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“Congratulations, you’re on TV!”: Middle-space performances of live tweeters during the FIFA World Cup

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ABSTRACT

Social television has transformed the traditional role of the television viewers by providing ‘ordinary people’ access to the public stage. This article describes how public access to television affected the dialogues of Finnish tweeters on Twitter during the massive media event of the FIFA World Cup. Through the lens of digital conversation analysis, the study shows how the media publicity of tweets changed the direction of the interaction between tweeters and transformed their roles vis-à-vis the television show, making one of them into a ‘media flasher’ and the others viewers of his or her performance. The publicity was constructed as important through noticings, congratulations, and compliments, and in their responses to these actions the participants oriented to dilemmatic expectations of agreeing with the previous speaker and displaying modesty and authenticity. The activities of live tweeters can be seen as middle-space performances where ordinariness and celebrity are intertwined.

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1. Introduction

Since media events have traditionally been viewed as fostering interaction among audiences, the integration of social media into television viewing in the case of sport mega events seems a natural line of development. While television once enabled access to the event, making it a main resource for interpersonal discussion as well as for a feeling of collective participation (Dayan and Katz, 1994: 94, 131), social media has transformed those living-room discussions or imagined relations with fellow watchers into a more widely visible interactional reality (Harrington et al., 2013: 405). Nowadays, television viewers can use different kinds of dual screens (e.g. laptops or smartphones) as additional media to complement their television viewing experience and express opinions or talk with other viewers about media events as they happen. In particular, *live tweeting* during media events has become an important practice for both audiences and producers, since Twitter as a channel enhances an important feature of media events – the feeling of ‘liveness’ (Bennett, 2012).

This study focuses on the participatory, interactive, and dialogical use of the combination of a traditional mass medium and social media, often called *social television* (e.g. Wohn and Na, 2011;

Giglietto and Selva, 2014) in the context of FIFA World Cup broadcasts put out by Finland’s national public service broadcasting company (Yle) in 2014. This paper demonstrates how social television constructs a shared virtual interaction space and how the audience of a media event act, react and interact in this space. A key feature in merging television and Twitter is the shared hashtag, in this case *#ylemmfutis* ‘#yleworldcup’, that confirms the shared attention in the event, constructs a common ground for discussion and extends access not only to a wider Twitter audience but also, potentially, to the television audience.

Recently, social television has been studied by many researchers, who have provided insights into the use of Twitter during live television broadcasts mainly in the contexts of politics, sport and entertainment. A vast amount of research has used big data and focused for instance on mapping the networks of specific hashtags and peak uses of Twitter (e.g. Highfield et al., 2013; Alonso and Schiells, 2013), as well as the content and tones of tweets during programs (e.g. Wohn and Na, 2011; Highfield, 2013; Giglietto and Selva, 2014; Yu & Wang, 2015). Much less attention has been paid to the actual core of social television, i.e., to the intersection between the traditional television broadcast and its tweeting audience. Only a few studies have investigated how the social media comments of the audience are (or are not) integrated into television shows by focusing on the parts of broadcasts where tweets are unfolded on screen. While Kroon Lundell (2014) has shown that webcasts produced by sports broadcasters have replaced

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one-way broadcasting with a more interactional form, the producers of traditional television have not exploited the full potential for interaction enabled by technological settings (Kroon Lundell, 2014; Laursen and Sandvik, 2014) and, as van Es (2016) notes, tweets on the television screen during broadcasts are often used more as an overlay than integrated into the television show itself. In this study, we approach tweets on the screen from a different perspective since we focus on the impact of television publicity on the subsequent interaction between peers on Twitter.

Although earlier studies (Wilson, 2011; Bennett, 2012; Highfield, 2013) have shown that public attention, including retweets and replies from fellow tweeters as well as tweets on the television screen during the program, may be the main reward for tweeters, there has been no detailed investigation of the effect of public attention on the interaction between tweeters. In this paper, we seek to fill this gap by investigating, through a case study, how the public access to television affects dialogues on Twitter. We approach the question in relation to audience participation shows and reality TV and discuss the live tweeting practices as *middle-space performances* (Thornborrow, 2015). The concept has been used to refer to practices that participants produce in reality TV shows, but it seems also to be appropriate for describing the social television talk, since live tweeters are engaged not only in the work of watching television but also in 'the work of being watched' (Thornborrow, 2015: 35, 44). According to Couldry (2003: 48), the crucial assumption is that media presence elevates one's status, and therefore, as Thornborrow (2015: 44) notes, people in media are not doing performances of the ordinary but rather performances of the staged self. We ask how the 'extended publicity' (i.e. television publicity) shapes the interaction of live tweeters, how they orient to publicity, and how they perform themselves and treat others at the intersection of Twitter and television. This research problem will be approached through the lens of digital conversation analysis, which will be used as a methodological tool to show the ways participants in the situation 'do interaction'.

2. Social television talk: Breaking the frames of broadcast interaction

According to Hutchby (2006: 18), broadcast talk is a specific type of institutional talk characterized by the fact that its audience is separated from the production of the talk by space (and time). Thus, media talk is always necessarily a *performance* displayed not only to a studio audience but also, and primarily, to a home audience (Hutchby, 2014: 87). Chovanec (2015: 70) uses the concept of a *dual frame of reference* to emphasize the layered nature of interaction in public media. The first frame consists of the interlocutors in a studio discussion, but as soon as this interaction is mediated it becomes a media product that is consumed by a home audience, which constructs the second frame of interaction. In this frame, the studio discussion is echoed privately with co-viewers by the home audience but, traditionally, they have had no access to the first frame interaction (Chovanec and Dynel, 2015: 6).

However, there is a long history of different kinds of audience participation shows where the audience is made visible (Hutchby, 2006: 39–40). Radio phone-ins, television talk shows and, later, reality television have been viewed as blurring the opposition between producers and audience (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 36) by letting 'ordinary' people have access to the public stage (Hutchby, 2006: 40; Thornborrow, 2015: 4). In all these cases, the one-way communication from producers to audience has changed so that the previously passive audience has taken the role of producer and thereby been allowed into the first level interaction (Chovanec and Dynel, 2015: 6).

However, when crossing from non-media to media (Couldry, 2003:51), the participants of audience engage in the 'work of being

watched' (Thornborrow, 2015: 44) that affects how they perform themselves. Bignell (2005: 67) calls this state of being watched a *middle space* where participants take a role between ordinariness and celebrity. Thus, although the participation of audience in talk shows or reality TV shows is often seen as a performance of being ordinary, the television itself has the power to transform ordinary people into celebrities (Thornborrow, 2015: 35, 39; Couldry, 2003: 119–120).

In the age of digital media, the participation of audiences has become even more visible, and further blurred the distinction between professionals, experts, and lay participants (Thornborrow, 2015: 5). There is a vast amount of possibilities to be in public, and Twitter, for example, has been viewed as enabling *micro-celebrity practices* in which its users see themselves as public persona (Marwick, 2013: 114). O'Sullivan and Carr (2017) use the term *masspersonal communication* to refer to the intersection of mass and interpersonal communication, which is typical of, but not restricted to, social networking communication. Marwick and boyd (2010: 129) see social media audiences as differing from a faceless broadcast audience in that the audience of social media i.e., *the networked audience*, contains familiar faces as well: it is potentially both public and personal.

When used simultaneously with watching television, the social networking service Twitter provides a live channel for discussions and creates a *virtual lounge room* (Highfield et al., 2013), where a home audience can 'do' watching television together in real time, relocating their interpersonal conversation from the private to the public sphere (Giglietto and Selva, 2014). In live broadcasts, television viewers are encouraged to use a dedicated hashtag to participate and communicate through dual screening (Vaccari et al., 2015) either with each other or, across-the-frame, with producers (Chovanec, 2015: 72), thus potentially changing the dialogue from asynchronous, somewhat quasi-conversation to synchronous, live interplay between television and its users (Laursen and Sandvik, 2014). By adding a hashtag into their tweet, tweeters categorize it as a performance of, for example, watching televised football, and at the same time make it accessible not only to a broader Twitter audience but also, potentially, to a vast television audience (Papacharissi, 2012). This intersection of Twitter and television can be seen as a middle space between ordinariness and celebrity.

3. Data and methods

The data consist of tweets with the show-specific hashtag (#ylemmfutis '#yleworldcup') and Yle broadcasts during the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil. The hashtag was used as an official identifier that marked a tweet as part of a TV discussion and involved the tweeter to be part of a broad television audience. During the World Cup, viewers were encouraged to tweet using the hashtag #ylemmfutis, with "the best tweets" getting published on the screen and rewarded in the studio with jerseys, for example. Although the official hashtag basically enabled interaction with the broadcast, actual interaction between the studio and the audience remained little more than notional because the tweets on the screen were rarely acknowledged in the studio discussion.

The focus of this study is on the parts of broadcasts where tweets were displayed at the bottom of the television screen, as well as on the comments those public tweets received on Twitter. We began by collecting the tweets that were published on television during the FIFA World Cup. After that, we looked for those slightly over 200 tweets on Twitter by using a Twitter search tool, and selected those tweets that had got at least one comment on Twitter. From those 82 tweets we sifted out those that had received at least one comment specifically regarding the television appearance of the tweet. As a result, the number of tweets we ana-

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