From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

Edited by Derek Johnson

Twitter

Channels in the Stream
James Bennett and Niki Strange

On October 27, 2016, *International Business Times* and other global news outlets reported that Twitter was "killing off the Vine six-second-long video loop mobile app" as part of a cost-cutting exercise (Russon 2016). Just days earlier, Twitter had announced its first non-US deal to secure the live streaming coverage rights to a sports event: Australia's preeminent horse race, the Melbourne Cup. Coming on the back of a range of agreements Twitter has made for coverage of live events—including a global deal for the NFL's Thursday night package of games and the US presidential debates—Twitter's culling of Vine and investment in live streaming suggest how the future of the platform might be as a television "channel." Twitter's move into live streaming has not only exploited ancillary digital rights sold by event owners, but also required acquisition of rights traditionally auctioned *as*, and competed *for*, as "broadcast" rights. In the process, Twitter's repositioning of itself asks us to reconceptualize the notion of a television channel in a digital television age of streaming. This chapter sets out how we might understand television channels in the logics of social media platforms such as Twitter. As such, it challenges us to consider digital media *as television*, suggesting how the future of one media form might be found in the past of another.

The argument that follows does not suggest that the whole of Twitter—now an ecosystem of interrelated services and applications, including Vine, Periscope, and Snappy TV—should be understood as a channel. But a significant proportion of what the platform does, how content is produced, and Twitter's mutual affinity with the television industry all suggest how positioning it as a channel is productive for our understanding of digital television as a "non-site specific, hybrid cultural and technological form that spreads across multiple platforms" (Bennett 2011, 2). Indeed, it is the partnership between the platform and the television industry itself that allows us to understand Twitter as a channel most productively. In 2015, *Guardian Technology* writer Stuart Dredge described both Twitter and Facebook as "love-bombing" the TV industry in the hope of

driving more conversation on their platforms. But as Dredge's report recognized, this was only part of the story: "Twitter has become a broadcaster of sorts itself: its 316 million active users currently watch 370 years' worth of video every day on the service" (2015).

As a senior UK broadcasting executive told us, "both Twitter and Facebook want to develop that area. So they are very, very generous with their time," while other industry figures noted the distribution of new applications and additional support for broadcasters and television production companies to try new approaches. With such a huge appetite for video, as well as emerging competition for eyeballs between the social media platform giants, it is perhaps little wonder that Twitter is considering the lessons of television's past to secure its future. This partnership with television is especially important as Twitter moves from an emphasis on user-generated *feeds* to professionally generated content *channels* of video *streams*. At the same time, Twitter's feeds also increasingly draw upon television tactics and partnerships to garner and retain viewer attention. Twitter's gamble on at least partially reimagining the platform as channel speaks to the wider industrial context in which it found itself in late 2015: the *Financial Times* reported its share price had "languished [having] fallen almost 50 per cent in the past year," leading to the return of Jack Dorsey as chief executive to reignite growth of the platform (Kuchler and Foley 2015). A widely circulated press release less than a year later positioned "Twitter [as] increasingly a place where people can find live streaming video" (Slefo 2016). But as we will argue, Twitter's repositioning as channel in partnership with the TV industry is more significant than simply live streaming video. Drawing on 38 interviews from the UK television and digital media industries, including Twitter's director of broadcast partnerships (now director of strategic innovation), we argue that emergent practices on Twitter recycle television production heritage, including practices of live transmission, scheduling and counter-scheduling, content production modes and advertising. These interviews are triangulated with trade press and newspaper coverage as well as ethnographic observation over the two-year period 2015–2016.[1] As such, we position the UK's production cultures in the context of global industrial strategy to suggest how the future of Twitter's social media platform might lie in television's broadcast past.

OF CHANNELS, PLATFORMS, AND STREAMS

> *Twitter [is] the world's biggest sofa.*
> —Dan Biddle, Director of Broadcast Partnerships, Twitter (interview 01/03/2016)

Biddle's metaphorical reference to Twitter's status as a sofa replays a common tactic in the histories of media technologies: the familiarization of a new technology by reference to an older one. However, as it calls our attention to the platform's increasingly intimate relationship with television, it is also suggestive of how metaphors emphasize particular aspects of a media form and downplay others (Gripsrud 1998). Most regularly, as Derek Johnson sets out in the introduction to this volume, television and its channels have made metaphorical allusions to water, often via the notion of "flow." By contrast, most work on Twitter has considered it—explicitly or implicitly—as a platform, upon

which a user community develops. Tarleton Gillespie's work (2010) teases out how the term "platform," and its operationalization by companies such as YouTube, subsumes within it four different "semantic territories"—the computational, the architectural, the figurative, and the political. In so doing, the term functions as a powerful and persuasive metaphor that enables platform operators to elide potential tensions between serving all users equally at the same time as delivering audiences to advertisers and commercial partners. Simultaneously the platform is positioned as neutral and passive in terms of legal liability for content housed on the platform. Concluding his analysis, Gillespie persuasively suggests that despite the promises of a different system to traditional media (like television), "platforms are more like traditional media than they care to admit," going on to note that just as with broadcasting, platforms choose what can appear as well as how it is organized and monetized. However, the connection between television channel and platform does not end there for Twitter, with the relationship between the TV industry and social media operator returning us to both an emphasis on liveness and forms of flow that characterize a channel.

Indeed, prior to the series of "broadcast" deals for live streaming of sporting events announced in 2016, academic work on the relationship between Twitter and television focused on its reinvigoration of live TV: either as strategic collaboration (Sørensen 2016) or understanding audience practices (Evans 2014) or audience measurement and tracking (Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns 2013). As Sørensen argues, television channels "are using television's traditional traits—reach and live events—in a bid to dominate the mediascape and exert its power over who wins viewers across platforms and devices" (2016, 14). However, much as digital media is increasingly akin to television, it would be wrong to suggest that this is simply a domination of the mediascape by television in which broadcasters conceptualize "these types of viewing experiences as specifically televisual" (14). Instead, live television events also act as a space of collaboration and experimentation for Twitter as a channel: enabling Twitter, TV industry, rights holders, and sponsors alike to reach and engage audiences in mutually beneficial ways. Such collaborations arguably pave the way for Twitter's move into live streaming events. Here the language of content provision based in channeling or "streaming" returns us to the metaphorical allusions to water.

Before exploring the term stream, it is first important to note that the adoption of streaming by Twitter represents a shift from the Twitter "feed" to Twitter streams: both of which may be interacted with by the act of tweeting. Whereas feed suggests something to be acted upon, or to be consumed, stream returns us to notions of "flow." While feeds remain important, streams are embedded within these and, as we discuss below, usage of video (live or otherwise) is increasingly prominent in Twitter feeds—indeed, leading to greater emphasis on streaming. Our link back to flow and channels is complete when we consider the development of the computing noun "stream" in 1993: "A continuous flow of data. . . . Also, a channel for such data" ("Stream" n.d.). Streaming, as with channeling, suggests that at once there is an active sender at the same time as it posits the audience as a comparatively more passive receiver of the "flow," which washes them along. While the Twitter user, as with so many digital media forms, is figured as (inter)active, selective, and participative, the close relationship between

channel, platform, and stream traced here suggests how Biddle's metaphor of the sofa is not simply a clever pun or attempt to familiarize a new technology via reference to an old. Rather it reveals how the strategic ploy of the platform returns us to old media practices of television: from live-relaying events to scheduling, counter-scheduling, advertising, and more that we explore below. Of course, as television scholars have long demonstrated, the audience is never entirely active or passive—even when wrapped up in the "flow": digital media studies would do equally well to learn from such discoveries, or risk finding that the active users of Twitter—and other platforms—are just as likely to be sofa slobs as were television's couch potatoes likely to be interactive participants.

TWITTER AND LIVE TELEVISION PRODUCTION

Twitter's growing emphasis on both embedding video in Twitter feeds and live video streaming is at once competitive and collaborative, with both the television industry and Twitter co-opting and adapting tactics from one another. The result has been the convergence of different approaches to, and meanings of, liveness in the formation of Twitter as channel.

Initially television professionals regarded Twitter, as with any new media form that competes for audience attention, as competition. Our previous work on multiplatform production in UK television suggested how TV producers often viewed digital platforms as either sites of peripheral experimentation; insignificantly small in audience size; feared; shunned; or adopted in strategic statements but rarely backed in reality (Bennett et al. 2012). As one senior executive opined, the strategy at his broadcaster had been "basically [to treat] our social feed as the TV guide" for a long time. However, while disjunctures and barriers still remain between television, digital production teams, and platform operators, the growing ubiquity of smart phones has made television producers more conversant in social media. As one producer described, its become increasingly commonplace because ''it's more of a state of mind than part of their contract," or something they are forced to do. Some working in the UK industry noted the viral spread of Susan Boyle's *Britain's Got Talent* clip in 2009 as a pivotal moment in the adoption of Twitter, and social media more widely, by the industry:

> it went from TV producers being reticent to trying anything around digital/social (didn't see value, thought it would destroy brand equity) to them going to the other extreme and wanting to try everything! "let's do it all!" "we don't need to measure it!"

Such adoption has been aided by Twitter's courting of the industry, with a significant point of collaboration between TV industry and platform coming in the form of SnappyTV.

Acquired by Twitter in 2014, Snappy TV (2014) describes itself as a "cloud-based, live video platform that makes TV and live web streams social, mobile and viral." It enables video producers, especially television, to clip, edit, and share moments from live broadcasts in near real time and has become a significant point of collaboration between television industry and Twitter, even at the same time as it points to competition and

co-optation. SnappyTV is pivotal to the blurring of boundaries between Twitter feeds and streams, playing an important part in what Dan Biddle calls the "Tweet Spot," a tactic which has allayed broadcasters' fears of losing audience attention:

> Instead of fearing split attention, think of double attention—TV producers need to find "the tweet spot": OMG moments that everyone will react to and then providing the right clip/gif etc to *own* that moment. Great content mirrored on both screens . . . if you can get that content out to the audience at the time it's happening they will re-tweet that and comment around that and share it and spread it even further.

Similarly, Twitter's UK Managing Director Dara Nasr argued, "When there's great programming it drives a peak of tweets, and when there are a lot of tweets about programming, it drives greater viewing on TV—there's a real reciprocal relationship" (Bell 2016).

The ability of producers to use SnappyTV to hit the Tweet Spot and extend television's liveness into Twitter's feeds is not simply about the viewing experience, but also how production cultures adapt and respond to the integration of social media into their existing processes. Thus the executive digital producer on *The Voice UK* described her team's work in terms similar to those used to explain live television production: "it is chaotic and crazy and kooky and it is a split second. . . . I have a great team and it's a smooth as silk and we know what we're doing." Here the language mimics that of her TV counterparts, "chaotic" and time-sensitive, but a trade allegory of team-building and over-coming all odds makes sense of the difficulties of production. SnappyTV, and similar services, have become an important bridge between television and Twitter: enabling shared understandings and tools to emerge. As another digital producer we interviewed explained, SnappyTV is loved by those working in television because it is "integrated and native to Twitter," enabling them to bypass clunky content management systems. As he put it, this enabled him to "drop LoL bombs" throughout a range of shows quickly and easily, increasing viewer enjoyment and engagement with the show. At one major UK broadcaster, this had led an approach to using SnappyTV that, while ultimately stopping short of "put[ting] the whole show out there in little chunks," allowed producers to do as they liked because it all drove increased attention towards program brands. This senior executive argued television had learnt some of the lessons from social about the importance of giving content and extras away freely and promoting an attitude of generosity around brands, rather than proprietary control.

However, SnappyTV is not simply a point of collaboration between TV and Twitter. It also represents an important strategic tool for Twitter in developing streams: adopting and adapting television's liveness into its own channel. The story Dan Biddle tells of the evolution of the Tweet Spot, a service called Amplify, and the first uses of SnappyTV points to the way in which Twitter's initial co-operation with television was quickly seized as an opportunity to reinvent the platform, channeling both the live video stream and profits in-house rather than collaborating with television.

> college football . . . were the first people to use [SnappyTV] with Amplify . . . going out into Twitter at the peak point of the conversation i.e. the Tweet Spot, [because] . . . any

time that there was some kind of situation or a contested play . . . they bring over an iPad and the referee looks. . . . And it's like "well hang on, if the referee is looking at it we can tweet this out and see what the ref is [seeing]" and then everyone can share this and go "foul," "no way was that a penalty," whatever it might be.

The Amplify service then allowed Twitter to add a short pre-roll commercial to such clips, using the same sponsor as the television broadcast, to reach and extend their audience in a new way. As Biddle explains, liveness remains paramount: the audience "will re-tweet that and comment around that and share it and spread it even further." This "triangle of virtue," led to increased experimentations in collaboration with the television industry via SnappyTV and third party apps like Grabyo. As a result, an increasing amount of near live footage was shared through Twitter's platform enabling it to test transmission/bandwidth incrementally so that it eventually made more sense to stream content themselves. Thus while Twitter may posture as "TV partner, not predator," the story of SnappyTV suggests how the platform might increasingly be positioned as a competitor channel.

Moreover, this strategy indicates Twitter has learnt the lessons of television's past in its reconceptualization. Twitter's focus on live sporting events echoes Rupert Murdoch's strategy in the global television market of using sports as a "battering ram" to enter new markets and drive consumers to new television platforms—such as satellite and digital (Millar 1998, 3). The move by Twitter into partnerships with existing television players such as Bloomberg and new online players such as Buzzfeed in its live streaming of the 2016 US election debates, further asks us to reconceptualize Twitter as akin to a broadcast channel. Twitter's strategy of developing live events coverage mimics Raymond Williams's description of the evolution of television broadcasting as technological and cultural form, whereby content developed "parasitically" via state occasions, public sporting events, and more (2003, 18). Just like early television, Twitter has adopted its purportedly neutral platform to act as a mere relayer of live events—a "channel through which information passes" ("Stream" n.d.) The following section explores how such a move has extended television production practices to Twitter in order to provide the platform with compelling content and TV-like experiences.

TWITTER AND TELEVISION CHANNEL TACTICS: SCHEDULING LIVENESS

Since the network era, television channels have rarely presented us with "live" events. Yet the medium is suffused with the ideology of liveness perpetuated by its continual call to the present: its ability to unite large viewing audiences in the same experience at any one time, stitched together by the carefully curated schedule that responds (and shapes) the routines of daily life to build a powerful sense of copresence. As John Ellis (2000) has argued, scheduling is one of television's most powerful and creative tools, both in terms of organizing the industrial production and reception of programming as well as defining the experience and identity of a channel. Television's collaboration with

Twitter has seen the importance of scheduling extended, ranging from prescripted, pre-scheduled tweets to tactics of tent-poling, counter-scheduling, and stunting.

One of the most prominent examples of scheduling on Twitter is around "live" television. Interviewees working to produce social media for live programs all discussed the importance of prescripting and scheduling the release of tweets, with format points being particularly useful for preplanning Twitter feeds. As one digital producer explained, the digital team will watch numerous rehearsals for a live show and "script [up to 50%] of the content [so] we can then craft it around acts that we know are going to have an impact." The social media writer discussed this as "writ[ing] a script of tweets . . . and image ideas for GIFs and Vines," which are then time-coded for release, using a tool such as HootSuite or TweetDeck. However, as both explained, the excitement was in leaving the "space" to react to live events and audiences that enhances the feeling of copresence, a view widely echoed in the industry. That said, Twitter feeds were rarely simply "live," in the sense of tweeting along to a program on the fly. Even releasing clips or images from the program into its related Twitter feed—the Tweet Spot—was not simply a case of ensuring synchronicity between broadcast and Twitter channel, but rather a carefully configured and debated form of scheduling. Thus one digital producer explained how a compelling piece of content was scheduled around *The Great British Bake Off*:

> We have a picture of a hamster *Bake Off* scene, which was on *Extra Slice* (a spin off TV show at 9/9.30pm). [My colleagues] was on that evening and he messaged me saying "I really think we should put this up," and I said "yes, I'll definitely put it up tomorrow after 6.30." He thought we should strike while the iron was hot and put it up then and now, but my feeling was post it around 6 o'clock as that's when you're going to have people looking at their feeds. Timing matters . . . and that post then did really well.

However, scheduling in a medium that is ostensibly live is not without its dangers, something that was laid bare in *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s coverage of the Melbourne Cup Twitter stream: releasing a prescripted, and perhaps even prescheduled, tweet in a bid to announce the winner first but without updating the information to include the winning horse's names. As a result, they announced "XXXX" had won the Melbourne Cup and were widely ridiculed for their error by other Australian news outlets—especially as XXXX is also a well-known Australian beer of questionable quality ("Tweet" 2016).

Despite such risks, tactics that mirrored those of television scheduling were to be widely found in the collaborations between television industry and Twitter. As with the discussion of SnappyTV above, early experimentations and collaborations between Twitter and TV industry have also led to co-optation by the platform. The practice of tent-poling, whereby earlier content in a schedule is simply a teaser or filler to keep audiences tuned in for the "main event" of a high value program at prime-time, is a common strategy of channels in television's network era (Caldwell 1995). Initial experimentations by television talent—such as the popular UK duo Ant and Dec or the presenters of *Have I Got News for You*—in the use of Periscope to stream backstage access

FIGURE 26.1 *The dangers of prescheduling tweets.*

to a show for viewers prior to the scheduled start of a "live" television program can be understood simply in terms of the promotional role of Twitter for television. But they also clearly function in terms similar to tent-poling: during the ethnographic work on *The Voice (UK)* we saw similar use of backstage Q&A with the judges Periscoped on Twitter before the live semifinal to build audiences for the "main event." The importance of such strategies as a way to build an audience that "stays tuned," rather than simply as a form of promotion, has seen it adopted into the contractual arrangements for Twitter's NFL deal. Significantly, therefore, Twitter's rights include "pre-game Periscope broadcasts from players and teams, giving fans an immersive experience before, during and after games" (Stelter 2016).

But the use of Periscope has also taken a form of counter-scheduling against television to attract users to the Twitter stream. For example, in the US Chris Rock provided viewers of his Twitter feed access to backstage areas of the 2016 Oscars via a Periscope stream during the broadcast commercial breaks. In the UK Rob Delaney "*Goggle Box*-ed" his own series *Catastrophe* by providing a Periscope-streamed commentary on the show during the adverts as a kind of "counter-scheduling" offer. Such techniques point to the tensions between competition and collaboration. For example, some of our interviewees discussed "cross-over" points between the end of a broadcast show and its transmedia extension on to other platforms, such as Twitter, ensuring that they "some of your [*sic*] strongest bits last" to encourage post-TX engagement. While television producers, and their digital teams, continue to view Twitter as ancillary, the platform has muscled in on traditional television tactics, production modes, aesthetics and experiences. Twitter's current use of live streaming represents the most obvious form of this competition, but it also draws upon historical television practices such as stunting. Michael Saenz's (n.d.) notes that stunting is often used "when a network, station, or program is in special trouble," noting that it will often involve huge levels of promotion of one show or the appearance of stars on another program. Twitter's NFL deal, coming at a time of declining valuation and user-growth, similarly operated to regain audience attention with NFL stars appeared across non-competing programs or affiliated

services, such as Periscope. A senior YouTube executive linked Twitter's live streaming stunting to the immature medium of early television:

> Other platforms [are] much more prepared to shove a live stream that happens to be going on . . . they're at an earlier stage in their thinking of where live sits in their overall eco system.

While this interviewee may have strategic reasons for positioning Twitter as "immature," the growth in live streaming emphasizes the growing convergence between Twitter as social media platform and Twitter as channel. Indeed the adoption, and adaption, of television's production strategies and techniques looks only set to continue as Twitter's platform becomes ever more crowded with video, either embedded or live streamed. Echoing Caldwell's description of the development of videographic televisuality's style of "acute hyperactivity and obsession with effects" in the late 1980s and 1990s (1995, 13), one interviewee stated that social media producers' video needed "as much color as possible . . . [you're] actually competing for screen real estate and people's attention. Color grades make things look really super-vibrant." The lines between platform and channel, television and wider forms of digital media are likely to increasingly blur in the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has suggested we might understand Twitter not simply as a platform but also, and increasingly, as a channel. As we have argued, this is not a case of simple competition, collaboration or co-optation between TV and Twitter, broadcast and social. Rather, this is an evolution of television channels for the digital era that responds to the ubiquity of both social media and television, whereby neither is contained on one device or platform: neither the box in the corner nor the smartphone in the hand. The convergence of these forms is wider than simply Twitter and TV, with Facebook Live and YouTube's streaming of live broadcast TV channels, among other developments, suggesting this a productive moment to consider the meaning of a "channel." As Facebook's Patrick Walker (director of media partnerships, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) remarked, their increased emphasis on video reflects "a massive sea change," estimating "that 50% of all mobile traffic now is video—in five years it will be about 75% (Bell 2016). Video is clearly a key part of social media platforms' futures, with much of the experimentation of how to curate and monetize it likely to draw on television's past. For Twitter, as its feeds move away from simple chronological or "live" to ones that are algorithmic and directive, the potential to drive more viewers to its increasing range of video content has some fascinating potential implications for its future, where it may find itself acting as a (television) guide to "what's on" its channels.

   If Twitter has its way, the future of television might also be one where a channel is coming to a Twitter stream near you. As the competition, co-option and collaboration between broadcast television and social media platforms continues, however, we can

equally expect to find Twitter coming to a channel near you. One way or another, we would do well to observe the ways in which the future of digital media is television.

NOTE

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