	37%	35%
NOS.nl (n=100)	11%	81%	1%
Volkskrant.nl (n=100)	12%	86%	2%
Ad.nl (n=100)	14%	84%	2%
Flemish media	About Twitter	Twitter as source	Twitter not mentioned
Newsmonkey.be (n=100)	15%	79%	6%
Deredactie.be (n=100)	7%	81%	12%
Standaard.be (n=100)	3%	74%	23%
Nieuwsblad.be (n=100)	0%	83%	17%

TABLE 3: Prevalence of different tweet formats ($N=1,053$)

Format	<i>N</i>	%
Embedded	949	90.2
Direct quote	57	5.4
Paraphrase	46	4.4

TABLE 4: Prevalence of references to groups (N=212)

	<i>N</i>	%
Group on Twitter	79	37.3
Group transcending Twitter	128	60.4
Other	5	2.3