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Searching for “Tweethenticity”: Television, Tweets, and the Impression of Reality at the 2012 Daytona 500

Abstract

This paper uses the case study of the sensation around NASCAR driver Brad Keselowski’s tweets from the 2012 Daytona 500 to explore why Twitter is so popular among both fans and producers of popular culture, arguing that the social networking site offers the impression of a more “authentic” or “real” experience than what is available through the consumption of traditional media outlets. Over two hours Keselowski sent out a barrage of tweets, and gave fans access to the insights of an athlete in the middle of one of the biggest sporting events on the calendar. The desire for such direct information from an athlete speaks to a need for a more “real experience” in sports media. This “tweethenticity”, or authenticity through Twitter, may be elusive or theoretically impossible depending on the realist theories to which one subscribes, but it is the desire for “tweethenticity” that is important. Building on realist theories ranging from Plato to Bazin to Baudry, this paper explains how the perceived realism of Twitter can be both a blessing and a curse for sports leagues and their broadcast partners.

Fans of popular culture in the dark ages before the internet were left to wonder what their favorite stars were thinking about on a day-to-day basis. Fans could creatively imagine scenarios where co-stars were romancing or feuding during commercial breaks or summer hiatuses as they waited patiently for a weekly gossip magazine to provide a more polished, but scarcely more fact-based account of the goings-on of the rich and famous. With the advent of the internet allowing for instantaneous dissemination of information, coupled with social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, fans of popular culture are now given access to status updates from many of their favorite celebrities, or at least their publicists. In the world of sports and sports media, this change has made it possible for athletes to gripe to their fan base about their current contract negotiations, or apologize for making insensitive comments about breastfeeding. In turn, fans get the sense of a more intimate, more “real” connection with sports stars they normally only see from the distance of a television screen or distant arena seat. This paper will use a case study from NASCAR stock car racing to explore why Twitter is so popular among both fans and producers of popular culture. The social networking site offers the impression of a more “authentic” or “real” experience than what is available through the consumption of more traditional media outlets, and the implications of such loaded concepts are examined through the lens of classic film theories of realism and performance.

The 2012 Daytona 500, NASCAR’s showcase event, was forced to take a major delay in the race when a car collided with jet-dryer truck, causing a massive explosion that damaged a large section of the track. With the race already running a day late due to inclement weather, NASCAR and its partners were desperate to resume racing that night, which meant the drivers, crew, and the audience would have to wait while the track was repaired. One driver, Brad Keselowski, had his cell phone in the pocket of his fire suit, and saw this as an opportunity to fire off some tweets to
his fans. Drivers were not permitted to use phones during a race, but Keselowski kept his in case of an emergency and this seemed like an exceptional circumstance. Over the next two hours Keselowski sent out a barrage of tweets, and gave fans access to the insights of an athlete in the middle of one of the biggest sporting events on the calendar. By the following morning he had gained 150,000 followers and was sharing headlines with race-winner Matt Kenseth. It was deemed a watershed moment for NASCAR’s social media presence, but also for social media and sports, in general. What made Keselowski’s tweets so exciting to so many thousands of race fans lies in the connection to “the real” that Andre Bazin famously saw as the source of the importance of cinema. Bazin wrote that cinema is “change mummified,” capturing the reality of movement for eternity. Keselowski’s use of Twitter, while only occasionally photographic, did provide fans with the preserved remains of the athlete’s direct perspective from the arena floor in real time. This case study shows that the key value of social media in connection to participants of other forms of media is its ability to give the audience a feeling of a direct connection to the “real” experiences of the previously untouchable talent being watched.

What is Real?

Anyone with a basic understanding of film theory or philosophy would immediately raise a red flag over a term as loaded as “real” or “authentic”. Our conception of what is “real” has been debated for millennia, and within the academic world of film and media studies, the belief that media can ever capture some sort of objective truth is generally considered a naïve and outdated understanding of media production and consumption. But to say that media is inherently subjective does not necessarily make it less “real”, especially if we understand that all human interaction is to some degree socially constructed and performative. In order to argue that the excitement around celebrity tweets such as those made by Brad Keselowski at the 2012 Daytona 500 is based in a desire for a “real” or “authentic” interaction with the objects of our fandom, it is necessary to step back and review some of the key sources of realist theory so that we might salvage these terms for use in contemporary media theory.

Andre Bazin, the foremost proponent of realism in motion pictures, argued that “cinema is objectivity in time.” Whereas still photography had surpassed the plastic arts in its ability to capture images, cinema took that next step of capturing physical movement, allowing the filmmaker to “mummify” an action for eternity.

Bazin has been criticized for overlooking the subjective influence of the filmmaker in the supposed objective capture of reality on film. These critics oversimplify Bazin, however, who was very aware that film could still be a subjective art form. In the same foundational essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” where he writes of “objectivity in time”, Bazin goes on to state that cinema can be surrealist in that it “produces an image that is a reality of nature, namely an hallucination that is also a fact.” The filmed moment is actually happening in front of the camera, but is also being interpreted by the artist controlling the camera. In a television landscape of science fiction fantasies and cartoon oddities, live sports broadcasts are among the least surreal programs available on the small screen. The need for most spectators to experience these events live on television in the age of the DVR has made sports programming extremely valuable to networks. Yet, there remains a distance between the audience and the athlete performers who are separated by this medium of television; a distance that the power of live images cannot overcome. Though one can link still or moving images to a tweet, Twitter is primarily a written medium, but when combined with cinematic media like television it can provide supplementary information to enhance the audience experience. The desire for such direct information speaks to a need for a more “real experience.” This “tweethenticity”, or authenticity through Twitter, may be elusive or theoretically impossible depending on the realist theories to which one subscribes, but it is the desire for “tweethenticity” that is important.

When Plato spoke of his allegory of the cave back in the fourth century BC, he likened unenlightened humanity to prisoners forced to experience life through the shadows of objects. In
this allegory, the philosopher is a freed man able to turn and observe the sources of the shadows on the cave’s walls.\textsuperscript{12} It is important to understand, however, that Plato was not claiming the objects projecting shadows were real because of their corporeality, but because of their ability to, “affect other things and be affected by them.”\textsuperscript{13} According to RW Sharples, “The Stoics and Epicureans stood this argument on its head, arguing that since only what is bodily \textit{can} have any effects, everything that does so—soul included—must be regarded as corporeal.”\textsuperscript{14} These philosophical debates can be seen through Twitter if one ponders whether a tweet is real because it exists on our phone or computer, or because it was produced by a human being with free will. Can we adapt Descartes’ famous phrase to say, “I tweet, therefore I am?” The concept that “real people” create tweets is not really being debated, though. We understand that somebody has physically typed the words we read on our Twitter feed, but the larger issue is who specifically is tweeting (celebrity or handler) and does their subjectivity affect our understanding of their messages as real?

Plato’s cave is not unlike a movie screen, and an audience believing they are watching “real life” would be considered naïve by the enlightened film scholar/philosopher, who knows these images are merely projections of real Forms. Jean-Louis Baudry, in his seminal piece “The Apparatus,” made this connection between Plato’s cave and the exhibiting apparatus of cinema.\textsuperscript{15} For Baudry, the cinematic apparatus allows the spectator to experience a dreamlike state: “an apparatus capable precisely of fabricating an impression of reality.”\textsuperscript{16} He sees our need as spectators to make and participate in the apparatus as a “desire for a real that would have the status of hallucination or of a representation taken for a perception,” but then Baudry takes it a step further and also argues that the spectator “is led to produce mechanisms mimicking, simulating the apparatus which is no other than himself.”\textsuperscript{17} If the cinematic apparatus is mimicking our unconscious desires, then our minds are also functioning as such an apparatus. Baudry believes that we watch films because we desire an “impression of reality.” Tweets, in conjunction with a visual medium such as a televised sporting event, further supplement this desire. We want the performers on screen to exist in some way as our avatars, fulfilling our desires, and so we look to a social networking site like Twitter to provide some confirmation of the mental process of our heroes. The excitement of Brad Keselowski tweeting in the middle of a race is that we normally only experience such insight through the mediated lens of the television broadcast. A television sports broadcast is filmed by multiple camera operators, and overseen by a director and multiple producers who are considering the opinions of both the network and their corporate advertisers, which means many points of view factor into the sounds and images that make their way to the home viewer. If we make the logical leap that Twitter is a less-mediated, and therefore more real expression because it is usually one person distributing information through their personal phone or computer, then we as spectators are fulfilling our desire for a real interaction with the dream world of the cinematic apparatus.

Before moving on from the theoretical background of realist debates, it is important to understand how theories of performance and identity construction relate to the realism of Twitter. Richard Dyer’s work on celebrity and star performance is of particular relevance here. Dyer writes, “Performance is defined as what the performer does, and whether s/he, the director, or some other person is authorially responsible for this is a different question altogether.”\textsuperscript{18} For Dyer, a film star is a semiotic construction that may or may not be formed by the performer her/himself. He explains, “If an actor is responsible only for acting but is not involved in any of the artistic decisions of film-making, then it is accurate surely to refer to the actor as a semi-passive icon.”\textsuperscript{19} To some degree we all perform our identities and the people with whom we interact receive our personas in their own subjective ways.\textsuperscript{20} Twitter is a place where stars and non-celebrities can present their musings to a potentially large audience. It is important to acknowledge that even in such a form where, unlike major Hollywood films, there is a direct link between media producer and consumer, one is still performing the identity one wants the world to see. Dyer says “any voice can only be returned to its author as the point of decision making in production, not that of unmediated expressivity.”\textsuperscript{21} The outward projection of our selves is always in
some way mediated by social influences and cues that affect both the production of our own identity and its reception by others. As we consider the realist value of tweets, it can be easy to dismiss this form of communication as “inauthentic” because it is an inherently performative voice being projected to the unseen masses. But as Dyer reminds us, all communication functions through performance and negotiations with social influences.

What Do We Know About Twitter?

Before returning to the specificity of this case study, there has been a great deal of academic work done on Twitter in the relatively short time since the service’s inception, and the most relevant of these need to be highlighted. Lucy Bennett has been researching Twitter and music fan cultures. In her work on Lady Gaga and her fans, Bennett argued that Gaga’s Twitter communiqués “seemed to encourage, for some fans, strong feelings of inclusion and value, despite their placement as one among potentially millions of followers.”

Bennett, along with Nancy Baym, have shown that fans feel a deep personal connection to musicians they follow on Twitter, something that can also be seen in the reaction to Brad Keselowski’s Daytona 500 tweets.

In their study of celebrity practice through Twitter, Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd discuss how Twitter gives fans the impression of intimacy with celebrities because of similarities to interactions fans might have with each other. They write, “The fan’s ability to engage in discussion with a famous person de-pathologizes the parasocial and recontextualizes it within a medium that the follower may use to talk to real-life acquaintances.”

Marwick and Boyd go on to argue that while the Twitter feeds of some celebrities are overly managed promotional advertisement tools, the most successful celebrity Twitter accounts offer at least the impression of “intimacy, disclosure, and connection.”

According to Marwick and Boyd, those celebrities that are most successful in performing authenticity through Twitter create passionate connections with their fan base.

In an earlier study, Marwick and Boyd examined the use of Twitter as a communication device directed towards an “imagined audience.” They describe the “imagined audience” of Twitter as a “networked audience” which functions as part of a “many-to-many” model of communication. According to Marwick and Boyd, who were in turn building on other communication theories, a networked audience “consists of real and potential viewers for digital content that exist within a larger social graph. These viewers are connected not only to the user, but to each other, creating an active communicative network.” They describe how Twitter allows for interactions between celebrities and fans, which can provide a sense of intimacy, but also, because of concerns over privacy, are simultaneously inherently guarded. This duality defines the interaction Twitter users have with their audience: “In combining public-facing and interpersonal interaction, the networked audience creates new opportunities for connection, as well as new tensions and conflicts.”

Unmediated interpersonal intimacy carries both opportunities and conflicts, and Twitter, as a mediated form of this communication is no different.

Megan M. Wood and Linda Baughman’s article “Glee Fandom and Twitter: Something New, or More of the Same Old Thing?” is an interesting contrast as they look at fan-made Twitter accounts posing as characters from the television show Glee. Wood and Baughman contextualize this fan production within the long history of fan fiction that has run parallel to popular culture since its inception. As their title suggests, Wood and Baughman view the phenomenon of Twitter fan fiction as both following frameworks we have seen with past examples of fan production, and also breaking traditional molds through the unique aspects of the social media platform. They write, “Fans actively and by choice engage a text in play—yet the tools they are using and the texts they are playing with require a set of rules much more stringent than traditional fan fiction.”

Fans creating along in real time with broadcast television have to stay within the boundaries created by the source broadcast in order to give the impression of credibility. In relation to questions of realism and fan interaction, Wood and Baughman’s study provides evidence that even overtly fictionalized communication on Twitter demands a certain sense of realism. The audience consuming and
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participating in Glee character accounts expect these accounts to conform to the boundaries of the fictional reality established by the show. This reveals the same desire for “authenticity” that we also see in the Daytona 500 tweets of Brad Keselowski.

Though there has yet to be a wealth of study on the relationship between social networking sites like Twitter and sports media, an important article by Myles McNutt on fan reaction to NBC’s coverage of the 2012 Olympic Games in London is particularly relevant to the questions raised here. NBC made the business decision to show the Olympics on tape-delay to allow the major events to be shown on prime-time television in the United States instead of live early in the morning when the games were actually happening in London. This meant that much of the audience already knew the results of the games because of news sites on the internet. Many Twitter users began to use the organizing hash tag #NBCFail in their rants about the perceived failures of the broadcast. A hash tag, a word preceded by # on Twitter, allows other users to search topics by clicking on the hash tag, so anyone interested in reading about more #NBCFail could simply click on the hash tag in another user’s tweet. McNutt argues against the perception of users of #NBCFail as simply an angry mob, saying their outcry “is reflective of the way social media discourse has the potential to influence how we understand television.” McNutt’s article speaks to the frustration of sports fans regarding any sense of contrivance around sporting events. Networks pay top dollar to broadcast live sporting events because the “live”, or “real”, aspect of the events is so highly valued by the audience. NBC symbolically “failed” a virtually vocal segment of their audience by delaying the broadcast of the London Olympics. Twitter was an outlet to vent this frustration, but its public visibility as a popular medium in its own right also allowed its users to challenge the powers of broadcast television. The intense desire for realism in sports and the public platform afforded by Twitter are key takeaways from McNutt’s piece and inform the realism of Keselowski’s Daytona 500 tweets.

The Daytona 500 Tweets Of Brad Keselowski

When Brad Keselowski tweeted from inside his parked racecar during an extended caution period of the 2012 Daytona 500 it created a social media sensation. The relatively little-known driver went from having 60,000 followers on Twitter to over 200,000 in twenty-four hours. ESPN.com’s Bill Speros called it “among the greatest moments in social media history.” Outside of surveying the 150,000 followers who joined onto Keselowski’s feed that night, it would be difficult to pinpoint exact reasons for the excitement his tweets generated. That said, it would be reasonable to infer that his tweets were offering a perspective that FOX’s television broadcast could not. What was unique about Keselowski’s tweets in relation to the TV broadcast was the sense of realism, the “tweethenticity,” that made this communication compelling.

Brad Keselowski’s first tweet after the red flag halted racing at the Daytona 500 because of an explosion, was a picture from his driver’s seat captioned, “Fire! My view.” (see Figure 1)

The fire itself is barely visible in the distance, but the fact that a driver was tweeting this to his followers in the middle of a race was a development that had not been seen before. For those unaware, the photo out of context even gave the impression that Keselowski had taken the picture while driving. Twitter user Clay Travis (@ClayTravisBGID) replied “Tweeting from inside cars. What could possibly go wrong?” Tom Jolly (@TomJolly) commented, “texting & driving after a crash,” and ESPN’s Dana O’Neil (@ESPNDanaOneil) added,
When asked by ESPN reporter Darren Rovell if he was tweeting from inside his car, Keselowski tweeted back “Yup At least I’m not in the port-a-Jon :).” What these tweets may lack in terms of contemplative analysis is transcended by the “impression of reality” provided by this athlete offering up his real-time responses during a major sporting event. Keselowski was not making a Foucauldian analysis of the panopticon of international sports media, but his personal live observations and wise cracks were revealing a new opportunity for communication between athletes and fans. The immediacy of Twitter and the perception of on-screen reality as delivered by the FOX TV cameras, which showed Keselowski alone on his phone, allowed fans to rightly believe that they were communicating mid-event with a star athlete. And while the content of his tweets leaned towards the mundane, their authenticity, particularly in a moment when the television broadcast was struggling to produce content to entertain its audience, made them compelling.

As the repair crews finished their work and it became clear that racing would begin again soon, Keselowski tweeted one more picture (see Figure 3).

He put his smartphone back in his pocket and climbed back into his Dodge stock car. He did not have to wait long to tweet again, as he wrecked his car in an accident shortly after the green flag dropped to resume racing. After safely returning to the garage he tweeted, “Nothing we could do there… Never saw the wreck til we were windshield

“Shouldn’t he get a ticket for that?”

While some of the fervor around Keselowski’s picture may have been through misunderstanding that he was driving when actually parked, and in fact did not start racing again for over two hours, the majority of those commenting on Keselowski’s tweet were simply amazed that a driver was taking this as an opportunity to engage with social media. Many shared the sentiment of Marcus Dittmer (@mditt), who wrote, “I think this defines giving fans inside access – def a driver that gets it.” While FOX was showing replays of the crash, footage of the lengthy cleanup, and eventually even the metacoverage of Keselowski’s social media presence, Keselowski himself was giving race fans the direct expressions of one of the drivers on the track. His photograph not only mummified change in the Bazinian sense, but the tweet itself, with its text and timestamp and hyperlinks, is also a mummification of an important moment in social media history. Particularly as more and more time has passed since that night in February 2012, the tweet holds the resonance of a dramatic moment captured for eternity; its significance stemming primarily from its first-person, performing subject stance, and its relatively intimate distribution through the same channels that one could receive an image of their niece’s birthday party.

As users responded to Brad Keselowski’s tweets, he began to reply to them, forming conversations with his fan base. Twitter follower Anna (@mest_girl99) asked, “Any of the other drivers tweeting?” Keselowski wrote back, “Nope they all think I’m crazy. ESP this guy,” attaching a picture he took of veteran driver Jeff Burton (see Figure 2).
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deep. #DAYTONA500. The race itself may not have been particularly memorable for Brad Keselowski or his fans, but his engagement with his “networked audience” through Twitter that night was a transcendent event that brought himself and NASCAR new levels of media attention.

In the days following the 2012 Daytona 500 Brad Keselowski’s tweets were as much the topic of discussion as the jet-dryer explosion and Matt Kenseth’s victory. NASCAR made an official announcement the day after the race was completed that drivers would be permitted to keep phones in their pockets, but that drivers could not use them during a race. Keselowski had been keeping a phone on his person since a scary wreck in August 2011 when he was airlifted to a hospital and had no means of contacting his family to let them know he was conscious. The popularity of Brad Keselowski’s Daytona 500 tweets called attention to the powerful ways modern cellular phones could be used for much more than contacting loved ones. David Higdon, managing director of integrated marketing communications for NASCAR said following the race, “It shows the wide impact of the Daytona 500 and its fan base. We’re in a major stretch with social media that’s blowing up. Our TV partners get it. Our athletes get it. We don’t want to be trailing. We want to be leaders in this.” NASCAR was well aware that Twitter could be a valuable marketing tool because the excitement of “tweethenticity” was drawing new fans to the sport.

It did not take NASCAR long to change its tune regarding the embrace of in-race social media. In November 2012, less than nine months after that landmark evening in Daytona Beach, NASCAR fined Brad Keselowski $25,000 for tweeting during a red flag caution at the Sprint Cup race in Phoenix. The erasure of the previous nine months of relative smartphone freedom was strange, but it was clear that NASCAR had become concerned. The potential realism offered by “networked audience” communication during races was trumped by the collapse of realism that could potentially befall the sport if its drivers were allowed to use smartphones to manipulate races through speedometers or manipulation of electronic fuel injection. Ultimately, the realism of the sport itself was far more valuable to NASCAR officials than the realism fans may occasionally experience through social media.

Conclusion

Our perception of reality is subjective, and mediated realities, in particular, are constructions of multiple subjectivities. The social-networking site Twitter, when used in conjunction with the broadcast medium of television, can offer a sense of authentic communication between content producers and consumers. This impression of “tweethenticity” allows fans to feel a deeper connection to the program they are watching and its stars by reading the observations and occasional direct messages of the celebrities that television traditionally distances us from. Brad Keselowski’s tweets from track of the Daytona 500 were an internet sensation because they gave fans the rare opportunity to both hear directly from an athlete in mid-competition and converse with him.

Live sports broadcasts, a medium already considered among the “realest” forms of programming to be found on television, are still highly produced affairs that use cutting edge technology to provide images fans could never see from an arena seat, but simultaneously lack the intimacy of experiencing an event in person. This lack of intimacy is inherent to media, which by definition is standing between the audience and the production. Twitter, in the hands of athletes on the playing field, offers the potential to reach sports fans in a more direct manner. This communication, while still mediated, now assumes the guise of the text messages people are used to sharing with friends and family.

“Tweethenticity” stems from the perceived collapse of the boundaries between personal friends and celebrities one follows on Twitter. Surely few believe they have the same relationship with Lady Gaga as they do with their Aunt Rita, but simply the fact that they can all potentially communicate on the same level creates this feeling of “tweethenticity” in receiving a “real” message that humanizes the normally abstract celebrity. While television networks and sports leagues have readily embraced Twitter as a new marketing avenue, it appears unlikely that there will be another “in-game” tweet like Brad Keselowski’s
any time soon. Leagues are happy to use social media as a sales tool outside of the arena, but when “tweetehenticity” threatens the authenticity of the games being played, there is no doubt which would be sacrificed. Despite the pleasure fans may experience from interacting more directly with star athletes, if, through the breaking of the fourth wall on Twitter, fans were to believe the games they watched were a constructed artifice it would truly be game over.

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Notes
8 Ibid, 14.
10 Bazin, 16.
12 Plato, Republic, 7.514.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid, 187.
17 Ibid, 188.
19 Ibid, 483.
21 Dyer, 484.
25 Ibid, 149.
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27 Ibid, 129.
28 Ibid, 130.
30 Ibid, 341.
32 Ibid, 126.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Pockrass.
43 Ibid.
44 Speros.