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Communicative Capitalism: a study of retweeted content on *Twitter*

Contents

Abstract

This study focuses on the social media site *Twitter* as a media environment which represents an increased potential for audience interactivity, by allowing users the opportunity to simultaneously consume and produce media content. This development challenges the traditional sociological conception of audiences as simply receivers of information, and raises the question of whether the term 'audience' remains relevant in digital age. This study adopts a mixed methods approach, using quantitative analysis which captures a representative snapshot of *Twitter* activity over the course of a day, along with qualitative interviews with regular users of the social media site. Both sets of data are combined to make the case for the continued relevance of audience reception theory, by demonstrating the media environments where *Twitter* users are at their most active and passive. The study moves beyond audience theory, contextualising its findings within the wider debate between cyber-utopian theorists, who view social media sites such as *Twitter* as platforms for the democratisation of communications, and theorists adopting a political economy perspective, who focus on the exploitation of media users by political and economic power. It ultimately finds the political economy perspective to be most convincing, suggesting that the democratising and revolutionary potential of social media sites such as *Twitter* are often overplayed, and arguing that new media entrench hierarchy and preserve the hegemony of political and economic elites.

Introduction

The term 'web 2.0' has been used to mark the integration of new technological developments and social culture in the years following the turn of the century, leading to what William Merrin (2014) describes as, 'a range of web applications that were built around a participatory architecture, personal content creation by enabled individuals, information sharing and personal networks' (Merrin 2014: 31). The embodiment of the web 2.0 is the rise of social media sites such as *MySpace* (2003), and more recently *Facebook* (2005) and *Twitter* (2006), which enable users as simultaneous producers and consumers of media content, reflected by Axel Bruns' (2007) coining of the term '*produsers*'. While the focus of this study is predominantly *Twitter* it will draw on examples from a wide range of media environments, such as gaming, fan communities and citizen journalism, which can be seen to represent the empowerment of the *produser*. *Twitter* is a microblogging site which allows its users to post messages, known as 'tweets', of up to 140 characters, along with an ever-increasing potential to upload digital images, audio and video clips, which are displayed on users' pages as a continuous live feed. Users can also follow the *Twitter* accounts of other members, from family and friends, to celebrities and mainstream media outlets, whose posts subsequently appear on their page. As tweets are generally posted publicly, users can interact with each other in real time, re-circulating or 'retweeting' the comments and content of others, creating what Denef *et al* (2013) refer to as 'an interactive space of open communication' (Denef *et al* 2013: 1). Social media sites such as *Twitter* are of particular interest to scholars of media and audience theory as they represent a significant shift in the traditional conception of audiences as simply receivers of information, enabling users with the means of both production and dissemination, and forever altering the traditional value production chain of mass producer – distributor – consumer (Bruns 2009: 3).

Philo & Miller (2001: 57-58) make a critical distinction between the media practices of audiences for the purposes of pleasure, which they argue are fundamentally separate from politics and the real; a distinction which appears to be largely compatible with the concepts of 'soft' and 'hard' media. These terms are defined by Henderson and Kitzinger (1999) as 'commonly used by media sociologists and journalists alike to describe media output. Put simply, 'hard' media is 'serious'; 'fact-based' coverage and 'soft' involves 'light' or 'human-interest' stories' (Henderson & Kitzinger 1999: 568). It seems reasonable to suggest, in our increasingly media-saturated society, that 'soft' media encompasses our more frivolous and entertainment-based media habits; while 'hard' media refers to more serious issues such as politics, the economy, military action and the law. Accepting Philo and Miller's (2001) argument that audiences have different expectations and behaviours within these two distinct media spheres, it would seem logical to question, in the digital age, whether there are potentially different levels of audience activity exhibited in 'hard' and 'soft' media environments.

Dhiraj Murthy (2013) states that the process of retweeting on can potentially have the effect of amplifying the ordinary *Twitter* user's voice exponentially (Murthy 2013: 21). With this in mind, the study will employ quantitative content analysis, capturing re-circulated tweets in representative 'hard' and 'soft' media environments, and investigating whether there is a difference in the percentage of user-generated content, and conversely mainstream media content, retweeted across these distinct media environments. It follows that this process will allow an insight into whether it is ordinary *Twitter* users, or mainstream media organisations, who are most active, or to adopt Murthy's terminology, have the loudest voice in each of these environments. Following the content analysis stage, the study will conduct interviews with ten *Twitter* users in order to provide greater insight into quantitative findings by gathering users' subjective perspectives on why, and under what circumstances, they create and re-circulate content on *Twitter*. The analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative research will be contextualised within contemporary media theory, where it will be argued that the critical distinction

between 'hard' and 'soft' media demonstrates that users are often at their most active in 'soft'

environments and comparatively passive in 'hard' environments; findings which suggest the continued

importance of the conception of audiences as receivers of information. The final chapter will

incorporate these findings into a wider discussion of the debate between cyber-utopian theorists, and

those adopting a political economy perspective; who view social media sites such as *Twitter* as

representing the democratisation of communications, or exploiting the user, respectively. It will be

argued that rather than a democratising force, due to their profit-orientation, the continued importance

of multimedia conglomerates, and traditional media organisations, that social media sites such as

Twitter often represent the exploitation of the ordinary user, rather than the emancipation. Finally, the

study will conclude with a summary of its findings and their implications with regards to the future

direction of media studies.

Literature Review

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, the sociological study of audience research has undergone a number of paradigmatic shifts which reflect the extent to which audiences are considered to be either passive or active. Central to making a break from early Behaviourist approaches, such as the effects, and uses and gratifications models, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model assumes the prospect of audience agency (Hall 1973). During the 1980s and 90s a generation of Constructionist scholars including Radway (1987), Ang (1996) and Alasuutari (1999) subsequently built upon Hall's work, focusing on the power of highly-active audiences to both resist and subvert dominant media discourses. The most recent paradigmatic shift, often referred to as the *produser/prosumer* paradigm, is closely aligned with advancements in digital technology and the rise of new media since the turn of the century, where access to both the means to produce and disseminate media content have led to increased levels of audience activity, resulting in far less significance given to the traditional boundaries between the media and audiences than had previously been held (Devereux 2014: 224). It follows that the extent to which audiences are seen to be active or passive in their interactions with media texts and technologies is a key point of contemporary debate within the media theory.

Falling roughly within the *produser/prosumer* paradigm are a new generation of media theorists, such as Bruns (2007; 2009), Robinson (2010), Rosen (2012) and Livingstone & Das (2013), who have instigated a debate surrounding the ongoing relevance of the term 'audience', suggesting that the conceptualisation based around the mass television audiences of the 1980s and 90s, focusing on audiences as receivers of information, can no longer be considered reflective of our modern media practices (Livingstone & Das 2013: 111). This debate has led to calls from theorists such as William Merrin and David Gauntlett for the radical overhaul of the discipline, stressing the need to upgrade to a media studies 2.0 (Merrin 2014: 133). Naturally, there is some debate over the future direction of

media theory, with many of the central players adopting their own terminology to discuss essentially the same practices: Merrin (2014) refers to the group formerly known as the audience as media 'users', while Axel Bruns (2007) uses the term '*produsers*' and Henry Jenkins (2006; 2012) adopts the term 'participants'. For the most part, this study adopts the term 'users' to refer to the group formerly known to as the audience, though without necessarily accepting Merrin's strict definition of this term. Every attempt has been made to use the terminology employed by each respective scholar when discussing their work, in order to capture the nuances of their arguments, however, it is necessary to highlight that a degree of flexibility is applied with regards to these terms, which are roughly approximate in their usage. Due to the recent nature of the paradigmatic shift towards the *produser*, and the variety of competing theoretical perspectives, the terminology used is an ongoing issue. Hyde *et al* (2012) recognise this issue, suggesting that a failure to fully define commonly used terms such a 'user-led' and 'collaborative' means that they are often conflated or misused (Hyde *et al* 2012: 60). However, while acknowledging these issues, within the limited scope of this study every effort has been made to adopt the terminology which enacts the greatest clarity for the reader.

Theoretical tensions also exist beyond the use of specific terminology, in particular regarding the centrality of the individual and the role of technology in this paradigmatic shift. Merrin (2014) promotes the role of hi-tech gadgets in what he refers to as the '*me-dia'*: a concept which downplays the significance of mass media, instead focusing on the importance of horizontal, peer-to-peer communications, placing the individual at the centre of their own personal media ecology (Merrin 2014: 78). However, Jenkins argues against the positioning of media convergence as a purely technological process, concentrating on the increasing integration of individuals into networked communities, he argues that new and old media will continue to interact in ever more complex ways (Jenkins 2006: 6). Nevertheless, in their own ways, both theorists recognise that the rise of the *produser* represents both a technological and cultural shift in our media habits. Despite these differences, it could be argued that

the overarching tension within the discipline in fact lies between postmodern theorists and those adopting a political economy approach. Postmodernists such as Bruns, Jenkins and Merrin, can loosely be described using Fuchs' (2014) term as 'cyber-utopians', and believe that the empowerment of the new media user, as represented on platforms such as *Twitter*, can ultimately challenge the hegemony of traditional media, political and economic elites. While theorists such as Herman & Chomsky (1988), Dean (2014), Fuchs (2014) and Devereux (2014) advocate a political economy perspective focusing on the ways in which the capitalist class use such communications platforms to promote and ensure their dominant position in society.

Sonia Livingstone states that the new task for contemporary media studies 'is to understand the changing conditions of communication, that underpin every and any form of participation' (Livingstone 2013: 6). It follows that the key to moving forward within the discipline is developing a greater understanding of which areas of the media are user-led, and in which areas the mainstream media still dominates. However, this task is not without its difficulties, primarily the ethereal and ever-changing nature of our modern media ecology. Our media habits are increasingly varied and the knowledge that we acquire dates very quickly, leading Merrin to claim that it may be impossible to empirically capture a generalisable model of the real (Merrin 2014: 133). However, such postmodern perspectives have been criticised for 'avoiding the hard work' of empirical research by Philo & Miller (2001: 40). In calling for further investigation into audience agency, Sonia Livingstone (2013) argues that despite the difficulties in capturing media practices, culture gets hardened into certain conventions for engaging with the media (Livingstone 2013: 5). It follows that this research answers calls for further empirical research into audience participation, capturing a snapshot of our media ecology, which attempts to establish one of these broad conventions to which Livingstone refers, namely the different levels of audience activity across 'hard' and 'soft' media environments. In doing so, it acknowledges the need to consider both the mass audience and personal experiences and perceptions of users, responding to calls from media

theorists to integrate quantitative and qualitative methodological paradigms in empirical research

(Devereux 2014: 224).

Empirical research of this nature within the discipline of media studies is relatively

underdeveloped. A study of the *Twitter* habits of selected mainstream news agencies by the Pew

Research Center [*sic*] (2011) finds that, on the whole, news agencies rarely use the retweet function to

expand upon conversations or include alternative perspectives (Pew 2011). This study adopts a similar

approach to Pew's research, focusing on re-circulated material and attempting to capture a snapshot of

Twitter activity within a single day. Although the aims and focus of Pew's research are quite different to

those of this study, it is particularly relevant from a methodological perspective, as are similar studies

which employ the coding of tweets, albeit in slightly different areas of communicative research, such as

Denef *et al* (2013). Similarly, both Brannen (1992) and Bryman (2012) are invaluable during research

planning stages, providing valuable insights into the mixing of research methods, best practice when

conducting social research, and the clear guidance on the reporting of information.

The study moves on to contextualise its empirical findings within contemporary audience

theory, arguing for the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft 'media interactions by drawing upon the

arguments of Philo & Miller (2001), and the analysis of studies by Fuchs (2014) and Karlsen (2015) which

suggest that *Twitter* is primarily used for entertainment purposes. It is proposed that the most

convincing arguments of the empowerment of the user are often found in 'soft' media environments;

this point is reinforced by examples drawn from postmodern theorists such as Bruns (2007; 2009),

Jenkins (2006; 2012) and Merrin (2014). Conversely, the study highlights problems with user-led media,

which are often more apparent in 'hard' media environments, drawing upon the works of theorists such

as Mansell (2004), Robinson (2010), Livingstone (2013), Murthy (2013) and Deveruex (2014), all of

whom adopt more critical approaches, which reinforce the continued importance of mainstream media

institutions. The distinction between our 'hard' and 'soft' media habits is the basis for the call to

recognise the continued importance of theoretical perspectives which focus on audience reception, drawing upon Livingstone & Das (2013) to argue that under many circumstances we are still an audience in the traditional sense, despite our access to new media.

In the final chapter, the study moves beyond the theoretical implications for audience theory, contextualising its empirical findings in terms of the debate between postmodern and political economy perspectives. The study contextualises and aligns the postmodern 'cyber-utopian' perspectives of Bruns (2007; 2009), Jenkins (2006; 2012) and Merrin (2014) with studies within political communications which seem to reinforce the argument for the revolutionary potential of new media, drawing upon research into the role of *Twitter* in the 'Arab Spring' uprisings by Harlow (2012) and Kharroub & Bas (2015), which suggest that social media use can facilitate and instigate real world activism. In contrast, studies by Tufekci & Wilson (2012) and Wolfsed *et al* (2015) argue that economic and political conditions are the most important factors in protest activity, as well as influence of traditional media. The study questions whether social media sites such as *Twitter* represent a new public sphere, drawing on the work of Fuchs (2014), who cites Habermas (1989) and draws upon Marxian theory to reinforce the argument that *Twitter* does not fulfil the necessary criteria. In contrast to the utopian view of new media, Dean's (2014) theory of communicative capitalism is used to build upon Fuchs' (2014) argument, by highlighting examples of the exploitation of the user by corporate power. Finally, the study combines the critical perspectives Herman & Chomsky (1988), Devereux (2014), Dean (2014) and Fuchs (2014), whose works capture the exploitation of the user from the top down, ultimately rejecting the underlying utopian ideals of postmodern approaches.

Methodology

Research Question: Is there a difference in levels of user-generated content, and conversely mainstream media content, found in representative 'hard' and 'soft' media environments on *Twitter*?

Research Design

Eoin Devereux (2014) highlights calls within media studies for a more integrated methodological approach to empirical audience-based research, ending the 'stand-off' between proponents of quantitative and qualitative research. It is reasoned that such an approach will allow researchers to simultaneously consider both the creative audience and the commodified mass audience (Devereux 2014: 224). With this in mind, this study adopts a mixed methods research strategy, where quantitative content analysis will facilitate the subsequent qualitative interviews, with each stage of the study approaching the research question from a different perspective for the purposes of triangulation (Brannen 1992: 17). The quantitative analysis aims to establish a difference in the percentage of user-generated, and conversely mainstream media content, re-circulated within 'hard' and 'soft' media environments on *Twitter*, while the subsequent interviews were designed to elaborate and fully understand the findings of the quantitative analysis from the perspective of the user. While content analytical studies are at times criticised as being atheoretical (Bryman 2012: 197), the study addressed this issue by combining both quantitative and qualitative data and contextualising findings within a discussion of their wider implications for contemporary media and communications theory.

Data Collection

The study's empirical database was a complete set of 1558 tweets posted on the 23rd of June 2016 between the hours of 8am and 5pm. Tweets were continuously captured using *Twitter Archiver* —

a free software programme available as an add-on through Google Sheets — in order to create a snapshot of the *Twitter* use of two selected hashtags over the course of the day. The date in question was selected in advance as that of the UK referendum on European Union membership, which, as one of the most significant political and economic events of the year, was an obvious choice as an example of a 'hard' media issue. The hashtag *#Brexit*, a portmanteau which had been in popular use by the British media during the run-up to the referendum, was therefore pre-selected to represent the *Twitter* coverage of a 'hard' media topic. Due to the unpredictable nature of social media, the selection of a corresponding 'soft' media hashtag was left undecided until the morning of the data collection. Accordingly, the hashtag *#Catsagainstbrexit* was chosen from *Twitter's* trending list on the morning of the 23rd, ensuring the selection of two hashtags which would be regularly used throughout the course of the day. While thematically linked to the referendum, there can be little doubt that the *#Catsagainstbrexit* hashtag is primarily focused on users' entertainment rather than serious political debate, and can therefore be seen as being representative of a 'soft' media topic.

The study focused on the influence of mainstream media content, and conversely user-generated content, in 'hard' and 'soft' media environments, as represented by the corresponding hashtags. Rather than capturing every tweet using these hashtags, only tweets which had been retweeted on a minimum of ten occasions were captured during data collection. This decision was justified theoretically, in that it identified only the most impactful tweets, which were reaching the greatest number of people, and eliminated a great deal of what could be described as 'background noise' such as spam, content created by twitter-bots, and some of the more obscure material which is inevitably found in open-access networks. In practical terms, including material with a minimum of ten retweets also ensured the collection of a manageable data sample for a research project of this nature, as capturing all tweets using trending hashtags would likely provide a sample running into the tens or hundreds of thousands. Similarly, the time period of 8am to 5pm was selected after earlier piloting to

ensure sample size that was manageable. In total, 990 tweets were captured using the hashtag *#Brexit*

and 568 tweets using the hashtag *#Catsagainstbrexit*, with each tweet given a unique identification

number and recorded along with all relevant data on spreadsheets; copies of which are included as

digital appendix A.

In developing coding categories, the research drew upon the methodology used in the Pew

Research Center's (2011) paper 'How Mainstream Media Outlets use *Twitter*', modifying and simplifying

the categories used for the purposes of this study. This study differs to that of the Pew Research Center

in the need to differentiate between the origin of content from mainstream media and user-generated

sources, and therefore their codes such as 'personal anecdote' and 'information gathering' were simply

replaced by 'User-generated', which reflects that the origin of these tweets is not a mainstream media

outlet or profit-orientated organisation. The two Pew codes 'Tweet contains link' and 'Driving site

traffic' were replaced by with the code 'Embedded or re-circulated mainstream content', while content

originating from mainstream media outlets or profit-orientated organisations was simply coded as

'Mainstream content' (Pew 2011). After initial piloting, tweets coded as 'User-generated' were further

sub-divided with additional coding categories added for tweets originating from 'Personality-led'

accounts —such as journalists and celebrities— and 'Activist' accounts, with the sole purpose of political

or social activism. While this sub-division requires a greater degree of interpretation on the part of the

researcher, it allows for greater understanding of the origins of the tweets for the purposes of

discussion, while still allowing for the combination of all three categories in order to consider the

influence of all content originating outwith mainstream media organisations. An additional coding

category was also included during piloting for tweets which were no longer available due to the de-

activation of a *Twitter* account between the data collection and analysis stages. Coding took place over

a two-week period at the beginning of July 2016, with each tweet assigned a code and unique

identification number corresponding to the relevant section of the coding schedule (**Appendix B**); with full details of the coding process recorded in the coding manual (**Appendix C**).

Analysis of coding allowed for the juxtaposition of the chosen 'hard' and 'soft' media hashtags, presenting an opportunity to compare the percentages of 'Mainstream' and 'User-generated' content appearing in each domain, and the opportunity to identify any significant differences between the two. Given the nature of *Twitter*, it is highly unlikely that any two hashtags would be used equally, and therefore, while data was collected over a pre-determined timeframe, there remains a disparity between sample sizes. For this reason, it was necessary to conduct a series of two-sample t-tests between corresponding percentages in order to establish the statistical significance of the results; based upon a null hypothesis that there was no difference between the 'hard' and 'soft' media samples.

Qualitative Interviews with *Twitter* users

For a more direct investigation of *Twitter* use, ten semi-structured interviews of approximately 40 minutes were conducted with regular users of the micro-blogging site, in order to establish why, and under what circumstances, users created their own content, and where mainstream media sources were relied upon and re-circulated. Christian Fuchs (2014) defines typical *Twitter* users as being millennials, which represents 18-34 year olds (Fuchs 2014: 190). Participants were therefore selected from within this age group as regular *Twitter* users, who used the site in a personal or professional capacity, rather than for political or civic activism. The sample group was selected from a diverse range of backgrounds and equally divided by male and female participants. For practical reasons, interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling, and in some cases were therefore loosely known to the researcher in some social or professional capacity, or subsequent acquaintances thereof. This type of purposive sampling was selected due to its recommendation for those wishing to recruit participants relevant to a specific research question (Bryman 2012: 334). A flexible interview guide (**Appendix D**) was devised, guided by

background reading and the analysis of the quantitative results, which combined a selection of direct

and probing questions. Interviews were held in public settings within the University of Glasgow Campus

and recorded on an *iphone* with the Interviewees' permission. All Interviews were subsequently

analysed in terms of recurring themes and patterns which were considered to be of wider significance.

The interviews were partially transcribed so as to capture all relevant material, and securely stored

alongside copies of the original recordings, and data from the quantitative research, for purposes of

future reference.

Ethical Considerations

The identities of *Twitter* users whose data was captured during the content analysis stage was

publicly available, and while individual users' details are protected in the body of this dissertation,

spreadsheets including links to each tweet have been made available to markers for the purposes of

verification (**digital Appendix A**). In line with the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee guidelines,

all interviews were conducted in public places, with adult subjects who were considered to be of low

risk, all of whom were provided with a plain language statement, which fully explained the purposes of

the study. All interviewees provided informed consent, and agreed to interviews being recorded and

transcribed at a later date. The identities of all interviewees was protected by referring to each of them

with a pseudonym in the body of this dissertation.

Limitations

For practical reasons, this research investigated only two hashtags covering 1558 tweets, which

was deemed a manageable sample given the considerable coding and analysis involved. However, it

was recognised that analysis on a larger scale would be desirable to further establish these patterns,

capturing a larger number of tweets over a selection of 'hard' and 'soft' media hashtags. It follows that

the research does not claim to have established a definitive rule, but instead attempts to recognise a

broad pattern, reinforced with reference to contemporary media theory, in a replicable manner which can be built upon by subsequent studies. Measures such as the piloting of the coding scheme, and considerations regarding the time frame and number of retweets were undertaken to ensure the quality of the samples and reliability of the coding. It is recognised that it is standard practice in academic research for coding to be undertaken by more than one coder, and tested for both inter-coder and intra-coder reliability (Bryman 2012: 195), however, the nature of this research project, as a postgraduate dissertation, necessitates the use of a single coder in this instance. Similarly, interviews were held with a relatively small number of subjects, and while participants were stratified in terms of gender and those using *Twitter* in social and professional capacities, it is recognised that a larger sample group would be desirable. While acknowledging its limitations, this study also demonstrates a creative and replicable research strategy which can be built upon in the future.

Quantitative Analysis

In order to allow for a comprehensive approach, all 1558 tweets captured were coded for content using the categories: **[1] User-generated** – twitter users who appear unaffiliated with any commercial organisation, posting their own opinions, information, photographs, videos etc ; **[2] Mainstream Media Content** – material posted on behalf of mainstream news outlets, commercial or profit-orientated organisations ; **[3] Re-circulated or embedded Mainstream Content** – where users position themselves in terms of embedded or linked content of a mainstream media origin. All tweets were originally put into one of these three mutually exclusive categories, however, to provide an additional layer of insight, and for the purposes of further discussion, those coded as User-generated were sub-divided with two additional categories, which were: **[4] Personality-led** – including media personalities and journalists affiliated with mainstream organisations, authors, celebrities etc, tweeting in a personal capacity ; and **[5] Activist groups** – which included pages which were dedicated solely towards a specific political or social cause. An additional code **[6]** was added for tweets which were no longer available due to the accounts having been deleted in between the time of data collection and analysis; these tweets were later discounted from the final analysis. Full details of categories and measures to ensure mutual exclusivity are provided in the coding manual (**Appendix C**).

Having discounted 58 tweets, which were coded as category **[6]** - no longer available, there remained a total of 1500 tweets: with n=945 using the hashtag *#Brexit* ; and n=555 using the hashtag *#Catsagainstbrexit*. As mentioned, these figures do not represent all tweets sent using these hashtags
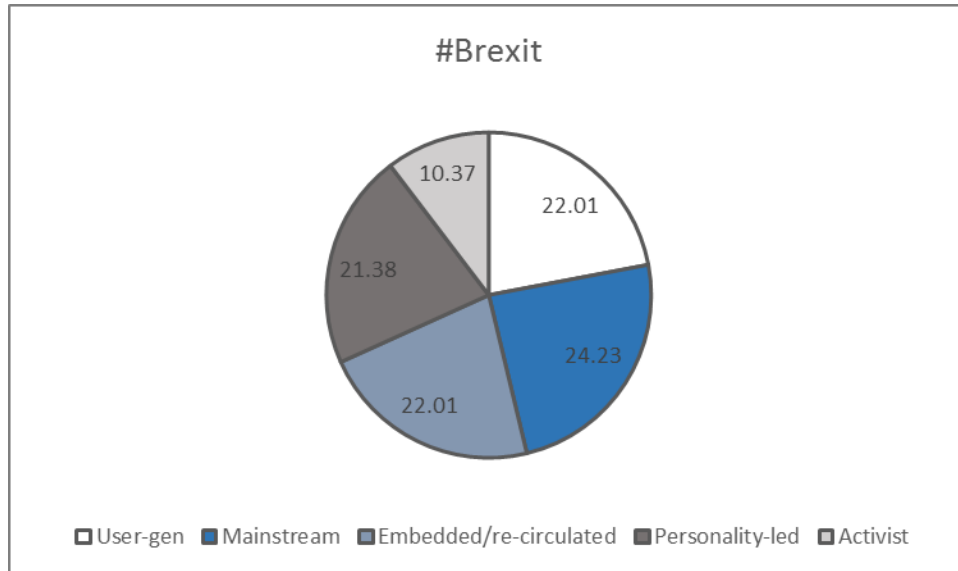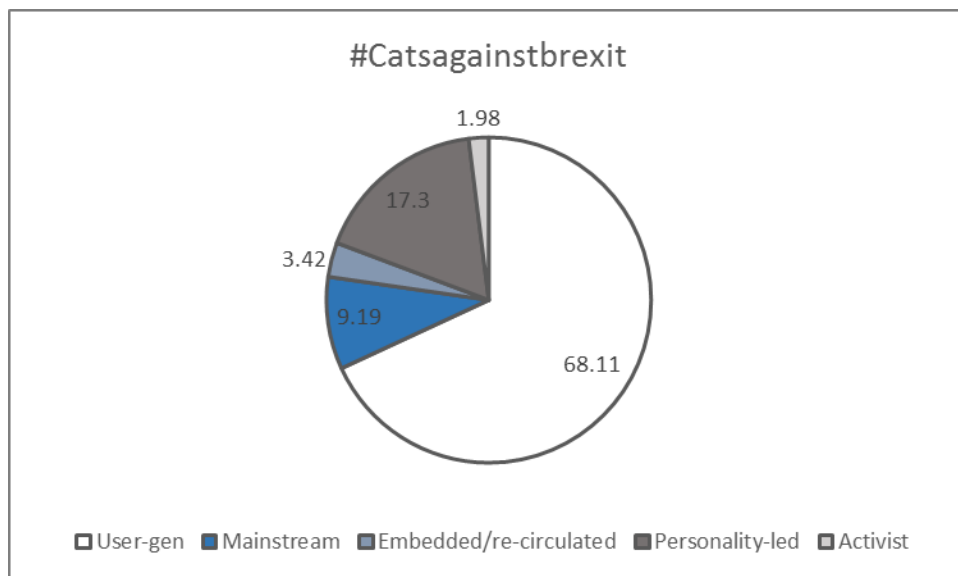

on the 23rd June 2016, but only the most impactful tweets – those which were retweeted on ten occasions or more. **Figures 1 & 2** below, shows pie charts representing the breakdown of content for each of the two hashtags:

Fig 1.

Fig 2.

The influence of the mainstream media can be assessed by combining **[2]** all content originating from a mainstream media outlet, and **[3]** all content linking to or embedding mainstream media content (these two categories are represented by two shades of blue in the pie charts above). **[1]** Content originating from what would be considered 'ordinary' individuals (shaded white), along with **[4]** personality-led and **[5]** activist-led (represented by two shades of grey), combined can all loosely be considered to be user-led content, although there could be some debate over both activist groups and media personalities within this grouping, especially as media personalities' popularity and influence is often due to an association with a mainstream media organisation; it could therefore be argued that the personality-led category falls somewhere in between the ordinary user and the mass media. On visual

#Catsagainstbrexit

1.98
17.3
3.42
9.19
68.11

User-gen Mainstream Embedded/re-circulated Personality-led Activist

comparison of the two hashtags in **figure 1 & 2** above, the most striking feature is that while ordinary users play an important role in the representative 'hard' media environment *#Brexit*, they compete with the significant influence of the mainstream media, in addition to the voices of media personalities and

activist groups. However, in contrast, the voice of ordinary users dominates the representative 'soft'

media environment *#Catsagainstbrexit*, with noticeably less direct and indirect influence from the

mainstream media and activist groups.

Moving beyond a visual comparison, and due to the difference in sample sizes, it was necessary

to conduct a two-sample t-test between percentages to determine statistical significance:

Fig. 3

Coding category	#Brexit	#Catsagainstbrexit	t-value	p-value	
[1] user-generated	22.01%	68.11%	17.668	0.000	***
[2] mainstream	24.23%	9.19%	7.218	0.000	***
[3] embedded	22.01%	3.42%	9.700	0.000	***
[4] personality-led	21.38%	17.3%	1.912	0.0562	—
[5] activist	10.37%	1.98%	6.044	0.000	***

***comparison X_2 -tests significant at 0.1% level

Fig. 4

Coding Categories	#Brexit	#Catsagainstbrexit	t-value	p-value	
Mainstream content [2+3]	46.24%	12.61%	13.294	0.000	***
User-generated content [1+4+5]	53.76%	87.39%	13.294	0.000	***

***comparison X_2-tests significant at 0.1% level

As is detailed in **figure 3** above, there is a highly-significant difference across these

representative 'hard' and 'soft' media hashtags in the percentage of [1] user-generated, [2] mainstream

content, [3] re-circulated mainstream content, and [5] that originating from activist groups; while the

influence of [4] personality-led accounts does not significantly differ. **Figure 4** combines all categories

which could conceivably be considered to be user-generated, comparing them against the influence of

direct and indirect mainstream media content, demonstrating that even adopting this conservative

approach, there is a highly-significant difference between the origin of tweets between these two hashtags.

Analysis of the 'hard' media hashtag *#Brexit* could describe it as a contested space, where we see the significant influence of material originating from mainstream media sources; with a combined total of 46.24% of all tweets coded ultimately representing the dissemination of mainstream media messages. It seems fairly intuitive, that given the subject matter, the voice of activist groups plays a significant role in *#Brexit* with 10.37% of the tweets falling into this category, as it represents a political decision with far-reaching implications. It is also, perhaps, to be expected that celebrities or media personalities have significant influence in this environment, with 21.38% of all tweets falling within this category, as so many of our modern media habits focus on celebrity culture. Content generated by ordinary users is far from marginal, with 22.01% of tweets falling into this category, yet it seems clear that the voice of the ordinary user must compete with those of organisation, wealth and power. While this certainly represents an interactive media environment, it is difficult to argue that it is user-led in terms of the ordinary user, as mainstream media content plays a significant role, as do the voices of activist groups and media personalities.

Although *#Catsagainstbrexit* is thematically linked to a 'hard' news issue, it is undoubtedly entertainment-based, rather than focusing on serious debate or the dissemination of political messages. The most noticeable pattern here is the highly-significant rise in the influence of the ordinary user in this environment, with 68.11% of all tweets falling into this category. Conversely, we see a highly-significant reduction in both the direct influence of mainstream media outlets, with only 9.19% of all tweets, and the re-circulation of embedded mainstream content only representing 3.42% of all tweets. While the influence of media-personalities is the only category which remains reasonably constant across the two hashtags, the level of activist influence is negligible in *#Catsagainstbrexit* with only 1.98% of total tweets, which again seems intuitive given the frivolous nature of the subject matter. Analysis of this

hashtag could suggest that, given its focus, there is far less inclination for mainstream media involvement, with users creating their own content, rather than relying on mainstream media texts. There is justification for making the argument that this is indeed a user-led media environment, where the agenda is set by ordinary *Twitter* users.

These results suggest a highly-significant difference in the levels of user interactivity across these representative 'hard' and 'soft' media environments, with content produced by ordinary users dominating proceedings in the 'soft' media environment, while competing to a far greater extent with the voices of mainstream media organisations and activist groups in the 'hard' media setting. The study will now move on to explain these findings through interviews with a selection of *Twitter* users, in order to gather a greater understanding of this pattern based upon the perspectives and insights of those who use the social media site regularly.

Qualitative Findings

The results of the quantitative analysis find greater levels of mainstream media influence in the representative 'hard' media environment, while user-generated content appears to dominate in the representative 'soft' media environment. What quantitative analysis cannot do is help us understand the reasons for these results. For this purpose, the research moved on to focus on the subjective experiences of typical *Twitter* users who provided further insight into the findings of the quantitative analysis through a series of ten semi-structured interviews, which were held during late July 2016. The Interview guide (**Appendix D**) was based upon extensive background reading alongside the results of the quantitative analysis. While these interviews revealed an array of different perspectives, there were also several recurring themes. Noticeable differences were apparent in interviewees' approaches towards *Twitter* for entertainment purposes and newsgathering; and distinct attitudes displayed

towards *Twitter* use in personal and professional capacities. This chapter gathers together the insights

and perceptions of interviewees, reinforcing recurring themes with direct quotes where appropriate.

For the majority of the interviewees, *Twitter* was used primarily as a platform for entertainment

purposes, and communicating socially did not feature highly among reasons given for its use, with

Facebook regularly mentioned as a preferred environment for activity of this nature. The general

consensus among participants was that creating content on *Twitter* was a less important feature of their

use than consuming content created by others. However, when both creating and retweeting content in

a personal capacity, it was considered far more likely to be for entertainment purposes, referred to as

'soft' media in this study. Participant FW-02's answer was typical of the wider response when asked

about how often she created her own media content:

> '*It's quite rare that I do, but it's mainly just photos of the kids or the dogs or something – I don't
>
> really engage in any activism or blogging, so I suppose it's mainly just light-hearted stuff rather
>
> than anything too serious*'.

While *Twitter* offers an opportunity to engage with online activism or share political opinions through

the creation of articles and blogs, it could be questioned whether this element is at times overplayed, as

not a single interviewee identified as creating their own 'hard' media texts in a personal capacity.

Rather than creating informational content, their interactions in 'hard' media environments tended to

be expressive, with several interviewees suggesting that offering opinions based upon mainstream

media texts was a significant feature of their usage. It is clear from the content analysis that there are

many highly-active *Twitter* users creating original content, however, several of this group of

interviewees self-identified as being more passive in their use, suggesting that it is perhaps more

common than is thought that *Twitter* is used as a consumptive practice, much like traditional media,

albeit with increased potential for feedback, and greater control over the point and method of reception.

For many of the more media-savvy interviewees, *Twitter* was considered to be an increasingly important resource for newsgathering, with its potential for keeping track of developing or breaking news a recurring theme. The unrivalled speed of the coverage of breaking news stories on *Twitter* was regularly cited by interviews as a reason for its use, with the example of the attempted Turkish coup which took place on the 15th of July 2016, fresh in the mind of several interviewees. However, while anecdotally interviewees often stressed the importance of the speed and interactivity of *Twitter*, further probing of the sources used highlighted the important role of mainstream media outlets, and affiliated journalists, within this process as a means of contextualising and verifying information. Several of the participants suggested that *Twitter* offers an opportunity for users to curate their own media experience based upon their own personal tastes and interests, often combining internet rumours and opinions with the coverage of mainstream news outlets, and the work of the best journalists, as a means to quickly cross-reference an unparalleled selection of coverage. This sentiment was captured succinctly by participant MW-03 who said:

> *'All of the people I follow —and all mainstream news outlets and journalists— are there to curate my own news content based on my interests and area of work.'*

While the unrivalled access to a wide selection of opinions and internet rumours in real-time, as news stories develop, is undoubtedly central to *Twitter'*s appeal for newsgathering, the vast majority of participants stressed that information from a trusted and authoritative source remained the most important aspect of their news consumption. During the interviews, the BBC, Channel 4 News and the *Guardian* were frequently mentioned, unprompted, within this context, as were journalists such as Jon Snow and Owen Jones who are associated with mainstream media organisations, but also use *Twitter* in

a personal capacity. Very few of the interviewees followed citizen journalists, unaffiliated with any

mainstream news organisations, though the nature of such journalism may suggest less of a committed

following. When asked whether it was important that 'hard' news comes from a trusted and

authoritative source, interviewee MW-03 commented:

> '*Yes and I read that news feed and verify through others — mainstream and via hashtags.*
>
> *Twitter is an important part of the process of newsgathering, it supplements mainstream outlets,*
>
> *but also relies heavily on their input'.*

This insight accurately captures the symbiotic nature of new and traditional media in our contemporary

ecology. All too often, new media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* are as discussed in terms of

being the source of news, when in reality they often provide then means to curate our own personal

newsfeeds, which rely heavily on traditional media outlets and established journalists.

As interviews progressed, a distinct pattern began to emerge between participants' personal

and professional *Twitter* use, with many of the interviewees contrasting their behavior between these

two environments. For example, participant FW-04 stated that creating original content was not a

significant part of her personal *Twitter* use, but she acknowledged that this was quite different in a

professional capacity:

> '*Creating original content is beneficial in a professional context. At work, I frequently retweet*
>
> *content produced by others, but again in a 'hard' media environment, and for professional*
>
> *purposes'.*

Several of the interviewees echoed this sentiment, suggesting that generating and retweeting media

content of a 'hard' nature was often associated with having an audience with which to share such

information. In a professional setting, users were far more aware of their audience, and the need to

continually engage them, promote their businesses, and re-circulate media content which was assumed

to be in the best interests of their employers, while steering clear of any potentially contentious material. The Pew Research Center's (2011) study questions whether *Twitter* is a marketing tool or a tool for newsgathering. This research suggests that both alternatives are valid, and that in 'hard' media environments *Twitter* is tool for newsgathering in a personal capacity, but is often viewed as a marketing tool in a professional capacity.

The findings from these interviews demonstrates many divergent practices and habits among *Twitter* users, but also several broad trends and patterns which emerged as recurring themes. In terms of personal usage, entertainment was considered to be a dominant feature of *Twitter* use, with more of the interviewees than expected using the micro-blogging site for solely the consumption of media, rather than their own production. However, it was widely acknowledged that users were more likely to both create and share their own content in 'soft' media environments, as the interviewees featured in this study did not identify with creating their own 'hard' media content in a personal capacity. This is not to suggest that ordinary users do not create 'hard' media texts, and the relatively small sample size is again acknowledged, yet these findings seem to reinforce the quantitative analysis, which suggests a tendency for users to be more active in 'soft' media environments. Several participants mentioned the growing importance of *Twitter* for curating their own personal newsfeeds, but with further questioning it emerged that this process often ultimately relied heavily on mainstream media organisations and their associated journalists, with interviewees stressing the central importance of trusted and authoritative sources in their newsgathering process, which highlights the ongoing importance of mainstream media texts in our current media ecology. The interviewees who used *Twitter* in a professional capacity discussed an increased pressure to generate and re-circulate content aligned with promoting the best interests of their employers, and based upon expectations of a larger audience. It seems intuitive, and confirmatory of the quantitative results, that interviewees often identified the creation of 'hard' media

content with their professional use, and 'soft' content with their personal use. In the next chapter these

findings will be discussed in terms of their implications for audience theory.

Audience Theory: the case for the critical distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' media usage.

In this chapter, the results of both the qualitative and quantitative analysis of this study are

contextualised within contemporary media theory. Eoin Devereux (2014) stresses the Importance for

media theorists to develop an understanding of when we are an audience led by the mainstream, and

when we have control of production (Devereux 2014: 253). This chapter will make the case for the

critical distinction between our 'hard' and 'soft' media interactions, drawing upon examples which

highlight the strengths of user-led environments, and, conversely, where traditional media organisations

retain a great deal of power and influence. Drawing upon both empirical evidence and background

reading, it will argue that modern media users are often at their most highly-active in 'soft' media

environments, while tending to rely upon the mainstream to a far greater extent in 'hard' media

interactions. It will be argued that this distinction highlights the continued importance of the

sociological conception of the audience as receivers of information, while also demonstrating the

problematic nature of media theorists who fail to recognise this broad trend in our media habits.

It is clear from both sets of results, that while *Twitter* is primarily viewed by its users as a means

of entertainment, it is also increasingly seen as important tool for curating newsgathering, especially for

those working within the media industry. Analysis of both sets of results suggests distinct approaches

towards *Twitter* use, with regards to both entertainment and news, and personal and professional

usage, which seem to be broadly aligned with the 'soft' and 'hard' media distinction. Studies by Fuchs

(2014) and Karlsen (2015) reinforce the primacy of entertainment-based interactions on *Twitter*, with

Fuchs' analysis of trends and topics between 2009 and 2012 demonstrating that the social media site

was dominated by 'soft' media content, such as music and dating; while 'hard' issues such as politics

were marginalised, and when prominent tended to be personality-led, focusing on influential political

actors such as Barack Obama, rather than the wider debates and issues (Fuchs 2014: 190). There is little

to suggest a wholesale change to this pattern in 2016, and Philo & Miller (2001) highlight the important

role within audience theory for studies that emphasise pleasure, namechecking influential research by

Radway (1984) and Ang (1996), which focuses on media consumption for the purposes of escapism,

fantasy and fiction (Philo & Miller 2001: 57-58). However, as discussed, it is argued that the pleasures

gained from such consumptive practices are 'fundamentally separate from politics and the real' (Philo &

Miller 2001: 58). This critical distinction between media consumption, or indeed interaction, for the

purposes of pleasure, and that with which we interact for more serious purposes, is often marginalised

by postmodern theorists who wish to talk-up the empowerment of modern media user, while

downplaying the significance of large media institutions and organisations. Postmodern theorists, such

as Bruns (2007; 2009), Jenkins (2006; 2012) and Merrin (2014) often illustrate the power of the user in

'soft' media environments, using such examples as the basis for bold claims regarding the future of

media theory and beyond. In contrast, media theorists adopting a political economy perspective, such as Herman & Chomsky (1988), McChesney (2000) and Devereux (2014) stress the importance of powerful political and economic interests to shape our media ecologies, and are naturally primarily concerned with 'hard' media issues (Devereux 2014: 259). With regards to audience theory, there is much to be learned from both postmodern and political economy perspectives, however, they are often focused on entirely different aspects of our media usage, and it could be considered problematic to make overarching claims on the future of the discipline based upon examples from only one of these two distinct media environments.

User-led environments: where the boundaries between producer and consumer are broken down

There is a strong basis for Dhiraj Murthy's (2013) claim that 'the influence of ordinary people may be minimal on *Twitter*' (Murthy 2013: 31). However, in certain respects, the findings of the quantitative analysis appear to contradict Murthy's assertion, as the voice of 'ordinary people' dominates the representative 'soft' media hashtag *#CatsagainstBrexit*. The problem with Murthy's generalisation is that it is based upon 'hard' issues, and fails to recognise the voice of the user is often most prominent in 'soft' media interactions. Although this distinction is rarely acknowledged in contemporary media theory it is often inferred, as time and again, the most convincing arguments of theorists wishing to demonstrate the potential of user-led media environments draw upon examples from 'soft' media. Henry Jenkins (2006) focuses on fan communities from *Harry Potter* to *Star Wars* and the *Matrix*, while William Merrin (2014) demonstrates the user's new-found control over the means of production through a discussion of his son's ability to create a *YouTube* channel and post clips of himself playing the computer game *Halo* (Merrin 2014: 2-3). Similarly, Axel Bruns' (2007; 2009) most convincing examples of user-led environments are drawn from within the gaming community, with reference to titles such as *The Sims* and *Minecraft*, of which upwards of 90% of the content is now said to be created by gamers themselves (Hertz 2005: 330). In our pursuit of entertainment and pleasure, as has be

demonstrated with the analysis of the *#Catsagainstbrexit* hashtag, ordinary people can often lead the

way; their influence is far from minimal in these environments as Murthy suggests. These 'soft' media

environments demonstrate where the boundaries between producer and consumer are broken down,

and tend to provide examples which best support arguments which differentiate between the audience

and the modern media user or *produser*. In these 'soft' media environments, the creative power of the

user in computer games, fan communities, and indeed, the re-circulation of cat pictures, demonstrates

the end of the one-to-many mass media model, and shows where participants or users can have

genuine claims to lead the way in influencing large media organisations.

Just as Murthy's (2013) generalisations based upon a 'hard' media interactions are not

necessarily representative of users' *Twitter* use for entertainment purposes; there are obvious problems

with the arguments of theorists such as Bruns (2007; 2009) Jenkins (2006; 2012) and Merrin (2014) who

use examples of our 'soft' media interactions to make wider generalisations about the future of the

discipline, without significant regard for the powers which shape our modern media ecology. Jenkins

recognises that the collective power represented by user-led environments is generally a feature of our

recreational pursuits, yet he envisions a future where these collaborative skills are deployed in more

serious environments, changing 'the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising and even the

military operate' (Jenkins 2006: 4). The results of both the qualitative and quantitative analysis

conducted within this study, reinforced by the findings of studies by the Pew Research Center (2011),

Fuchs (2014) and Karlsen (2015), support the assertion that users have distinct approaches to *Twitter*

use for both entertainment and newsgathering; work and pleasure. While ordinary users often lead the

way in the sharing and creation content of a more trivial nature, such as *#Catsagainstbrexit*, results

demonstrate that they tend to rely more heavily on mainstream media texts in their 'hard' media

interactions. When viewed within this context, Murthy's (2013) argument bears greater relevance, and

while ordinary users' voices are not necessarily minimal, they are forced to compete with a host of other

interests in the more serious environments to which Jenkins refers. It could be argued, therefore, that

the dominance of the user in 'soft' media environments such as #*Catsagainstbrexit*, is rarely replicated

in 'hard' media environments such as #*Brexit*, where the interests of political and economic power are

likely to be more concentrated.

User-led environments as a trusted source?

While the most convincing examples of user-led environments are found in 'soft' media, there

are also examples of the empowerment of the user to be found in 'hard' media, yet these examples

often highlight the problems with postmodern perspectives. Axel Bruns (2007: 2-4) emphasises the

power of the *produser* through his discussion of citizen journalism and open-source environments such

as *Wikipedia*, while William Merrin (2014) discusses the potential of open-source software, which is

available for any user to understand and improve (Merrin 2014: 5). While there are valid claims that

such environments represent the growing power of the user, this transition into a more 'serious' media

environment also highlights certain limitations. For example, *Wikipedia*, which allows its members to

create, upload and edit articles, can be seen as being symbolic of an inherent problem with open-access

and user-led content. As stressed during the interviews conducted within this study, in 'hard' media

interactions users tend to seek information from trusted and authoritative sources. One of the key

benefits of an open-source environment such as *Wikipedia* is that it can be quickly edited by its users,

and therefore kept up-to date in a way that printed works cannot, however, this ease of access also

leaves it open to potential abuse. Bruns (2007) concedes that, at least in the short term, it is possible to

deliberately derail the *produsage* processes by seeding such environments with mis- and disinformation

(Bruns 2009: 7). For all the benefits of user-led environments like *Wikipedia* they still struggle to be

considered as an authoritative source of information, which is why it is widely frowned upon as an

academic source. Merrin's reference to open-source software is based upon the assumption that it is

open for 'anyone to understand and improve' (Merrin 2014: 5). However, this assumption appears to be

based on an idealistic belief in benevolent users adding value and improving the software, while ignoring the prospect of those who may wish to devalue it through sabotage, or for their own gains. In 'hard' media environments, where authority and veracity are most important, user-led initiatives rely on shared level of accuracy, honesty and integrity, which is only as strong as the weakest link. All too often, the works of postmodern theorists, such as Bruns (2007; 2009), Jenkins (2006; 2012) and Merrin (2014), which emphasise the empowerment of the user, are based upon idealistic beliefs in a participatory culture of communal responsibility, collective intelligence and shared ownership. However, more critical media theorists such as Hyde *et al* (2012: 58-59) are quick to point out that multiple levels of collaboration are often a source of conflict and confusion, while Livingstone (2013) argues that group identity and collective responsibility assume level of organisation and planning that simply does not exist (Livingstone 2013).

The continued importance of mainstream media Institutions in 'hard' media

Little evidence from the interviews conducted during this study demonstrated users generating news or blogs in a personal capacity, suggesting a more consumptive usage in 'hard' media environments, albeit with the increased potential for feedback. Citizen journalism, referring to journalism engaged in by so-called ordinary citizens (Devereux 2014: 289), demonstrates the ability of ordinary people to challenge the hegemony of large media institutions in our modern media ecology. However, as Mansell (2004) suggests, there is often too much focus on the variety and abundance of new media with little regard for how it is shaped by power. While the basic premise of citizen journalism is highly plausible, whereby technological advances and networked practices allow users access to the means of production and dissemination, there is an inherent problem in that user-generated material is rarely trusted until seen through the lens of the mainstream media. The empirical

evidence reinforces this assertion as interviewees stress the importance of verifying their news through

a trusted source, while quantitative results suggest that voices of the ordinary citizens are far from being

a dominant force in 'hard' media environments. This point is reinforced by Christian Fuchs (2014) who

notes that the exponential spread of information, or 'going viral', almost always indicates the

involvement of highly visible users, such as mainstream media organisations or celebrities (Fuchs 2014:

198). It is argued, therefore, that mainstream media organisations essentially act as gatekeepers who

can embed and link to user-generated material when it suits their own agendas and benefits their

interests (Robinson 2010). This point does not negate the role of citizen journalism, and the important

place of user-generated material within mainstream news, however, it highlights the need to clearly

define and examine the power and processes which enable supposedly user-led initiatives.

Devereux (2014) states that 'the production and circulation of the overwhelming majority of

media texts which are consumed by audiences remains in the hands of powerful media conglomerates

(Devereux 2014: 267). While this study acknowledges that ordinary users are increasingly active in 'soft'

media environments, it rejects the idea that this represents a challenge to the hegemony of traditional

media, and will move on to argue that such interactivity is often beneficial to large media organisations.

Robinson (2010) recognises that new interactive platforms such as *Twitter* undoubtedly mark a

redefinition of the relationship between the media and users, however, it seems difficult to accept the

postmodern perspective, and more likely that users are often interacting within confines of

environments which are ultimately controlled by media conglomerates. It must be recognised from a

'hard' media perspective, that the best and most respected journalists tend to be working for, or

associated with, mainstream news agencies; they are authoritative due to these professional

associations alongside their extensive research, fact-checking and verification processes. While

platforms such as *Twitter* mark the increased ability of users to challenge, feedback and comment upon

mainstream media texts, this ability to express opinion should not be conflated with the genuine

creativity displayed in 'soft' media environments. For postmodern theorists who question the relevance

of the term 'audience' in the digital age, focusing on the rise of users or *produsers*, it could be argued

that the idealised potential of the user displayed in certain 'soft' media environments, cannot overcome

the fact that in 'hard' media environments our habits are often consumptive, rather than productive. In

agreement with theorists such Livingstone & Das (2013), who argue for the continued validity of

audience reception theory, it must be recognised that the technological potential which enables

interactivity, should not overshadow the social reality that, particularly for serious purposes, we are still

very often audience in the traditional sense.

This chapter has argued, by drawing on original empirical evidence, that the conception of the

audience as receivers of information remains valid within contemporary media theory. It has been

proposed that modern media theorists must recognise the distinction between our 'hard' and 'soft'

media habits, by showing a highly-significant difference in the way in which user-led activity, and

conversely mainstream media content, influence these different environments. It is acknowledged that

both postmodern and political economy approaches provide great insight into the changing perception

of audiences, addressing the need to consider both the creative and commodified audience (Livingstone

2014: 5). Nevertheless, it should be recognised that our media interactions for pleasure are

fundamentally distinct from the real. As has been demonstrated by drawing upon examples from

theorists such as Jenkins and Murthy, broad generalisations based upon either 'hard' or 'soft' media

usage are often problematic when considered within different a context. It is argued, therefore, that

those who adopt a top-down political economy perspective must also consider the nuances of user-led

environments such as gaming and fan communities. However, postmodern approaches, which

emphasise the power of the user must consider the influence of political and economic power which

enables such processes. As will be discussed in the next chapter, adopting a utopian perspective

regarding the future of the discipline, which marginalises such influences, could be considered

problematic for a number of reasons.

Communicative Capitalism: the empowerment versus the

exploitation of the user.

For many new media theorists, the increased access of ordinary users to the means of

production and distribution of media messages, on social media sites such as *Twitter*, represents the

democratisation of communications. Axel Bruns (2007), for example, claims that 'a shift towards

produsage may revive democratic processes by leveling the roles and turning citizens into active

produsers of democracy once again' (Bruns 2007: 7). This chapter will juxtapose the arguments of

theorists such as Bruns, who are loosely described by Christian Fuchs (2014) as 'cyber-utopians', with

those of theorists adopting a political economy perspective; exploring the arguments for the

emancipatory potential of new media, versus the so-called 'myth' of interactivity (Robinson 2010: 127).

It will be argued that rather than democratising communications, social media sites such as *Twitter* in

actual fact entrench hierarchy, drawing upon Dean's (2014) 'circuit of exploitation' to demonstrate how

profit-orientated organisations such as *Twitter* turn users' interactions into the raw material for capital.

Contextualising the empirical analysis of this study within the debate, it will be argued that rather than

empowering the individual user, social media benefits the corporations who are best able to meet

consumer demands while harnessing the mass power of user communities. This chapter looks beyond

communicative capitalism as simply the exploitation of users by large corporations, and questions the

role of the users themselves within the process.

Contrasting theoretical perspectives of the empowerment of the User

While Eoin Devereux (2014) recognises the power of new media to shape and frame the world

in which we live, he rejects what he refers to as a 'postmodern free-for-all' (Devereux 2014: 222), which

he argues is overly focused on the empowerment of the user without sufficient recognition of the

importance of powerful economic and political interests within our media ecology (Devereux 2014: 259).

To identify postmodern theorists such as Bruns (2007; 2009), Merrin (2014) and Jenkins (2006; 2012)

together as cyber-utopians would perhaps be disingenuous. There are significant differences in both

their arguments and approaches, with Merrin and Jenkins in particular differing in their focus on the

empowerment of the individual media user as a technological process, or as participants in networked

communities marking a cultural change, respectively. While each of these theorists captures the tension

between the empowerment of the user and the interests of power to an extent, they share a common

emphasis on the potential of the user, or users, to challenge the hegemony of traditional media

organisations, tending to reinforce these perspectives with examples from 'soft' media environments.

Jenkins claims that, 'the politics of critical utopianism is founded upon empowerment; the politics of

critical pessimism on a politics of victimisation' (Jenkins 2006: 248). In this respect, perhaps Jenkins'

term 'critical utopian' best captures the shared values of these theorists, rather than Fuchs' 'cyber-utopian'. In contrast, and as previously discussed, those media theorists adopting a political economy perspective such Herman & Chomsky (1988), McChesney (2000) and Devereux (2014) focus their efforts almost entirely on the more 'serious' aspects of our media ecology. It follows that it is necessary to question whether the optimism of the critical utopian perspective stands up to scrutiny in the real world, and whether the political economy perspective is one of victimisation, or of capitalist reality.

Political communications and Twitter as the new public sphere

Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that new media platforms expand opportunities for grassroots activists to speak back to the media and challenge traditional power (Jenkins 2006: 248). Considerable attention has been given, particularly within academic circles, to the role of social media in the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings, often referred to as the '*Twitter* revolutions'. Studies by Harlow (2012) and Kharroub & Bas (2015) argue that internet use in general, and more specifically the use of social media, can facilitate and instigate real world protests and activism, however, the significance of the role of social media in these uprisings continues to be debated. It is acknowledged that social media sites such as *Twitter* reduce both the cost and time involved in political participation, and represent an accessible and efficient means of disseminating information (Enjolras et al 2012: 4). Several academic studies have also found strong links between social media use and political engagement (Valenzuela 2013: 922). However, many academics remain sceptical of the direct influence of *Twitter* in the Arab Spring uprisings. Murthy (2013: 112) argues that much of the *Twitter* activity surrounding these events actually arouse from accounts in the West, stating that only 0.00158 % of Egyptians used *Twitter* in 2011 (2013: 107). It is argued that while *Twitter* activity may have raised global awareness regarding the widespread unrest, it cannot be considered to have caused the revolutions (Fuchs 2014: 180). Many scholars are now beginning to revise the early optimism regarding the positive effects of new media on protest action and civil society (Wolfsed et al 2015). It is often the case that studies which emphasise the role of

Twitter in the Arab Spring uprisings, fail to consider both the roles of traditional media and the wider

political and economic environments in their arguments (Tufike & Wilson 2012; Wolfsed *et al* 2015).

Reinforced by the empirical findings of this study, it has been argued that mainstream media

organisations play a significant role in framing *Twitter* conversations in 'hard' media environments,

therefore, it would seem problematic to study the influence of *Twitter* users in isolation from the

mainstream media within this context. It is proposed that a more holistic approach is required when

considering the role of new media in revolutionary political activism, which accounts for the roles of

both traditional media and the wider political and economic environment. As has been argued in the

previous chapter with focus on 'soft' media examples, analysis which treats new media such as if it were

in a vacuum is often problematic.

Fuchs (2014) states that, '*Twitter* revolution claims imply that *Twitter* constitutes a new public

sphere of political communication that has emancipatory political potentials' (Fuchs 2014: 199). Fuchs

draws upon Habermas (1989) to characterise some of the important features of the public sphere, such

as: the formation of public opinion; all citizens have access; freedoms of assembly, association,

expression of opinions and publications; debate over general rules governing relations (Habermas 1989:

122-129). Many of these idealised characteristics of the public sphere are broadly aligned with the

visions put forward by critical utopian theorists such as Jenkins, Bruns and Merrin, whereby the 'ideals

of access, inclusion, discussion and participation are realised through expansions, intensifications and

interconnections of global telecommunications' (Dean 2014: 4). However, Christian Fuchs, cites Marxian

theory to argue that the principles of the idealised public sphere cannot be realised within a capitalist

society, 'due to the exclusory nature of the public sphere and the manipulation of the public sphere by

particularistic class interests' (Fuchs 2014: 183). Fuchs proposes a list of criteria which can help

determine the existence of the public sphere (Fuchs 2014: 184-185), which, on many counts, *Twitter*

fails to fulfil. Perhaps most importantly, on the question of whether there is democratic ownership of

media outlets and resources, whether they are accessible to all, and independent from economic and state interests. While widely available to users in economically developed nations, *Twitter* still excludes those without the means to own electronic devices and access the internet. As a privately owned, profit-orientated corporation, with a business model based around targeted advertising, *Twitter* naturally privileges economically powerful users over ordinary ones. On these issues in particular, Fuchs argues that the profit-orientation of social media platforms such as Twitter do not promote the public sphere (Fuchs 2014: 198- 200). However, we must also consider the role of the user within this process, in particular with regards to another of Fuchs' criteria: how valid (right, true, truthful, understandable, attentive, sincere, reflexive and inclusive) is our online political discussion? (Fuchs 184-185). It must be questioned how much of our online activism represents 'clicktivism', where the click of a button does not necessarily reflect any level of engagement or real world agency (Harlow 2012: 229). Similarly, we must also consider how often online discussions break down into episodes of trolling and incivility (Robinson 2010).

The capitalist value of users' 'hard' and 'soft' interactions

In contrast to viewing social media sites such as *Twitter* as democratising communications, Dean's (2014) 'circuit of exploitation' argues that such sites turn users' interactions into raw material for capital, whereby, 'capitalist productivity derives from its expropriation and exploitation of the communicative process' (Dean 2014: 4). It has been argued that critical utopian perspectives are based upon the belief that the participatory, user-led culture, evident in certain 'soft' media environments, will one day be turned towards more serious purposes (Jenkins 2006). However, even in these idealised media environments, which Jenkins concedes are relatively low-stakes, and therefore unlikely to be the focus of attention for political and economic elites, examples of the exploitation and manipulation of the user are evident. Axel Bruns (2007) refers to this process as the 'mainstreaming of *produsage*'; marking the acquisition of user-led environments by corporate interests (Bruns 2007: 7). Bruns cites examples of

this process, such as the acquisition of *MySpace* by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and *YouTube* by

Google, which highlight a trend where these apparently user-led environments are quickly absorbed by

multimedia conglomerates (Bruns 2007: 7). Whereas Bruns sees *produsage* as a challenge to

production, a more critical approach would argue that the process marks the exploitation of the

collective creativity of the user by powerful media organisations, and a fortunate few individuals. This

point is emphasised with the story of *Minecraft* creator, Markus Persson, who after sending a single

tweet complaining about the obsessive nature of the *Minecraft* community, sold his stake in the

company to *Microsoft* for £2.5billion (Sheffield 2015). While Persson was admittedly one of the games

original creators, upwards of 90% of the content of open-source games such as *Minecraft* are user-

generated, and the capitalist value, therefore, based upon the continued developments and interactions

of the vibrant gaming community. While theorists such as Bruns and Jenkins discuss a future of

communally held intellectual property (Bruns 2007: 7), collective intelligence and cultural production

(Jenkins 2006: 246), it could be argued that such concepts remain largely theoretical. This is evident

with reference to open-source games such as *Minecraft*, and social media sites such as *Twitter*, who

retain the ultimate ownership of user-generated material (Fuchs 2014: 198). In reality, even in these

often idealised 'soft' media environments, the creativity and engagement of fan and gaming

communities, is often exploited for the benefit of media conglomerates and a very select few.

Both Robinson (2010) and Devereux (2014) also question the 'myth' of interactivity in 'hard'

media environments. As has been argued in this study, while social media promotes interactivity in

'hard' environments, such interactions and debates tend to be focused around mainstream media texts,

with user-generated content often reactionary rather than agenda-setting. Robinson (2010) notes that

online interactions can allow a genuine opportunity for users to add value to mainstream news stories

through comment sections, which in turn allows editors an opportunity to amend articles, make repairs

and provide further explanations where needed. However, it is also noted that unmoderated comment

sections are often problematic in reality, with online debate quickly breaking down into incidents of

incivility (Robinson 2010: 133). A critical perspective, as Robinson infers, is that the value of users'

interactions, from the perspective of media organisations, lies not in the valuable content created, but

instead in that each interaction allows an additional opportunity for targeted advertising, which

represents the most viable source of income for many mainstream organisations (Klaehn 2010: 338).

While *Twitter* did not initially use advertising, terms were amended in 2009 to allow for the possibility of

targeted advertising, which finally came into full effect in 2011 (Fuchs 2014: 198). As the interviews

conducted during this study suggest, it could be questioned how often the content produced by

ordinary users in a personal capacity in 'hard' media environments can be considered to be of value in

informational terms to the wider public. Rather, it could be suggested that such interactivity is often

encouraged as it represents increased potential for advertising revenue. It could therefore be proposed,

that the value of user-generated content in such environments is often in the interaction itself, rather

than the quality of the content produced.

The value of interactivity in 'hard' media environments is not solely based upon advertising

revenue, but also in the creation of information which such interactions provide about the user.

Devereux (2014) suggests that 'a critical take on audiences as *produsers* in a social media or new media

setting is that they are a free reserve army of labour from whom the global media giants are not slow to

harvest valuable data' (Devereux 2014: 271). User interactions in online environments such as *Twitter*,

from the articles read, to comments and discussions, likes and retweets, all generate valuable data

regarding media habits, patterns of use and areas of interest. Dean (2014) refers to Big Data as the basic

resource of communicative capitalism, highlighting the dispossession of such data from the user into the

hands of corporations or the state, who can both analyse and monetise datasets for the purposes of

producing products, creating policies, or gaining knowledge of social interactions or political views (Dean

2014: 5). As Dean notes, the value of such data is invariably capitalist value, as opposed to the kind of

collective or cultural value envisioned by critical utopian theorists. *Twitter* marks not only the

productive turn of the user, but also the increasing importance of the user as the distributor of

information through processes such as liking and retweeting. Much has been made of the potential of

Twitter to amplify the voice of normal people through content 'going viral', however, as discussed, in

reality *Twitter* is not democratic, there is not an equal opportunity for all voices to be heard because the

power of amplification is stratified; highly visible users determine which voices are amplified and which

are not (Fuchs 2014: 192). Due to *Twitter*'s profit-orientation, these highly-visible users are often

commercial organisations or those affiliated with them; in short, traditional media outlets and

celebrities. In the 'hard' media environments where political and economic elites operate, the business

model of *Twitter* ensures that they have every opportunity to dominate proceedings; even more so if

they can engage the user by creating content which they in turn re-circulate. As discussed, it is perhaps

necessary to re-examine processes like 'going viral' which have been used as evidence of the

empowerment of the user, as they rely heavily on the highly visible *Twitter* users, rather than the

ordinary. As this study has demonstrated, ordinary *Twitter* users are often at their most creative and

interactive in 'soft' media environments, while tending to re-circulate a greater percentage of

mainstream content in 'hard' environments. It could be argued, therefore, that rather than challenging

the mainstream media, and holding them to account regarding serious social, political and economic

issues, *Twitter* is simply an echo chamber for competing mainstream media perspectives (Colleoni *et al*

2014).

The evolution of big media: the rise of 'Infotainment'

While the empowerment of the user as an individual remains debatable, the undoubted power

and value of large communities of users is evident. However, rather than challenging the hegemony of

traditional media, it could be argued that these users are in fact exploited by media organisations who

have adapted most quickly to recent technological advancements and associated social trends,

harnessing the power of online interactivity as a means of generating income from advertising, creating

and distributing content. It could be proposed that rather than a wave of citizen journalists challenging

the mainstream media accounts, what we actually find is an increase in journalism designed to attract

user-interactions and encourages the practice of retweeting. This process is exemplified by

organisations such as *BuzzFeed*: a cross-platform, social media driven global network, which claims to

generate over 7 billion content views each month, shared between 200 million unique users, 75% of

which come from social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* (*BuzzFeed* 2016). It almost goes

without saying, that there are huge advertising revenues associated with such online traffic, not to

mention lower overheads associated with publishing online only, and access to users' data on a massive

scale. *Buzzfeed*'s apparent success lies in a deep understanding of how and why users share content,

based upon their constant analysis of Big Data (Robischon 2016). The aim to create 'shareable' content

was originally entertainment based, however, *Buzzfeed*'s reputation for the speed and accuracy of their

coverage of 'hard' news continues to improve, with their stories often reporting on the online

interactions surrounding news stories themselves; in a kind of digital meta-journalism. Journalists such

as *Buzzfeed's* UK Political Editor Jim Waterson have a knack for creating accurate and insightful stories

that package traditional 'hard' media content in an entertaining, manageable, and most importantly,

'shareable' way. This ability to marry 'hard' and 'soft' media content together is referred to by Devereux

as '*infotainmen*t' (Devereux 2014: 294). 'Shareable' content, sometimes also referred to as 'click bait', is

generally attention grabbing, celebrity-focused and sensational (Fuchs 2014: 195). Whether the process

of *infotainment* represents the dumbing-down of content, or simply the repackaging, remains

debatable; further studies into how technology affects our media habits, from attention span to

engagement, are surely worthy of significant research as the discipline moves forward. While it is clear

that traditional media outlets such as newspapers and the BBC remain essential as producers of trusted

and authoritative content, they have fallen behind new media platforms such as *Twitter*, *Facebook* and

Buzzfeed, in terms of generating capital from our modern media habits. It could be argued that

Buzzfeed, which is inextricably linked with *Twitter*, can be seen as the embodiment of the process of

communicative capitalism, demonstrating the exploitation of user-led content, the manipulation of Big

Data, the influence of targeted advertising and the central positioning of users as distributors.

Rather than challenging the hegemony of big media as utopian theorists claim, the findings of

this study lend weight to the Jodi Dean's argument that 'networked communication does not eliminate

hierarchy, but in fact entrenches it' (Deans 2014: 9). As the empirical evidence has demonstrated,

Twitter preserves the significance of traditional media voices on 'hard' issues, but also increasingly offers

opportunities for new media organisations to harness user-led engagement, creativity and distribution

in 'soft' environments. While modern technology and networked communications allow the user

control over production, which can be employed to means of their own choosing, these choices are

increasingly focused upon entertainment and pleasure rather than enacting social or political change

(Fuchs 2014; Karlsen 2015); it could be suggested that this perspective is particularly true in the West

where political and economic conditions are comparatively favourable. As has been demonstrated with

focus on the hashtag *#Catsagainstbrexit*, the technological developments which mark the rise of social

media appear also to be correlated with cultural media habits which could be considered to be

increasingly frivolous. Commenting on the millions of digital interactions which take place every day,

Devereux adds 'it is not difficult to view the bulk of this activity as being pointless narcissism' (Devereux

2014: 271). These claims are surely reinforced by the fact that on the 23rd of June 2016, the day of the

EU Referendum, one of the most significant political and economic decisions for a generation, the

volume of people re-circulating pictures of cats was not hugely disproportionate to those tweeting

about *#Brexit*.

Herman & Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) has become a touchstone of many media

scholars adopting a political economy perspective, and although outdated in its focus on the media of

the 1980s, many of the basic principles of their argument remain relevant in the digital age. Due to factors such the influence of powerful media owners and corporations, advertising and profit-orientation, they argue that the media ultimately protects the interests of wealthy and political elites. Case studies in 'hard' media environments which consider economic and political influence are used to reinforce this view (Herman & Chomsky 1988). The problem with utopian perspectives, no matter how critical, is that the focus on the empowerment of the user, or users, is often approached as if in isolation, yet, as has been demonstrated, problems with these idealised environments often only become apparent when influence of capital and power are considered. Given the business models of social media sites such as *Twitter* it is difficult to envisage them as platforms for either political or economic revolution. However, communicative capitalism cannot be viewed simply as the exploitation of the masses from the top down; we must also consider the role of the user in this process. Philo and Miller's pre-*Twitter* observations highlight our increasing desire to be seen to be participating in a media-saturated society, comments which are highly pertinent when considered within the contemporary context of the web 2.0 (Philo & Miller 2001: 46). While it is recognised that modern technology represents the potential of the user to challenge the hegemony of media, economic and political elites, there remains a distinct lack of organisation, collective vision, and arguably, the desire to utilise social media for such purposes. In reality, our need to be seen participating in media environments which have become increasingly sensational, celebrity-focused and narcissistic, are satisfied within the free-market by new media organisations who best understand this cultural shift. While highlighting that social media often represents the economic exploitation of the user, we must also recognise the cultural impact of new media, particularly in developed countries where it is most prevalent, by questioning also whether growing online trends towards incivility, narcissism and materialism are aligned with the visions of critical utopian theorists.

This chapter has argued against critical utopian perspectives of new media by drawing on empirical research and extensive background reading, which demonstrate that the business models and profit-orientation of social media sites such as *Twitter* do not promote the public sphere, but instead expropriate and exploit users' online interactions for capital. It has been argued that there is little reason to suggest, when viewed systematically, that the empowerment of the user represents a challenge to the hegemony of media, political or economic elites; on the contrary, it has been proposed that communicative capitalism entrenches these hierarchies. It has been posited, based upon patterns in users' 'hard' and 'soft' media interactions, that online interactivity marks the empowerment of media organisations who best understand both the technological potential and cultural trends associated with new media. Finally, it has been argued that communicative capitalism cannot be viewed simply as exploitation from the top down, but that we must also consider the role of the user within this system.

Conclusion

This study commenced with quantitative analysis demonstrating that *Twitter* users are more active in 'soft' media environments, while being more reliant on texts created by mainstream media organisations in their 'hard' media interactions. Subsequent qualitative analysis was then employed in order to develop greater insight into this pattern of use, the results of which reinforced the quantitative findings, suggesting that *Twitter* is primarily seen as forum for entertainment, with users therefore more likely to be creative their 'soft' media interactions, while being more passive in 'hard' environments; often deferring to trusted and authoritative sources with regards to more serious issues. These findings have been contextualised within our current media ecology, to argue for the continued importance of

the sociological conception of the audience as receivers of information. They have also been used to make the case for the recognition of the critical distinction between our 'hard' and 'soft' media habits in contemporary media theory, highlighting issues with current political economy, and, most significantly, postmodern approaches. The tension between these two approaches is developed in the final chapter, which has moved beyond audience theory to examine the critical utopian perspective that social media sites such as *Twitter* represent the democratisation of communications. While acknowledging the potential of modern technology, this utopian perspective has been rejected, recognising the validity of the political economy perspective it has ultimately been argued that communicative capitalism marks the exploitation of the user, rather than the emancipation.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of mixed methods research in considering both the creative and commodified conceptions of the audience, which can help develop a greater understanding of where and when audiences are most active and passive. While acknowledging the limitations of this study, and the ever-changing and ephemeral nature of our current media ecology, it is maintained, as Livingstone (2013) suggests, that broad patterns in our media habits still remain. As has been demonstrated through the use of *Twitter Archiver*, modern technology which allows for the collection and analysis of Big Data, is increasingly available, not just for large media organisations, but for academic studies which can utilise this data to establish broad patterns in our media habits. After all, these trends and patterns are currently being identified by organisations such as *Buzzfeed*, *Twitter* and *Facebook* to understand our media ecology, and therefore academics must follow this lead. Nevertheless, audience theory cannot simply focus on technological attributes, but must also develop approaches which understand how social media influences our expectations and perceptions of media use from a cultural perspective. It is not sufficient for contemporary theorists to stand back and deliberate over the complexity of our current media ecology, they must avoid this risk averse strategy and attempt to establish broad trends within our new media habits. It has been argued that when doing

so it is increasingly necessary to adopt a holistic approach which encompasses the role of traditional

media, social practices, and the wider political and economic environment.

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