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## **THE ACCUSED IS ENTERING THE COURTROOM: THE LIVE-TWEETING OF A MURDER TRIAL.**

*The use of social media is now widely accepted within journalism as an outlet for news information. Live tweeting of unfolding events is standard practice. In March 2014, Oscar Pistorius went on trial in the Gauteng High Court for murder. Hundreds of journalists present began live-tweeting coverage, an unprecedented combination of international interest, permission to use technology and access which resulted in massive streams of consciousness reports of events as they unfolded.*

*Based on a corpus of Twitter feeds of twenty-four journalists covering the trial, this study analyses the content and strategies of these feeds in order to present an understanding of how microblogging is used as a live reporting tool.*

*This study shows the development of standardised language and strategies in reporting on Twitter, concluding that journalists adopt a narrow range of approaches, with no significant variation in terms of gender, location, or medium. This is in contrast to earlier studies in the field (Awad, 2006, Hedman, 2015; Kothari, 2010; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009 Lasorsa, 2012; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2011; Sigal, 1999, Vis, 2013).*

Keywords: Court reporting; Journalism; Live blogging; New Media; Social Media; Twitter;

# **THE ACCUSED IS ENTERING THE COURTROOM: THE LIVE-TWEETING OF A MURDER TRIAL.**

## **Introduction and context**

The use of social media, especially Twitter, is now widely accepted within journalism as an outlet for news information. Live tweeting of unfolding events is standard practice, with a few exceptions, and journalists are consistently required to use social media both for research and dissemination of stories. (BBC College of Journalism, undated; Bull, 2010; Knight & Cook, 2013; Nardelli, A, 2011; Newman, 2009; Zeller & Hermida, 2015)

But as new technology becomes routine, the law tends to follow slowly. In courtrooms, especially, where the needs of journalists are weighed against the requirements of the law, social media has penetrated more slowly, and its use is still constrained in many jurisdictions. In countries that follow British Common Law, especially, journalists are limited to analogue technology, and constrained in what they may report even outside the courtroom. ("Courts," n.d.; Hanna, Dodd, & McNae, 2012; Quinn, 2007)

In circumstances where live reporting of trials is permitted, and where journalists are able to use live social media during proceedings, a new form of social media journalism is arising. Just as the live broadcast of the trial of OJ Simpson heralded changes in both the media and in the criminal justice system (Brown, Duane, & Fraser, 1997; Thaler, 1997; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2000), so reporting of trials on social media has the potential to change reporting and the courts. Strategies for reporting trials on social media were evolving as journalists adapted and responded to circumstances, and for an observer of social media and journalism, this proved fascinating.

The particular trial chosen for analysis in this paper was that of Oscar Pistorius, Olympic athlete and now convicted killer. From the initial reports that the police had been called to his home outside Pretoria, South Africa, in the early hours of Valentine's Day 2013, the events surrounding and consequences of the death of Reeva Steenkamp were widely reported on social media, and especially on Twitter. A number of circumstances contributed to this happening: Oscar Pistorius was world-famous already, having been one of the first disabled competitors in the Olympics, and he was widely admired and his story held up as an exemplar of courage in the face of diversity; Johannesburg is the largest community of journalists in Africa (most English-language press organisations that have any correspondents in Africa station them in Johannesburg<sup>i</sup>), putting hundreds of journalists within easy reach of events as they unfolded; South Africa has a stable and extensive mobile phone and data network, and Twitter is particularly popular, with 44% of South African Internet users accessing the site (compare 28% for the USA, and 30% for the UK). (Statista, 2015)

In March 2014, Oscar Pistorius went on trial in the Gauteng High Court for murder, to intense global media interest. The trial attracted reporters from all over the world, offering an irresistible combination of celebrity and murder, while also touching on serious social issues such as domestic violence, access to guns and response to crime. The trial was open to the press, largely conducted in English (and translated where not), and physically within reach of a large community of journalists. Television cameras were permitted, and satellite television channel MNet had won a court order allowing it to set up a specific channel to broadcast the proceedings to South African subscribers. (Vos, 2014)

Mobile phones and social media were permitted in the courtroom (with some constraints – some testimony was barred from being mentioned), and with the intense global interest, journalists almost universally live-tweeted the proceedings, with little restraint. Because South Africa does not have jury trials, and therefore has fewer concerns about the possibility of the press subverting the judicial process, journalists were largely permitted to report as and how they saw fit from the courtroom, with far fewer concerns regarding potential contempt of court (particularly a concern for journalists used to working within strict British Common Law jurisdictions).

The trial of Oscar Pistorius was not the first trial to be live-tweeted, judges in other jurisdictions, including the notoriously traditionalist British system had previously allowed select use of mobile phones, but this was among the first trials to attract such a large and diverse number of journalists, reporting for a global spread of news organisations, and this allows a comprehensive and comparative analysis of social media reporting strategies to be conducted.

### **Literature review**

Social media has now passed its first decade, and has been thoroughly scrutinised, discussed, researched and commented on by the academy, the public, the media and the intelligentsia. A large corpus of academic research examining the uses, impacts, pitfalls and consequences of social media for the journalistic profession exists.

Approaches to the study of social media within the framework of journalism differ, with the focus shifting from its use as a source (Ahmad, 2010; Broersma & Graham, 2013; Knight, 2011, 2012; Lariscy et al., 2009) to its use in distributing the news (*#bbcsms: Technology & Innovation - YouTube*, 2011; Bosch, 2010; Farhi, 2011; Gleason, 2010; Newman, 2009, 2011; Stassen, 2010) and in self-promotion. As with many new technologies, much initial research is descriptive, and focuses on the potential for these new technologies. As the use of a new technology becomes routinised and normalised, the focus moves to more analytical research.

The use of social media in covering events has been analysed by a number of researchers (Bruno, 2011; Knight, 2012; Newman, 2009; Vis, 2013) all studied coverage of specific events in order to discern how social media was used, by journalists and other actors. Much of this analysis focused on coverage in crisis situations, where social media use spikes with public interest and immediacy of information becomes especially important. Bruno's report for the Reuters Institute on the use of social media in crisis situations picked up on this, and on the implicit competition between professional and amateur reporters in being the first with the image, video or data point. This inherits much from earlier tensions in the profession about the impact of amateur, or citizen, journalism and how it might displace or otherwise affect professional (commercial, industrial) journalism. This issue was widely analysed and discussed in the academic sphere (Allan, Sonwalkar, & Carter, 2007; Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2010; Murthy, 2011; Rosenberry & St John III, 2010) and in the professional, and is clearly an influence in the discussion of social media (Lind, 2012). Although these analyses all examine social media and its use by journalists, they tend to take a broader view, with an emphasis on interviews and commentary by journalists about their own usage.

Chadha and Wells' (2016) study of how journalists used social media was based on interviews with eighteen American journalists, examining how they perceived Twitter and its utility for journalists. The response was largely focused on the use of Twitter as a brand promotion tool for their news outlets and themselves, and the journalists expressed annoyance at the demands social media placed on them to constantly be present, to respond to other journalists' items and

to satisfy their editors. Although the content of tweets is discussed in the research, their function as news outputs is not explicitly engaged with. Likewise, Zeller and Hermida's interviews with senior journalists and editors on the subject of social media elicited a number of tensions between the traditional and the modern in their analysis of responses to the impact of social media.(Zeller & Hermida, 2015)

Farida Vis's analysis of the use of social media by two reporters during the 2011 riots in the UK takes a more narrow and directed angle, examining tweets by the two reporters over the four days of the riots. This analysis codes the content of each tweet according to a frame developed through prior analysis, focusing on the function of the tweet (reply, link, mention) and its content (requests, statements, intentions, commentary, etc). This then forms the basis for an analysis of the use of social media for planning, newsgathering, direct reporting and dissemination of news and other information. This research reinforces the importance of the direct analysis of content and uses of technology by journalists in order to understand both the impact of that technology and the evolution of journalistic practices.

Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton's analysis of social media use takes a similar approach in their examination of the normalization of social media within newsrooms, building on Singer's research into blogging among journalists (D. L. Lasorsa et al., 2011; Singer, 2005). Their analysis concluded that journalists use social media for a wider range of activities than their traditional outputs, and identified a number of key functions that journalists perform on social media: opining, re-tweeting, job talking, discussing, personalising and linking. This study was based on journalists' use of Twitter over two weeks in 2009, and not focused on coverage of a particular event or breaking story, contrasting this analysis with much else of the research into social media.

Zeller and Hermida's analysis of attitudes towards social media in newsrooms takes a wider view, and uses interview method to access opinions and responses. Although the study is fairly small, it does echo other findings that social media is often used for promotional activities and reinforced the idea that although journalists use social media as a form of collaboration, considerable emphasis is placed on professional standards, especially as a means of asserting control. (Zeller & Hermida, 2015, p. 113). These analyses fit in with more general discussion of social media usage by journalists, such as those conducted by(Hedman, 2015; Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013) which focus on the disruption caused by new technology and reactions to it.

Based on a corpus of Twitter feeds of twenty four journalists covering the trial, this study analyses the content and strategies of these feeds in order to present an understanding of how microblogging is used as a live reporting tool. The journalists selected cover national and international media for the full range of media outlets and are from a range of nationalities and backgrounds.

## **Methodology**

Tweets were gathered using Martin Hawksey's Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet application.(Hawksey, 2013) This was chosen because of the ease of use, and the flexibility of setting up new feeds. Each account's feed was archived to a different spreadsheet, and the whole consolidated in Microsoft Access for analysis.

During the first two days of the trial all tweets using the hashtags #oscarpistorius and #oscartrial were harvested. These were then sorted by the number of followers, and top posters analysed in order to identify journalists who were covering the trial. Approximately fifty accounts were identified and archived, this number was whittled down as it became apparent

which of the journalists were present in the courtroom, and would remain so for the bulk of the trial<sup>ii</sup>.

At the end, 24 accounts were selected for analysis, all those of journalists covering the trial from within the courtroom. 21 of these accounts were those of individual named journalists, and three were the official organisational account of news organisations. One unaffiliated journalist was included in the corpus, alongside 12 representing largely print organisations, nine from broadcast organisations (including four from radio stations, three from television stations and two from joint) and two from news agencies.<sup>iii</sup>

Only accounts posting primarily in English were selected. A few of the South African journalists posted in both English and Afrikaans, and these were included, but no other languages.<sup>iv</sup> All but two of the outlets analysed produce news only in English. The *Rekord* Newspaper (local Pretoria paper) is published in English and Afrikaans, and *Agence France Presse* is produced in both English and French. Of the 20 news organisations included in the corpus, two were local organisations (a newspaper and a radio station), twelve were South African national news outlets, and nine were international (US and UK, and agencies).

Tweets were gathered on the days in which the court was in session, weekends excluded, a total of 49 days between March 3 and September 12 2014. The full archive of Tweets contained 139129 records.

After removal of duplicates, successive filters were applied to the text to eliminate irrelevant tweets. Filters were based on hashtags used throughout the trial and on free text searches for names and incidents that were mentioned in the trial. Filters were also applied based on other news events at the time, such as the South African Elections. Tweets were also filtered by time, including only those between 9am and 5pm local time, in order to narrow the corpus to only those tweets sent while court was in session, or immediately before and after. A final analog filtering was applied to the remaining tweets, to eliminate irrelevancies. This resulted in a corpus of 79 021 Tweets from 26 accounts.

## **Findings**

### *Patterns of tweeting*

The trial was broken into four phases followed by final arguments and the verdict. The dates were as below:

3 March to 28 March – Phase one (adjourned due to illness)

7 April to 17 April – Phase two (adjourned for the Easter break and national holidays)

5 May to 14 May, May 20 – Phase three (adjourned to allow Pistorius to be evaluated by mental health professionals)

30 June to 8 July – Phase four and final evidence

7 August to 8 August – Concluding arguments

10 to 12 September –Verdict

Twitter activity remained high throughout the period, but the highest activity was in phase two, which included the hearing of the most explosive evidence, and Pistorius's own testimony from April 7 to 15.

[Insert figure one]

All of the accounts chosen reported on the trial for at least 26 of the 49 days of the trial, with the average being 42 days. It was not possible to ascertain whether all reporters were present in the courtroom during all of these days, since they may have been reporting remotely, or merely commenting during some of the time, but all accounts had been identified as having been in the courtroom for at least part of the trial. The most consistent account was that of News24, a South African News publisher, but Debora Patta (a freelance journalist), Charl du Plessis (from *City Press*) and Barry Bateman (from *Eye Witness News*, but also working as a commentator for MNet's Pistorius Trial channel) were all there for 47 of the 49 days. Andrew Harding of the BBC was the most consistent of the foreign media, followed by Aislinn Laing and David Smith of the *Telegraph* and *Guardian* respectively.

Average tweets per day per user varied immensely, from seven to 142. The chart below shows the number of tweets per user per day, based on six indicative accounts, those of Barry Bateman (EWN), Aislinn Laing (*The Telegraph*), Charl du Plessis (*City Press*), David Smith (*The Guardian*), Phillip de Wet (*Mail and Guardian*) and Rohit Kachroo (ITV).

[Insert figure two]

From this it can be seen that the overall pattern of interest tended to hold, and that times of peak traffic applied to most users. The single largest traffic day was April 7<sup>th</sup>, the day Pistorius himself took the stand.

#### *Tweet entities - hashtags*

Twitter defines specific elements as entities within the data included in the tweet. These include Hashtags (defined by a preceding #), mentions of other Twitter users, replies, links and images. Hashtags are used across multiple social media platforms to identify key concepts and subjects within a stream of data, allowing users (and other sites) to aggregate all content around a particular topic. Journalists are consistently advised to tag all Tweets with hashtags to allow for them to be easily found and aggregated. (Bull, 2010, p. 38; Knight & Cook, 2013, p. 34)

In the corpus of Tweets, 78% (61475) contained hashtags, the most common of which were #OscarPistorius (35 591, 45%) and #OscarTrial (23 065, 29%), with 5% using both tags. Other hashtags used include #Pistorius (5 172 uses, 7%), #ReevaSteenkamp (244 uses) and #Roux (Pistorius's chief defence lawyer, 144 uses). The main hashtags in use were #OscarTrial and #OscarPistorius, which were used at least 50% of the time by 17 of the 23 accounts. Hashtags arise through a process of osmosis and consensus as a news story evolves (Hedman, 2015; Hermida, 2010; Lind, 2012), and by the time of the trial the consensus had evolved around these two tags.

The consensus was not universal, however: one journalist, David Smith (*Guardian*), used the #Pistorius hashtag 84% of the time, and used the other two only 0.2% of the time. Stephanie Findlay (*Agence France Presse*) favoured #Pistorius over either of the other two, at 24% to 9%. Rebecca Davis (Daily Maverick) followed suit with 16% usage of #Pistorius over 3% for the main two. Aislinn Laing (*Telegraph*) used the main two hashtags 25% of the time, and #Pistorius only 2%.

Excluding retweets and replies to users, overall hashtag usage varied from 99.98% to 6.35%. The chart below shows use of the main three hashtags by user, and overall hashtag use.

[Insert figure three]

## *Interaction on Twitter*

Twitter manages conversations, replies and repetition of comments by other users through the use of the “@” symbol to identify other users, which can then be analysed as an index of interaction. Overall tweeting behaviours showed considerable variety, with some users barely interacting at all, and others approaching 40% interaction. Of the users who used interaction consistently, most showed a mix of responses and retweets, with a smaller number of direct mentions. Karyn Maughan from eNCAnews mentions the main account the company (@eNCAnews) in 72% of her tweets, which appears to be intended as a way for the main newsroom to aggregate and distribute her feed – this was removed from the data for analysis, since it was obscuring other activity. The actual feed for eNCAnews is not public.

*[Insert figure four]*

Retweets are repostings of another Twitter user’s tweet, and are prefixed with the code RT followed by the user name. Retweets can either be simply a repetition of the original post, or the retweeter can add their own comment (or even edit the original text). Programmatically, Twitter does not differentiate Retweets from any other response to a user’s status (the fact that the Tweet was a response, and the Tweet it was a response to, is recorded in the metadata, but the Retweeted text is simply recorded as the text of the Tweet. This makes the analysis of Retweets slightly risky, since there is no way to differentiate between a response and Retweet with absolute certainty.

The most commonly retweeted accounts were, without exception, other journalists or news organisations. Within the corpus, the 25 most commonly retweeted accounts consisted of 6 international journalists and 19 local journalists. All of the most retweeted accounts were of journalists covering the trial, and of these 25, 15 are within the corpus, and a further four worked for news organisations whose main feed is within the corpus, thus creating a circular conversation of journalists talking to each other.

Retweets were used extensively by several accounts as a form of news aggregation. *The New Age* retweeted posts from several freelance journalists who had existing relationships with them, including Michael Appel (TheMikeAppel), Hasina Gori (MiZz\_haSiNa) and an account called TNAreporter. Alex Eliseev also retweeted extensively his colleague Barry Bateman, and the generic account ewnreporter. Aside from these activities, analysis of retweets and responses did not show any other significant patterns, and no one user was overly favoured by the others.

By far the largest number of accounts mentioned were mentioned only once or twice, which indicated that where users were responding to other users, it was to random comments or queries.

The majority of the material posted on Twitter was original, and was not posted in response to any other user. This is in line with the strategy of Twitter being used (in this context) as a live reporting tool, and not an engagement tool. Where engagement was evident, it was most commonly in the form of formal links to another person or account within the news organisation, or in the form of one-off responses to other people on Twitter.

*Twitter entities: images*

Images can be embedded in Tweets, and the judge did allow photographs inside the courtroom on most days, limiting their use only on days when witnesses asked to not be shown. Despite



this, images were not extensively used: only 2% of tweets had images attached (1495). The official news organisation accounts were more likely to use images, but the distinction was not particularly significant, with the exception of *The New Age*, which included images in 16% of its Tweets.

More significant was the link between the use of images and what was happening in the courtroom. The most common use of images was on the first day of the trial, and on the first day that Pistorius testified, with 96 and 62 images posted, respectively.

The overwhelming majority of the images were taken inside the courtroom (80%, 126), or immediately outside the building (12%, 19), and appeared to be taken by the journalist himself.

*[Insert figure five]*

In terms of subject, Oscar Pistorius was the subject of 41% of the images, family members and supporters of both Pistorius and Steenkamp were 20%, all taken inside the courtroom. 24% (32) of the images were of journalists, many of which were re-tweeted and commented on by their subjects. On April 8<sup>th</sup>, the first day of Pistorius's testimony, 25% of the images were of *Whatsapp* messages that were submitted to the court as evidence of an argument between the couple.

Images were not used extensively in the coverage, possibly because the scene remained static throughout much of the proceedings, and because the nature of the event was that words were more important than images. Where images had weight was as evidence: screenshots of *Whatsapp* messages between Steenkamp and Pistorius were used 25 times, images of the baseball bat and the bathroom door were shown 48 and 35 times, over the course of several days. Aside from these images, images were used either to signal the start of something, or to fill time while waiting for proceedings, or as people left courtroom. Two thirds of the images were this kind of scene-setting, or filler.

It is important to note that photography was not universally allowed in the courtroom. Judge Masipa allowed witnesses to decide whether they were happy to be photographed on the stand, and the majority of them, especially the members of the public, refused. It is fair to say that if photography had been universally permitted, more images would have been posted, since interest was clearly high.

*Twitter entities: links*

Links were used throughout the corpus, 2400 Tweets contained original links (this was excluding links to images, which are discussed above). Twitter encodes links as shortened URLs, to save on characters, and these are resolved within the "entities" field of the metadata stored by the API. If the user posted through a third party services, such as with HootSuite, the links are doubly shortened, and needed to be resolved twice, using a Python Script. This is a slightly unreliable process, and 37 of the 2400 links identified were unresolvable, usually because the service that shortened them had purged the records.

The majority of links used were to the journalists' own news organisation, 69% of the total. The official sites of news organisations, *News24*, *The New Age* and the *Rekord Newspaper* group were the most common self-promoters, at 92%, 98% and 85% respectively. Individual users averaged around 40%, but the variation was substantial.

*[Insert figure six]*

Overall, news organisations were by far the overwhelming majority of links included, at 86% of links, with individual users varying from 45% to 99% of links. Social media and other websites accounted for the remainder of the links.

As with the behaviour with regards to replying and retweeting, the primary attention of journalists is on other journalists, not on the wider public and its opinions. The self-enclosed nature of the journalistic twittersphere is evident here.

### **Tweeting strategies**

Journalists use Twitter to perform a variety of functions, and a number of researchers have attempted to categorise and analyse these functions. Vis (2013) developed a typology of Tweets used during a breaking story (the London riots in 2011). She focused on reporting, requests, statements, opinion/reaction and thanks. She also included links and retweets in this analysis. (Vis, 2013, pp. 41–42)

Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton developed a slightly wider range of functions, including discussing, personalising, opining, job talking, linking and retweeting. (D. L. Lasorsa et al., 2011, pp. 25–27)

These two approaches differ because the content under analysis differs, and the strategies used by journalists will alter according to circumstances. Live reporting of a breaking event is substantially different from the day to day activities of journalists, and so activities on Twitter may not be comparable. However, building on these analyses, a content analysis research instrument was developed to examine the reporting strategies of journalists covering the trial.

In developing the research instrument, both phases were taken into consideration, as well as traditional approaches to court reporting. A two-layer typology was developed: the first addressing the content of the Tweet, the second the tone.

The typology was as follows:

- Reporting (direct and indirect quotes) of words spoken in court (only words spoken by officials and those under oath at the time).
- Reporting on court proceedings (calling of witnesses, adjournments, and similar).
- Explanations of proceedings in court (explanations and comments on what is happening).
- Descriptions of proceedings in court (physical descriptions of witnesses and evidence).
- Observations and descriptions of events in court (this includes comments on the behaviour of observer and friends and family while not on the witness stand).
- Personal comments
- Conversations (discussions with other social media users)
- Irrelevant (any tweets on other subjects)
- Links and Retweets

The second layer of analysis addressed the tone of the tweet. The categories were:

- Professional/journalistic
- Opinion/comment
- Personal/humorous.

The corpus of tweets exceeds 75 000, so five dates were randomly selected, and two journalists randomly selected from each date, giving a total of ten days of reporting by different journalists, which were content analysed using the above instrument. This selected analysis covered 1250

Tweets by ten journalists over five days. The days selected were March 5<sup>th</sup>, March 12<sup>th</sup>, April 7<sup>th</sup>, April 14<sup>th</sup> and July 7<sup>th</sup>. Pistorius was on the stand on April 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, the other days included testimony by witnesses, experts and investigators. On all days selected proceedings ran for at least half the day, and users selected tweeted reasonably consistently throughout the day. The journalists chosen were:

Name	Handle	Type	Organisation	Medium	Scope
Barry Bateman	@barrybateman	Individual	<i>Eye Witness News</i>	Radio	National
Charl Du Plessis	@charlduplessc	Individual	<i>City Press</i>	Print	National
EWN Reporter	@ewnreporter	Organisation	<i>Eye Witness News</i>	Radio	National
Johannes Myburgh	@johannesmyburgh	Individual	<i>Associated Press</i>	Agency	Global
Karyn Maughan	@karynmaughan	Individual	eNews	Television	National
News24	@news24	Organisation	News24	Print	National
TMG Oscar	@oscarstriak	Organisation	Times Media Group	Print	National
Aislinn Laing	@simmoa	Individual	<i>Telegraph</i>	Print	Global
David Smith	@smithinafrica	Individual	<i>Guardian</i>	Print	Global
The New Age	@the_new_age	Organisation	<i>The New Age</i>	Print	National

This gave a good range of organisations, media and types of account. The journalists chosen all tweeted consistently throughout the proceedings, with an average of between 15 and 40 tweets per hour, while court was in session. The most prolific Tweeters were Barry Bateman and Aisling Laing (@simmoa), with the official news channels News24, Eye Witness News (@ewnreporter) and The New Age (@The\_New\_Age) also having a high volume. Johannes Myburgh (@johannesmyburgh) and David Smith (@smithinafrica) were less prolific overall: although that day in court was slightly shorter than the others, their average still remained lower than that of the more prolific Tweeters.

[Insert figure seven]

Tweet frequency varied across the day, with the most Tweets being sent as the most was happening in court. The chart below shows the frequency of tweets generated per user, with users being paired by day.

[Insert figure eight]

Tweets were identified as being Reporting, Court Proceedings, Descriptions, Explanations, Observation (collectively typified as “formal communication”), Personal comments, Conversations, Irrelevant and Links and Retweets (collected typified as “informal communication”). Formal communication outweighed informal communication at 80% of the content overall, with most users having at least 75% of the content formal.

The New Age and Johannes Myburgh were the outliers here, largely because of the high proportion of links and retweets included. It has already been noted that The New Age included

a large number of links (almost universally to their own news organisation), so this has skewed this coverage. Johannes Myburgh is discussed below.

*[Insert figure nine]*

Breaking the content down further, direct and indirect quotes from the stand and the bench accounted for 63% of the content overall, with most users devoting at least that amount to a stream of consciousness reporting of what they were hearing.

*[Insert figure ten]*

*Narrative and conversation*

Direct and indirect speech were used in equal measure, and users often abbreviated names and designations in order to save on characters. A typical construction of such a tweet would be either a brief sentence starting with the name of person speaking and an indirect speech reporting of the words that followed, or the name, followed by a colon, and then the quote (often without quotation marks to save on characters). The two pairs of Tweets below illustrate this<sup>1</sup>.

*[Insert figure eleven]*

This approach was widely used by all journalists, and a kind of conventional shorthand is apparent in the sentence construction and language used. Most journalists opted for a kind of stream-of-consciousness reportage of as much as possible of what could be taken down and transmitted, rather like public note-taking, but others took a more summative strategy. The two approaches can be seen contrasted below: <sup>2</sup>

*[Insert figure twelve]*

Where Smith<sup>3</sup> takes the strategy of reporting verbatim, or as close as possible to verbatim, each statement, Myburgh's approach is slower, summarising events at appropriate times. Throughout the day, the Twitter feed of the two reporters makes this apparent, with Myburgh summarising events in one tweet for every four to six of Smith's. Myburgh tweeted as much as Smith, but for every reporting Tweet he provides twice as many that are explanatory, observations on events, or conversations with other users. While Smith is producing a rapid-fire précis of what is being said; Myburgh discusses and comments on events, and participates in conversations.

In a sequence earlier in the same day, from 9:46am to 10:19am, during which a witness was cross-examined, demonstrates this clearly.

The narrative effect of Myburgh's feed is conversational and commentary based – he is less interested in noting the detail of what is said than he is in participating in a discussion about it, and speculating about its wider impact. Smith remains detached and professional throughout, reporting only the events as they unfold.

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<sup>1</sup> The timestamp on screenshots of Tweets reverts to US time when viewed on the web.

<sup>2</sup> Retweets are shown as original Tweets – although the metadata clearly marks it as a retweet, the source URL provided for the Tweet routes immediately to the original Tweet, with a tag indicating it was retweeted.

<sup>3</sup> David Smith changed his Twitter handle from @smithinafrica to @smithinamerica some time after the trial and before this paper was prepared.

*[Insert figure 13 – Note to editors, figure 13 can be cut into sections to display correctly]*

### *Description and observation*

Journalistic descriptions of events in court, including explanations of proceedings and descriptions of people and behaviour in court accounted for 17% of Tweets, with individual journalists varying between 6% (The New Age) and 24% (Aislinn Laing). These kinds of “colour” are important to journalists, and often make the difference between individual reports, when all journalists are covering the same event. However, important as colour is to a final report, it seemed to be considered less important by some journalists in the process of tweeting. Strategies for using colour varied.

Charl du Plessis of *City Press* and Barry Bateman from *Eye Witness News* (different reporters worked this account during the trial: although Barry Bateman was there for the whole trial, on some days he reported for EWN, and on others for himself) were in court the day that evidence was presented showing the damage to the door of the bathroom and the cricket bat. The key question was whether Pistorius was wearing his prosthetics at the time he broke down the door with the bat. The witness, Colonel Vermeulen, acted out various scenarios of hitting the door, standing and on his knees, to simulate the different scenarios.

This is described by the reporters in the room. Bateman takes the strategy of describing the scene is as much detail as he can, using successive tweets to construct a paragraph showing the scene:

*[Insert figure 14]*

Charl Du Plessis’s only comment on this setup was:

*[Insert figure 15]*

Later, during the same testimony, Bateman explains what is happening on the stand as Vermeulen is instructed to demonstrate possible angles of attack and damage to the door, with language that is clear and non-emotional.

*[Insert figure 16]*

Du Plessis describes these scenes, but interspersed with commentary and explanation

*[Insert figure 17]*

Aislinn Laing (@simmoa) similarly uses colour and commentary in her feed (24%), but the voice and style was even more informal, and she focuses a lot of attention on the Pistorius family. This is from April 7, when Pistorius started to testify:

*[Insert figure 18]*

Contrast *The New Age*, at the same time:

*[Insert figure 19]*

### *Conversation*

Aislinn Laing, Barry Bateman, Charl du Plessis and Johannes Myburgh all engaged in conversation with other Twitter users over the course of the day. The majority of this conversation was journalistic in tone, answering questions from the public about proceedings,

or responding to comments and speculation on what was happening. The conversation below, from Aislinn Laing is typical:

*[Insert figure 20]*

Barry Bateman was arguably the most recognised journalist at the trial, as he hosted the DSTV trial channel, and was a regular on national television commenting on events of the day. He received a considerable amount of commentary from the public, but responded rarely, as below:

*[Insert figure 21]*

*Tone*

Tone was classified as professional/journalistic, opinion, or personal. The overwhelming majority of Tweets were professional in tone, even when responding to comments. Twitter is often hailed as a place where the personal and professional mix (Zeller & Hermida, 2015, p. 113), but this is not evidenced here.

*[Insert figure 22]*

## **Analysis**

Twitter is increasingly normalised within the framework of journalistic practice, and most journalists today are expected to maintain professional presences on Twitter alongside their personal accounts. What one does with a Twitter account is not as rigidly defined by convention as other media are, and strategies and ideas are evolving as this practice becomes standard. By examining this corpus of tweets, a number of strategic approaches can be identified, viz, Promotional, Reportage and Interactive. These approaches align roughly with the differing functions of social media as they have evolved: social media as marketing tool, social media as publishing platform and social media as vehicle for social engagement as discussed in prior research by the author (Knight, 2012; Knight & Cook, 2013).

### *Promotional strategic approach*

Within the corpus, this approach is taken by the official accounts for Eye Witness News, News24 and The New Age, and to a lesser extent by Karen Maughan. This is typified by a very high use of hashtags, which allow an account to be easily found and followed by someone with an interest in a particular story, and a high proportion of links to their own content. In this approach, the Twitter account is viewed primarily as a means to tap into interest in the wider public, and drive traffic to the owners' website. The content available on the Twitter feed is less informative, and focused more on trailing and teasing stories that can be read on the main site. Content on this feed is likely to be produced by a changing team of reporters (as with Eye Witness News), and to follow specific structures and formats.

### *Reportage approach*

This approach is typified by a constant stream of updates, similar to the notes taken by a traditional court reporter. The content is descriptive and detailed, and attempts to be comprehensive. Interaction and links are minimal, and hashtags may or may not be used. As a result the feed itself becomes a play-by-play of events, and readers can easily follow the

proceedings, but little analysis or colour is attempted. This was the strategy followed by Barry Bateman and David Smith particularly.

### *Interactive approach*

The interactive approach is typified by a high level of responses and retweets, and a low level of direct reportage. This approach was only partially followed by any of the users in the corpus, but Aislinn Laing and Johannes Myburgh both followed this approach at least partially. 55% of Myburgh's feed was links, retweets, responses and personal commentary, and only 43% was reportage of any kind. Laing was more split in her approach, 69% of her content was reportage (although little was direct quote, 46% was colour and commentary), and 30% interactive.

The lack of commentary and opinion may be ascribed to traditional restrictions on reporting court proceedings that are often in effect in countries that follow English common law (the sub judice rule), but this does not hold up to analysis. Of the three British journalists present, only one followed this strategy (David Smith), while the other two, Aislinn Laing and Stephanie Findlay, did not. Barry Bateman was trained and has only worked in South Africa, where the sub judice rule is only weakly applied, but his feed is similarly descriptive narrative to Smith's.

### *Statistical analysis*

All users were then categorised on these three axes, for a result that identified their primary and secondary motives along an indexed scale. The scale was then measured by proportion and each user's main and secondary strategies were identified.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Outlet</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
Alex Crawford	Individual	Sky News	Broadcast	Global	reporter
Alex Eliseev	Individual	Eye Witness News	Broadcast	National	interactor
Barry Bateman	Individual	Eye Witness News	Broadcast	National	reporter
Andrew Harding	Individual	BBC	Broadcast	Global	reporter/promoter
Rebecca Davis	Individual	Daily Maverick	Print	National	interactore
Biënne Huisman	Individual	City Press	Print	National	promoter/interactor
Charl Du Plessis	Individual	City Press	Print	National	reporter
Debora Patta	Individual	Freelance	Broadcast	National	reporter
EWN Reporter	Organisation	Eye Witness News	Broadcast	National	reporter/interactor
Kate Forbes	Individual	BBC	Broadcast	Global	interactor/reporter
Khatija Nxedlana	Individual	East Coast Radio	Broadcast	Natonal	reporter
Jerome Starkey	Individual	Freelance/The Times	Print	Global	reporter/interactor
Johannes Myburgh	Individual	Associated Press	Print	Global	promoter/interactor

Theresa Taylor	Individual	The Star	Print	National	reporter/interactor/promoter
Karyn Maughan	Individual	eNews	Broadcast	National	reporter/promoter
News24	Organisation	News24	Print	National	promoter/reporter
TMG Oscar	Organisation	Times Media Group	Print	National	reporter/promoter
Phillip de Wet	Individual	Mail & Guardian	Print	National	interactor/promoter
Pretoria Rekord	Organisation	Pretoria Rekord	Print	National	promoter/reporter
Rohit Kachroo	Individual	ITN	Broadcast	Global	reporter
Aislinn Laing	Individual	Telegraph	Print	Global	reporter/promoter
Stephanie Findlay	Individual	Agence France Presse	Print	Global	interactor/reporter
David Smith	Individual	Guardian	Print	Global	reporter
The_New_Age	Organisation	The New Age	Print	National	promoter

Across the board, “reporter” was the most common strategy, with eighteen of the 24 accounts being either largely, or wholly in this vein. Thirteen accounts were “promoters” and only nine were “interactors”.

T-tests were conducted on all possible variables (gender, location, medium and account type) against the index of reportage, interaction and promotion. No significant variance was found across any of the variables.

## Conclusion

This study shows the development of standardised language and strategies in reporting on Twitter. As opposed to earlier studies (Hedman, 2015; D. Lasorsa, 2012; D. L. Lasorsa et al., 2011; Vis, 2013) which found greater variation in what journalists did (or thought they did) on social media, the narrow range of activity is significant here. The limited scope of the assignment, and the existence of a considerable tradition of practice in court reporting may be a factor in the development of these strategies, and there is ample scope for further study to examine this effect. Although the practice of journalists on social media is wide-ranging, some standards are emerging, amid tensions around what journalists “should” be doing, and what is acceptable and not. This study forms part of an ongoing investigation into emerging traditions of journalistic practice on new media.

Lasorsa (2012), did find gender significance in the posting of personal and transparent information on social media, but his focus was on a wide range of beats and subjects. He raises the possibility that the gender difference is due to the greater likelihood of women following softer beats, and that if this changed the gender difference might change. (2012, p. 413). The finding that with all reporters following the same story, there was no gender difference in reporting style is significant, and indicates that Lasorsa’s conjecture was correct.

The closed loop of conversation is also significant. The narrow range of voices present in the media, and the extent to which journalists speak primarily to each other, and not the wider public has been researched and commented for some years (Awad, 2006; Kothari, 2010; Lariscy



et al., 2009; Sigal, 1999). This study shows that new technologies have not changed this significantly, and that social media is not expanding the community with access to the media.

This study highlights that we are in the beginning phase of the development of standardised strategies and styles for social media: from the wide ranging possibilities of the early days, Twitter is coalescing into a particular kind of tool for particular kinds of journalism. This is in keeping with the development of news in other media as well, which evolved into the standardised forms and language that came to be accepted as “traditional” for the medium. (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Briggs, 2001)

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## Captions

*Figure one: Average tweets per day during the phases of the trial.*

*Figure two: Total tweets per day for six indicative users.*

*Figure three: Use of hashtags as a percentage of Tweets. Karyn Maughan's feed has been altered to include mentions of @eNCAnews*

*Figure four: use of replies, retweets and mentions as a percentage of all tweets. Karyn Maughan's feed has been altered to exclude mentions of @eNCAnews*

*Figure five: Subject of images posted to Twitter on March 3<sup>rd</sup> and April 8<sup>th</sup> 2014*

*Figure six: target of links included by journalists.*

*Figure seven: Total tweets per day examined.*

*Figure eight: Total tweets per day examined. The Timestamp is Universal time, two hours earlier than local time in South Africa. Lunch and tea breaks can clearly be seen in the data.*

*Figure nine: formal and informal communication in tweets.*

*Figure ten: content of Tweets.*

*Figure eleven: Tweets showing styles of abbreviation and reportage.*

*Figure twelve: Tweets from Johannes Myburgh (left) and David Smith (right) showing the relative detail and length of reportage between the two journalists.*

*Figure thirteen: Tweets from David Smith (left) and Johannes Myburgh (right) showing the use of conversational discourse by Myburgh, as opposed to straight reporting by Smith. Tweets in Myburgh's timeline that are greyed out are comments by other users that he retweeted or responded to.*

*Figure fourteen: Tweets from EWN, with detailed descriptions of the courtroom scene.*

*Figure fifteen: Charl Du Plessis's only post on the same scene*

*Figure sixteen: EWN's explanation of events*

*Figure seventeen: Du Plessis's commentary on the same event*

*Figure eighteen: Laing's commentary on the whole courtroom scene.*

*Figure nineteen: The New Age's summing up.*

*Figure twenty: Conversational discourse between journalist Aislinn Laing and public.*

*Figure twenty-one: Conversational discourse between journalist Barry Bateman and public.*

*Figure twenty-two: tone of tweets.*

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<sup>i</sup> Although Johannesburg and Pretoria are separate metropolises, they are close together, and the trial venue was easily accessible for anyone based in Johannesburg.

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<sup>ii</sup> A large number of news organisations had journalists at the initial opening of the trial, and an even larger number had journalists assigned to watch the proceedings on television and report from there. It was never completely clear where journalists were, so accounts were filtered for comments and images that indicated actual presence in the courtroom. This may have slightly altered the journalists selected, since those more likely to post personal asides about the experience would be more easily identified and being present in the courtroom. However a number of journalists were identified through being mentioned by others in the room, which mitigates against this somewhat.

<sup>iii</sup> Clarifying and identifying the main medium of the news organisations is a problematic area, since most news organisations are now multimedia in function. This was done largely in order to identify whether the reporting strategies of the journalist concerned altered in accordance with the traditions of the format with which they were allied.

<sup>iv</sup> Although analysing reporting strategies across different language groups would be fascinating, it is well beyond the scope of this paper. Leaving aside potential language difficulties, the cultural and sociological issues that pertain to news coverage in other language groups makes cross-language analysis problematic.