

Following the Yellow Jersey

Tweeting the Tour de France

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as #letour snakes through the French countryside, its Twitter followers are close behind

Sporting events feature among the most popular topics covered on Twitter, both in terms of volume and frequency of updates (Twitter, 2010, 2011), with spectators using social media as a backchannel to post their own commentary while watching live events. Participating in these sports-oriented discussions is not limited to the audience, though—athletes and broadcasters are also active on social media, providing additional comments and perspectives before, after, and even while competing. This chapter looks at the 2012 Tour de France cycling race and its coverage on Twitter (as both sporting and media events) during the three weeks of competition between 30 June and 22 July 2012. Watched by millions of spectators around the world as well as along the streets of France, the Tour is also covered extensively online, and social media such as Twitter can potentially foster the development of a global, participatory audience simultaneously following the race.

Online communication can change the relationship between sports fans and athletes; Hutchins (2011), for example, argued that, as sportspeople adopt

Twitter in greater numbers for such purposes as self-promotion and self-expression, this has the effect of building “a sense of ‘common experience’ between athletes and their followers” (p. 242). By using the same communication platforms and discussing the same topics as their fans, sportspeople and other public figures can encourage a further connection and familiarity between themselves and their audience.

Professional cyclists are not new adoptees of social media. The US rider Lance Armstrong (@lancearmstrong) had over 1.2 million followers in August 2009 (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), and over 3.7 million followers three years later in October 2012. During the 2009 Giro d’Italia, Kassing and Sanderson (2010) studied tweets from eight competing cyclists from the US and Australia to determine the purposes for which they use Twitter, such as sharing personal commentary and opinion (including on the events of the race) and communicating with their followers; this embrace of social media could further “transform the way athletes communicate with fans and how fans in turn respond to their athletic heroes” (p. 124), creating new interactions and informality between sportspeople and their audience.

In addition to being a sporting competition, the Tour de France is also a major international media event. While Twitter users respond to each day’s stage and results in their tweets, their social media coverage might also treat the race in similar ways to other television broadcasts, such as including @mentions of media personalities in relevant tweets. Deller (2011) emphasised the importance of the live broadcast to tweeting about television, since users involved in a public conversation around a common programme are required to watch simultaneously to provide a consistent context for tweets and to avoid the possibility of reading spoilers from other viewers. This communal experience of watching and commenting on television broadcasts, including live sports, can see Twitter acting as a ‘virtual lounge room’, a means of connecting a show’s audience and providing a public backchannel for its responses to onscreen events (Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2012).

This chapter, then, provides a preliminary examination of the 2012 Tour de France and its Twitter coverage as both a sporting event and shared television experience. The analysis is guided by the following questions:

- What is the shape of the Twitter audience for the Tour, and how are users connected?
- How is Twitter used to comment on the Tour de France by its audience? Does it act as a backchannel, with users tweeting in isolation, or

does a more interactive discussion take place between those watching at home and those participating in the race?

METHOD

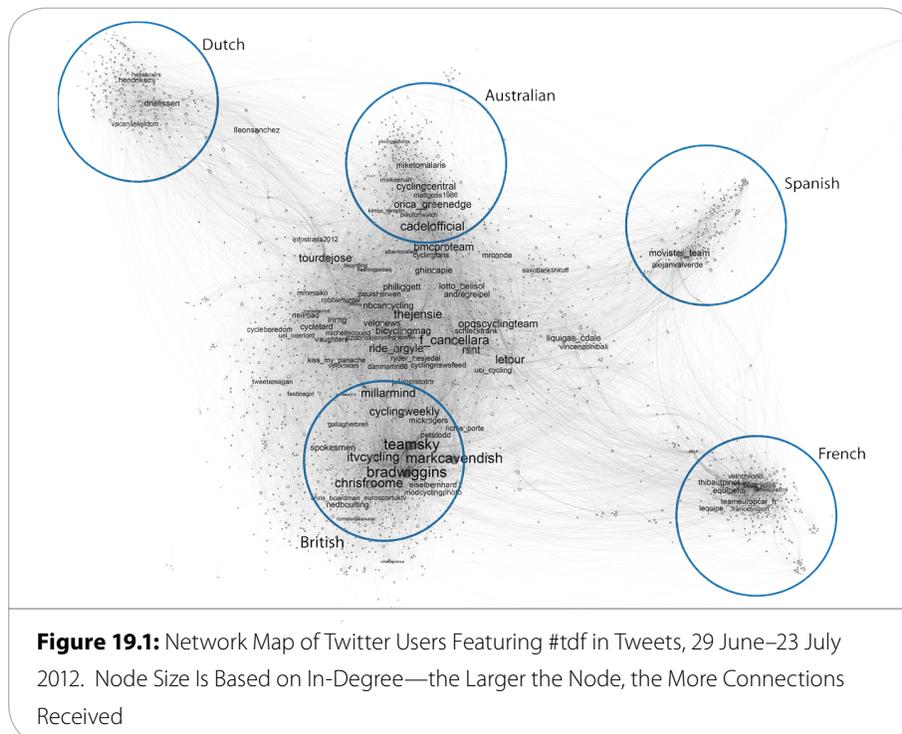
This project draws on an extensive collection of Twitter datasets gathered during the 2012 Tour de France. Using the open-source tool *yourTwapperKeeper* (for more information, see Bruns, 2012), 180 hashtag and keyword archives were created in order to collect a wider range of tweets concerning the Tour than are featured within a single hashtagged discussion. *yourTwapperKeeper* collects data by querying the Twitter API for each search term specified and capturing any corresponding tweets. An archive was set up for each unique term, such as common hashtags for the race, including #tdf and #letour, broadcaster-specific hashtags, and the Twitter usernames for riders, teams, commentators, and analysts. By tracking usernames as keywords, *yourTwapperKeeper* captures tweets containing these names as @mentions and retweets, and tweets posted by the users in question. In total, archives were created for Twitter accounts representing 120 of the 198 competitors who started the race.

Following the completion of the 2012 race, these archives were examined using a collection of Gawk scripts developed for the analysis of large Twitter datasets, aided by network visualisation in Gephi (Bruns & Burgess, 2011). The wide scope of the data collection provides an opportunity to examine several Tour-oriented discussions, as well as the uses of Twitter during the race by individuals and groups associated with the competition—and how the Tour's audience on Twitter responds to, and interacts with, these different participants. Although a full overview of the collected data is beyond the scope of this chapter, the following sections examine selected archives to identify the shape of the Tour de France's Twitter audience, and investigate how Twitter was actively used as an extension of watching the race. First, the overall audience is identified from tweets captured which included the #tdf hashtag. For the examination of specific uses of Twitter, however, the #sbstdf hashtag is studied. The hashtag is specific to the Australian multicultural public service broadcaster Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), and provides a smaller, English-language dataset than found with the #tdf tweets.

#TDF AND THE TOUR DE FRANCE'S GLOBAL AUDIENCE

The Tour de France is an international competition, with cyclists from 31 countries competing in the 2012 edition, and the race itself broadcast to 190 countries (“Le Tour: On Screens around the World!”, 2012). While French riders formed the largest national group (44 entrants), six other countries—Spain, The Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Australia—were also represented by more than ten competitors. The race itself was also not confined solely to France’s borders; the opening stages were held in Belgium, while the eighth stage finished in Switzerland. It would then be expected that the Twitter audience for the Tour de France covers a wide geographical area, with particular attention from nations with several riders competing in the race.

Examining tweets containing the #tdf hashtag provides an initial overview of the Tour’s global audience. Although this was not the only hashtag used to denote Tour de France-related tweets, and there is no requirement to include this, or any other hashtag, in relevant tweets, #tdf (and its variants, such as #tdf12 or #tdf2012) was widely employed during the race: 559,569 #tdf tweets from 145,328 Twitter users were captured between 29 June and 23 July 2012.



Each tweet was processed to identify any user accounts featured in the text as either an @mention or retweet. Initially, this created a network of 117,385 nodes (representing individual Twitter accounts) connected by 244,651 edges (each edge represents a link from one user to another account in the form of either an @mention or retweet). The network was then filtered to include only those nodes with a degree range of twenty or more (giving and/or receiving in combination at least twenty connections to other nodes), reducing the network to 3,083 nodes and 39,494 edges. The filtering process highlights the accounts mentioning the most users overall in their #tdf tweets, and the accounts receiving these mentions. The resulting visualisation, seen in Figure 19.1, depicts the extent to which the #tdf hashtag connects Twitter users through mentions of other accounts.

Immediately apparent are several clusters of Twitter users at the extremities of Figure 19.1; while still connected to the rest of the network, these clusters feature strong interlinking between users unique to those groups, and so are presented at a distance from the central mass of nodes. These clusters roughly correspond to national and linguistic groups: the group in the top left of the visualisation forms a Dutch-speaking corner, while a French cluster can be found in the bottom right of Figure 19.1. Between these two groups are further clusters around Australian and Spanish accounts, respectively, while the lower section of the main group is centred on British Twitter users. These are not exclusive clusters; Spanish accounts, for example, appear elsewhere in Figure 19.1, not just in the Spanish cluster, and the Dutch section features accounts based in both The Netherlands and Belgium.

The presence of these clusters suggests some separation among the Twitter audience along language, and also national lines. However, the groups share common characteristics, if not common users: unsurprisingly, given the fact that many broadcasters provide their own commentators and analysts to cover the Tour, these clusters prominently feature the accounts of local media personalities, publications, and television networks. Also noticeable within the groups are the accounts of cyclists and teams from these countries. However, the proximity of riders and teams to these clusters is not directly dependent on nationality. Although there is a Dutch-speaking cluster in Figure 19.1, the accounts of Belgian riders are distributed throughout the network, as they were members of international teams representing several nationalities. Dutch cyclists competing in the Tour, on the other hand, are more concentrated within the Dutch cluster, as the majority raced for Netherlands-based teams, such as Rabobank (@rabocycling), Argos-Shimano (@1t4i), and Vacansoleil-

DCM (@vacansoleildcm). These team affiliations also link different groups in Figure 19.1. The Spanish rider Luis León Sánchez (@lleonsanchez), for example, appears not within the Spanish cluster, but as a bridge between the Dutch cluster and the main network, as he was riding for the Rabobank team.

Similarly, the accounts for the BMC Pro Team (@bmcproteam) and its cyclists, such as the German Marcus Burghardt (@mburghardt83) and American George Hincapie (@ghincapie), are linked to the Australian cluster since the team's leader was the defending champion, Australian rider Cadel Evans (@cadelofficial). While the BMC accounts were mentioned by Twitter users from around the world, they were closely associated with the fortunes of Evans during the race, cited in particular by Australians hoping that Evans would repeat his 2011 success. The bridging role of cyclists, teams, and, to a lesser extent, media accounts, can be seen throughout Figure 19.1; riders competing for teams with an international roster connect different clusters, and success during the race itself can also attract attention from across the network. For example, the Swiss rider Fabian Cancellara (@f_cancellara), riding for RadioShack Nissan Trek (@rsnt) and the only cyclist other than race winner Bradley Wiggins (@bradwiggins) to wear the leader's yellow jersey, appears central to the network, since his account was linked in tweets from each of the clusters in Figure 19.1. The rider's own Twitter activity will also influence how connected they are, as fans, teams, and other riders may reply to or retweet comments made during the race weeks.

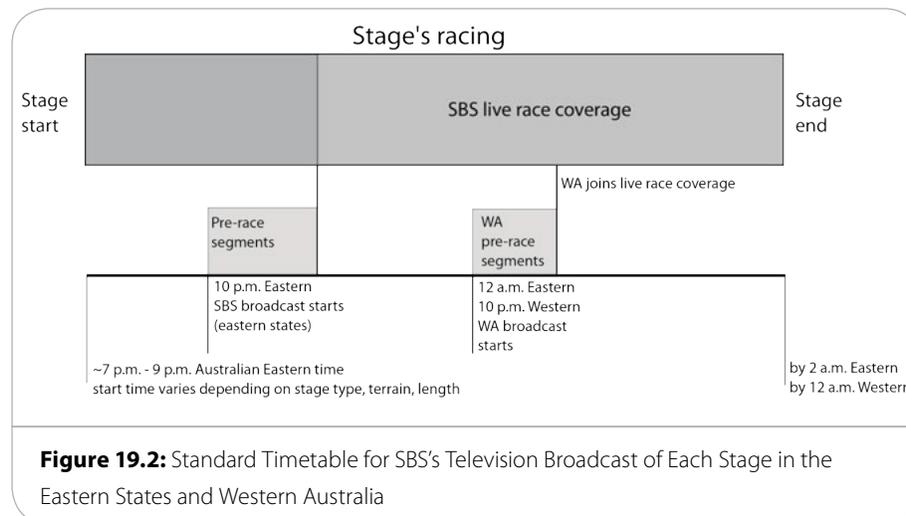
Tweeting at specific cyclists, asking questions of them and giving support and advice during the race, may take place without necessarily expecting a response—while some rider-fan interaction may result, the act of tweeting at a cyclist may also be seen as a Twitter-based representation of cheering from the roadside, or shouting at the television, in a more public manner that creates a direct connection to the subject of the comments. Similar links can also be made between the television audience and the commentators, presenters, and analysts contributing to the broadcast of the Tour. Tweets may comment on events within the race itself, but may also address phenomena related to the media coverage of the Tour that do not have any direct bearing on the final result, discussing both the sporting event and its mediated presentation. To explore this further, the next section examines the different uses of Twitter by the audience for a specific broadcaster's coverage of the Tour: the Australian Twitter users including the #sbstdf hashtag in their tweets.

THE TROPES OF #SBSTDF

The Tour de France is broadcast live and free-to-air in Australia by SBS, with coverage starting each race day from 10:00 p.m. local time nationwide—since the programming starts at the same time locally, the two-hour winter time difference between Western Australia and the eastern states means that viewers in Perth will see less of the race than their counterparts in Sydney or Brisbane. Figure 19.2 outlines the usual broadcasting timetable for each stage on SBS.

SBS's presentation of the 2012 race was watched in total by more than six million viewers over the 21 days of competition (Nance, 2012), with individual live stages averaging between 240,000 and 380,000 viewers (Dale, 2012). These viewing figures show that although the Tour is not one of the highest-rated shows on Australian television, it does attract a returning, niche audience despite the late nights involved in watching the live broadcast. The television coverage is supplemented by online content through the SBS Cycling Central Social Hub (<http://cyclingcentral.social.sbs.com.au/>): video footage, links, tweets, and Facebook comments from official accounts (presenters, cyclists) and fans are presented in a central location on the SBS website, and the #sbstdf hashtag is one part of this extended media coverage of the race. In total, 39,115 #sbstdf tweets from 3,185 users were captured during the period 29 June to 23 July 2012 (covering the race, rest days, and the days immediately before and after the race). This total activity also includes variations of the #sbstdf hashtag, such as #sbstdf12.

While still discussing a sporting event, the SBS-specific hashtag allows users to also comment on the race as a mediated event, wherein the cycling is



just one part of a wider entertainment package. For Australian viewers, watching the Tour de France is often a ritualised experience—staying up to midnight or 2:00 a.m., depending on location, to see the end of each stage over three weeks is a sign of dedication (Mathieson, 2012)—which is further amplified by viewers’ identification of common themes and repeated phenomena over the 21 days of racing (both in tweets and in other communication). SBS’s presentation of each stage lends to this ritualisation by following a standard format, as shown in Figure 19.2. In the eastern states (time difference GMT +10), several segments are shown before crossing to live coverage, including a recap of the previous day’s racing; a preview of the stage ahead; and a short, Tour-themed cooking programme. In Western Australia (GMT +8), this final segment is usually excised from the broadcast, as the 10:00 p.m. local start means that viewers join the live coverage over an hour after their eastern states counterparts (the exact time depends on the length of pre-race programming for viewers in these time zones). For the first part of the stage, commentary is provided by Matthew Keenan (@mwkeenan), while the final sections are covered by Phil Liggett (@philliggett) and Paul Sherwen (@paulsherwen). Following the end of the stage, analysis and comments are presented by Mike Tomalaris (@miketomalaris) and a guest expert.

The presence of these SBS personalities on Twitter—and their use of the medium for additional remarks, sharing links, and responding to follower queries—gives the #sbstdf audience a direct connection to the onscreen team. The consistent, annual appearance of Tomalaris, Keenan, Liggett, and Sherwen in the Tour coverage, and in other cycling broadcasts, aids this sense of familiarity; viewers are aware, for example, of favourite phrases used by Liggett in his commentary, such as describing the group of riders leading their respective teams as the “heads of state”. Finally, the video footage of the Tour itself, highlighting castles and other local points of interest, artwork in fields, spectators in costumes, and cows near the roadside, provides the audience with familiar views each year as the cyclists race past.

For the SBS audience, these different aspects of the Tour de France translate into recurring components of the broadcast, or tropes, to be light-heartedly embraced in their repetition. Rather than a space just for serious cycling commentary (although that is still present), the #sbstdf hashtag also serves as a backchannel where viewers can share the humour of the Tour as well as the sporting contest. The extent of this use of Twitter is seen in the distribution of hashtags within the captured tweets. Although, in addition to #sbstdf itself (38,960 occurrences), the most commonly used hashtags were race-specific (such

as #tdf and #tdf12, with 5,644 and 6,706 mentions, respectively), other popular hashtags reflect more humorous purposes. These include #LVDT (895 occurrences), referring to the blog of @lesvachesdutour, which highlights footage of cows during the race; and #sherliggettisms (456; 1,066 including variants), used to denote repeated, strange, offbeat, or incorrect comments by Sherwen and Liggett in their commentary. These broadcast-specific hashtags reflect different tropes of the coverage which all lead into the #drink hashtag (530); treating the Tour de France as a drinking game, the utterance of stock phrases or the appearance of visual stereotypes of the Tour (such as castles and sunflowers) are quickly tweeted as a prompt to take another drink. This does not mean that Twitter users are actually participating in a drinking game; rather, the #drink hashtag has become a staple response to clichéd behaviour, particularly within media events. Tweets concerning the SBS broadcast of the Tour, then, while still attracting a niche audience given its time slot and subject, can be seen to continue Twitter conventions from other media contexts.

The #sbstdf hashtag also features other Twitter conventions developed within unrelated situations, and which again dwell less on the actual events of the race than its tropes. While presenters Tomalaris and Keenan were active Twitter users during the Tour, their contributions were also shadowed by parody accounts in their name. Tomalaris inspired two fake accounts—@FakeMTomalaris and @FakeTomalaris—while other accounts satirised Keenan (@FakeMattKeenan) and pre-race television chef Gabriel Gaté (@fakegabrielgate). The creation of these accounts highlights the audience's familiarity with the race broadcasts, and this awareness is developed further through interactions and retweets between viewers, the fake accounts, and other humour-oriented users, especially when continuing the themes represented by other popular hashtags. Before Stage 9, for example, @FakeMTomalaris tweeted a bingo card of common phrases used by Liggett and Sherwen for which viewers should listen out, treating the broadcast in a similar manner as the drinking game trope.

The creation of fake accounts parodying public figures is not a uniquely Australian or sports-related activity, and the practice is carried out within different contexts on Twitter. Popular accounts which imitate celebrities include the parodies of Queen Elizabeth II (@queen_uk) and the actress Tilda Swinton (@NotTildaSwinton). Accounts for fictional characters and groups also spoof social media practices, such as @DeathStarPR's use of Twitter for brand management and promotion of the Galactic Empire from *Star Wars*. Satirising politicians and media figures is a newly established part of the “mediated spectacle of mainstream politics” in Australia (Wilson, 2011, p. 458); playing with the con-

ventions of political coverage and the character of the figures parodied, Wilson (2011) found that these fake accounts are usually ongoing performances, where public attention (such as increased followers, retweets, or replies from the satire's subjects) may be the main reward. Although the scope of the Tour parodies may be less open-ended, the intentions and goals may be similar to their political counterparts—indeed, the fake accounts would often mention the real Keenan and Tomalaris accounts, and their SBS colleagues, inviting reactions even if they ultimately went unrequited.

The humorous overtones found in #sbstdf tweets also demonstrate a mixture of these various Twitter conventions and other popular Internet culture. One of the most mentioned cyclists during the 2012 race was the German rider Jens Voigt (@thejensie). Despite not being Australian, nor riding for an Australian team, Voigt was a popular figure due to his attitude to riding; for example, he once stated in an interview that his mind's response when his legs are in pain while riding is to say, "shut up legs" (Vaughan & AAP, 2012). This comment helped to promote Voigt's reputation as a tough character in the world of professional cycling. Inevitably, Voigt became the sport's equivalent of actor Chuck Norris, the subject of the Internet meme 'Chuck Norris Facts', which shared "amusing (fictional) anecdotes ostensibly about the venerable action star, but more accurately about iconic traits of hegemonic masculinity" (Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011, p. 301). During the 2011 Tour de France, a Twitter account for 'Jens Voigt Facts' (<http://jensvoigtfacts.com/>; @JensVoigtFacts) covered similar ground to the Chuck Norris meme; while the Twitter account was not active during the 2012 Tour, the style was appropriated by other users. Indeed, the most retweeted comment during the race with the #sbstdf hashtag (306 retweets) followed this format:

.@thejensie has a polar bear stretched out on the floor of his den. It's not dead, it's just too scared to move. #sbstdf

Some Twitter users mixed the tropes of the SBS broadcast with Jens Voigt jokes in their tweets, creating their own new conventions. The start of the live broadcast in Western Australia, for example, would be announced by Matthew Keenan by welcoming viewers from that state. For the #sbstdf discussion, the Twitter audience regularly provided their own take on this greeting:

Welcome to viewers in Western Australia. You just missed Jens Voigt jumping over 25 tour buses on his bike. It was SPECTACULAR. #sbstdf

Welcome to viewers in WA. You just missed Jens Voigt riding so hard that a chopper got knocked off course by his wake turbulence. #sbstdf

The audience's familiarity with the cyclists, their personalities, and the conventions of the Tour coverage went even further, though; when it was revealed that the German cyclist Tony Martin was riding with a broken wrist, a parody account was created not for the rider himself, but for his wrist (@TonyMartinWrist). This act already demonstrates awareness of several tropes of the Tour, and the light-hearted relationship between the SBS audience and the cyclists and commentators involved in the coverage; however, there remained scope to combine conventions to an even greater extent, and this was realised in additional tweets:

Welcome to viewers in WA. You just missed a drunken brawl between @thejensie's legs & @TonyMartinWrist over who should shut up more. #sbstdf

RT @TonyMartinWrist: Shut up, Jens. #sbstdf

CONCLUSION

The tweets captured containing the #sbstdf hashtag demonstrate that the Tour de France, for its Australian viewers at least, is not just a sporting event appealing to a niche audience. Instead, the race and its result are only one component of the wider discussions taking place on Twitter. While there is certainly interest in the outcome of the Tour and the fortunes of the competitors, watching the SBS coverage can also be seen as a ritualised activity for some viewers. Tweeting about the Tour turns the rituals into a shared experience, encouraging interactions between the audience, as well as commentators and cyclists, in response to the events of the race as well as the tropes of the broadcast itself. The promotion of humorous content, especially tweets drawing on the established conventions of SBS's coverage (from stock phrases and recurring segments to the scenery and the commercials during the broadcast), make the #sbstdf discussions similar to other hashtags surrounding televised events. For instance, tropes based on recurring aspects of broadcast media spectacles are invoked by the Twitter audience for the Eurovision Song Contest, also shown in Australia by SBS (see Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013).

This chapter has focussed on the Australian context, where sports commentary is combined with irreverent remarks in a light-hearted relationship between fans, riders, and presenters. For viewers in other countries, though, the use of Twitter for commenting on the Tour de France may take very different formats and intentions. The Tour is watched around the world, attracting international attention on Twitter, and further research is required to examine

how different audiences respond to the same event. In addition, analysis can expand on the examples of Kassing and Sanderson (2010) to investigate how individual cyclists, teams, and commentators use Twitter over the course of the race—alongside any satirical counterparts.

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