Questions & Answers & Tweets

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Abstract
This article reports on the integration of Twitter messages into the live television broadcast of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) weekly public affairs discussion program, Q&A. The program first went to air in May 2008; Twitter integration began two years later. Twitter integration is an evolving example of 'participation television', but not one that involves the kind of remote-control/set-top-box interactivity that digital television promised. Q&A integrates broadcast and online content in a way the program makers thought would serve the animating purpose of the television program: to increase public engagement in politics. It is an attempt to use the internet to make television better rather than to concede its eclipse, by marrying brief fragments of online speech with the one-way, single-channel authority of a television program broadcast live across a nation by a public service broadcaster. The research draws on data about Twitter use supplied by the ABC and its contractor TweeVee TV, OzTAM television ratings data, interviews and email correspondence with ABC staff and others conducted by the two authors between June and October 2011, and observations on the making of the episode of the show in Sydney on 29 May 2011.

Keywords: digital television, public service broadcasting, social media, television, Twitter

Here’s what we’ll be looking for as we dip into the #QandA stream—

- tweets that are concise (short), timely and on topic
- tweets that are witty and entertaining
- tweets that add a fresh perspective to the debate
- tweets that make a point without getting too personal

(ABC 2011a)

Introduction
In May 2010, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) began to display Twitter ‘tweets’ on-screen in the broadcast of the hour-long, weekly current affairs discussion program, Q&A. In each hour-long episode, around 80–100 tweets using the hashtag #qanda are selected for display in the broadcast program. Q&A began in 2008 and is now transmitted live at 9.35 pm on Monday nights. It started out calling itself ‘Democracy in Action’, later adapted to ‘Adventures in Democracy’. Presenter Tony Jones coordinates a studio audience and a panel of five...
or six guests, generally including two politicians from different major parties. Questions come from the studio audience (pre-selected or spontaneous), from online submissions (emails, tweets and video questions) and from Jones (generally follow-ups). Answers come from the panelists. The show has been described as ‘an ABC success story’ (Simper 2010) and ‘a must-watch for political junkies’ (Meade 2010).

In early September 2011, the ABC had registered 46,000 people in a database, ready to be contacted to join the studio audience (Amanda Collinge, email, 5 September 2011). Launching with the slogan ‘The show where you ask the questions’, Q&A has acquired another tagline from Jones’ response to questions that require or deserve no answers: ‘I’ll take that as a comment.’

This article reports on a short investigation of the show’s relatively young experiment in ‘Twitter integration’ or ‘broadcast integration’ (we will use the former term). The research draws on data about Twitter use supplied by the ABC and its contractor TweeVee TV, OzTAM television ratings data, interviews and email correspondence with ABC staff and others conducted by the two authors between June and October 2011, and observations on the making of the episode of the show in Sydney on 29 May 2011. The purpose of the research was to document and understand the background to the decision to introduce Twitter integration; the way the moderation system works; the responses, impacts and adaptations; and ways it might be further developed.

Twitter integration is an evolving example of ‘participation television’, but not one that involves the kind of remote-control/set-top-box interactivity that digital television promised. Q&A integrates broadcast and online content in a way the program makers thought would contribute to the animating purpose of the television program: to increase engagement in politics. It is an attempt to use the internet to make television better rather than to concede its eclipse, by marrying brief fragments of online speech with the one-way, single-channel authority of a television program broadcast live across a nation by a public service broadcaster.

**Active television—the promise of digital transmission**

Introducing digital transmission in the late 1990s and early 2000s provided new impetus for an old idea: that audiences could engage more actively with the makers of broadcast television and other media, especially about information and politics. New media technologies and forms might stimulate new kinds of interaction and political participation.

In the early 18th century when journals like *The Spectator* and *The Tatler* were being established in London, bookseller John Dunton founded *The Athenian Mercury* to resolve ‘all the most nice [precise] and curious questions proposed by the ingenious’ (quoted in Briggs & Burke 2005, p. 59). It answered about 6000 reader questions in the six years it survived (Briggs & Burke 2005, p. 59; and see Griffen-Foley 2004). On radio, *America’s Town Meeting of the Air* was one of NBC’s answers to the demand for public service programming expressed in the 1934 Communications Act. It ran on the NBC Blue Network and then on ABC from 1935 until 1956. Broadcast live in front of an audience of around 1500 people at the Town Hall on New York’s 43rd Street (later touring outside New York), the show began with prepared statements from a small number of experts. It ended with a
question time comprising audience questions of less than 25 words, submitted in advance. The program provided an

... unprecedented sense of a national public sphere ... [and fulfilled] ... some of the cultural and civic promise of radio while also providing an edge-of-the-seat tension ... as it flirted with the danger of national broadcast of live comment from ordinary people.

(Goodman 2007, p. 48).

Television was sometimes asked to deliver more participatory forms, initially in the institutional structures proposed for its deployment. The ones chosen, however, generally replicated the public and corporate models that radio had settled into. In the 1970s and 80s, extra frequencies were allocated for new public service channels, like Channel 4 in the UK and SBS in Australia, and community and public interest channels were established (see Nolan & Radywyl 2004). In part, these aimed to provide spaces for television’s previously unseen, unheard audiences, and new ways of engaging them in producing, presenting and distributing programs, though they fell well short of more radical models of participatory television (see, for example, Groombridge 1972).

Digital television transmission, contemplated from the late 1980s, offered at least the technical possibility of increased levels of interaction between viewers and broadcasters. A more participatory politics, however, was never central to its promise. Interaction was about the navigational efficiency of electronic program guides, the commerce of targeted advertising and the convenience of take-away ordered from the couch. Even these applications struggled to find a place in the technical and business plans of many terrestrial broadcasters more interested in securing long-term access to spectrum than in transforming their business models or relationships with audiences.

By making incumbent broadcasters the main engines of digital terrestrial television in countries where public service broadcasters were still major players in the television landscape, some public aspirations were imported into free-to-air television’s digital future. Governments needed the public service broadcasters to make digital transmission work so that analogue television could be shut down and valuable spectrum reallocated. Public service broadcasters found the promised capabilities of digital transmission technology—multiple channels, flexible use of transmission capacity and new forms of audience engagement—matched their missions more closely than advertiser-funded broadcasters hooked on the rates they could charge advertisers for one-way exposure to large aggregations of viewers.

Interactivity seemed to suit the times and the technology. A representative of Australia’s largest ISP at the time, OzEmail, told a Parliamentary committee in 1998 that Australia should create ‘a pioneer situation in this country in developing interactive services which are transmitted through the broadcast spectrum’ (Ward in Environment, Recreation, Communications and the Arts Legislation Committee 1998). Just as multichannel television and multiple sets in households had helped television connect with increasingly fragmented societies, interactive digital media allowed the restless citizen consumers of the 21st century to demand more of their
retailers, their educators and their politicians, and to talk back more persistently than talkback radio and studio television debates allowed.

While never merely passive recipients of television’s account of political reality, audiences are increasingly becoming active participants in public communication, as senders as well as addressees of mass-circulating messages … media producers can no longer expect to operate in an exclusive, professionalized enclave. Media audiences are now able to intervene in political stories with a degree of effectiveness that would have been unthinkable 10 or 20 years ago.

(Gurevitch, Coleman & Blumler 2009, pp. 167–8)

Interactivity, argue Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 171),

… is neither an add-on nor a novelty but an innate property of digital media …

Television is the quintessential broadcast medium: it transmits messages to a mass audience expected to receive or reject what is offered ... The digital text is never complete … In the context of political communication, this has entailed a profound shift in the process of message circulation. … In the era of digital interactivity, the production of political messages and images is much more vulnerable to disruption at the point of reception.

But the particular technology of digital terrestrial television did not work very well for interactivity. Personal digital video recorders were resisted; electronic program guides were not always comprehensive or intuitive; Red Button interactivity was deployed by some broadcasters, in some places, at some times. Genuine interaction, conversation, participation, one-to-one or one-to-many, enabled by a terrestrially fed digital set-top box, struggled. The systems deployed felt clunky alongside other, faster-growing models of digital interaction: online and SMS.

A year after digital television commenced in Australia, Fiona Martin argued, online media were already playing a vital role at the ABC, allowing users the chance 'to conquer the ephemerality and time-boundedness of broadcast’ (2002, p. 48). Highlighting the significant constraints on the ‘discursive contribution of audiences’ (Martin 2002, p. 46) to established broadcast forms like talkback radio and studio television debates, she said online services had proved ‘a useful technological staging post to trial digital interactive TV and broadband delivery of programs’ (2002, p. 49). Narrowly anticipating the BBC’s Greg Dyke, Martin suggested 'To the common PSB mantra of "inform, educate and entertain" we might now add involve and connect’ (2002, p. 57). But rather than viewing online simply as a better platform for public service broadcasters’ missions than television and radio, Martin thought it was ‘the synergies between broadcasting and online which should be highlighted in current debates about the role of PSB in evolving, pluralist and globally connected national democracies’ (2002, p. 57).

This was inspiring but not easy for publicly funded, public service broadcasters, bound to strict notions of 'editorial standards'. Explaining the ABC's 2009 introduction of a new category of 'user-generated content' in its editorial guidelines (alongside news and current affairs; opinion; topical and factual; and performance),
ABC Digital Radio’s Tony Walker later stated that ‘making space on its platforms for the creative endeavours of its users results in something of an institutional dilemma for the ABC’ (Walker 2009, p. 43.3). Participatory possibilities, Walker said, ‘if not properly managed, could be inimical to the trusted role the ABC plays as a national public broadcaster’ (2009, p. 43.3).

A central question when considering these matters is … whether it is possible to provide truly decentralised, participatory, audience-led platforms and at the same time control the quality of content produced on them to the extent that such content needs to conform to the ABC’s editorial standards.

(Walker 2009, p. 43.2).

**Active politics—the promise of Q&A**

Q&A was first broadcast on Thursday 22 May 2008 on the ABC’s main television channel, now known as ABC1. It effectively replaced a studio discussion program, *Difference of Opinion*, broadcast in 2007.

Q&A’s executive producer, Peter McEvoy, spent three months in 2007 at the Reuters Institute in Oxford looking at how public broadcasters could develop systems to promote journalistic accountability and responsibility through interactivity and transparency. McEvoy was an experienced broadcast journalist who had worked on the ABC’s youth radio network Triple J, Radio National, and the television current affairs program *Four Corners*. From 2000 to 2006, he was executive producer of *Media Watch*.

I was asked to come back to supervise specialist factual programs including … *Difference of Opinion*. I was given a fairly free hand. The ABC wasn’t sure if *Difference of Opinion* was the right kind of show. It used a panel to look at a particular issue. The emphasis was on conveying information. It was shot in front of an audience, but the audience wasn’t there to ask questions.

(Peter McEvoy, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)

In the UK, McEvoy had been impressed by the mySociety websites and visited the recording of BBC TV’s long-running *Question Time* program. On *Question Time*, a panel of politicians from different parties answers questions from a studio audience. mySociety is a not-for-profit organisation creating online participatory platforms dedicated to democracy, transparency and civic engagement.

The mySociety websites were providing ways of communicating with politicians, ways of organising, of asking questions, getting answers … I brought back to Australia an interest in a program that wasn’t about conveying information so much as encouraging people to become engaged, to share opinion, to expect answers. I was interested in creating an opportunity for people to put things on the agenda, to ask questions. That meant a program that was about engagement and interaction.

(Peter McEvoy, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)
ABC TV had used this kind of audience engagement a long time ago. Running from 1971 until 1978, *Monday Conference* was sometimes the broadcaster’s most popular program. It began with ‘two vigorous journalists’ and presenter Robert Moore interrogating a single guest (Inglis 1983, p. 283). The opening night encounter with the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, according to ABC historian Ken Inglis, ‘may well have contributed to his return to the back bench three months later’ (1983, p. 283). Subsequent guests included Paul Ehrlich, Germaine Greer and Marshall McLuhan (see ABC TV [1977]). Oxford-educated Moore came from *Four Corners* and the BBC’s *Panorama* on which it was modelled, as well as a stint studying television in America. ‘Lucid, literate and searching’ (Inglis 1983, p. 222), Moore soon adapted the format of *Monday Conference* to involve a studio audience. Concerned about the lack of ‘balance’ in the questions that resulted, the ABC’s Commissioners insisted audience participation was not to be a regular feature. Where it was used, ‘every effort must be made to achieve an appropriate balance of questions from the audience’ (Inglis 1983, p. 283). Part of Moore’s job became inviting ‘teams of people known to disagree with each other about the subject of that week’s conference’ (Inglis 1983, p. 283).

The country’s other public broadcaster, the SBS, has run a weekly studio discussion program, *Insight*, since 2004. *Insight’s* host, Jenny Brockie, works with a live, but usually prerecorded, audience of around 50, including invited experts. The ABC decided its new program would be shot in front of a studio audience, like *Insight* and *Difference of Opinion*. Unlike *Insight*, it would have a panel comprising five to six politicians, thinkers, writers, policymakers, influential Australians and some celebrities, rather than ‘experts’. The audience would be able to ask questions: ‘We wanted a show where the audience was involved, not just there to clap,’ says *Q&A* presenter Tony Jones (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011). The working title, *On the Spot*, reflected this, but the title eventually chosen, *Q&A*, highlighted the proposed emphasis on interactivity. That emphasis motivated the decision to broadcast the program live—unlike *Question Time* and *Insight*.

That was the crucial format decision, that it would be live ... That makes live interaction possible ... The whole idea of *Q&A* is interactive ... The audience doesn’t come to it for information, like *Four Corners*.

(Peter McEvoy, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)

Tony Jones, the long-time host of the late night current affairs program *Lateline*, and winner of a Walkley Award for best broadcast interviewing in 2004, was chosen as host of *Q&A*. Then *Insight* reporter Amanda Collinge joined the program as series producer in its the second year, 2009, replacing Lin Buckfield (later at *Media Watch*). This returned Collinge to the ABC, where she had been a reporter and presenter on Triple J from 1985 to 1991, and a reporter on the late-night current affairs program *Lateline* in 1996. Anna Klaunzer was hired from the commercial Ten TV network and *VibeWire*, one of Australia’s first youth news and opinion blog sites. She became its ‘interactivity producer’, initially working on the *Q&A* website.
and SMS feed, then managing the Twitter integration project (Anna Klauzner, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011).

Twenty Q&A shows were broadcast in 2008, all from the ABC’s Sydney studios. In 2009, 32 shows went to air, including four from other capital cities. The show moved to Monday night in 2010, completing an all-public-affairs line-up on ABC1 on the second-biggest (after Sunday) viewing night of the week: following ABC News at 7pm, the half-hour national current affairs show now called 7:30, Australian Story, Four Corners and Media Watch, and preceding Lateline and Lateline Business. Of the 41 shows, two were shot in Western Sydney and six in other cities. Another full season followed in 2011, including the first program shot in a non-metropolitan centre, Albury. From August 2010, the program was also carried live on the ABC’s 24-hour news channel, ABC News 24, providing simultaneous live broadcast right across a country with three winter and five summer time zones.

**Twitter integration**

Even before first going to air, Q&A’s makers anticipated the program format could incorporate new media platforms, enabling television and online viewers to participate along with the studio audience. From the start, questions could be submitted live via the web and SMS (SMS became less popular after Twitter integration and was closed at the end of 2010). ‘Before the program started, we discussed with the web people about how to moderate a feed that could be on screen—like Twitter became’ says McEvoy (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011). But ‘there wasn’t a viable platform when we started’ (Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011).

Twitter launched globally in July 2006. McEvoy recalls reading a post on Jeff Jarvis’ ‘BuzzMachine’ site early in 2008, before Q&A first went to air: Jarvis (2008a) writes, ‘I used Twitter to create a tool for collaborative criticism (imagine seeing your friends’ snide remarks as you all watch Pop Idol at the same time, each from your own couches)’.

We didn’t invent the #qanda hashtag. But we noticed it was getting dozens, maybe 100, tweets during each [weekly] program. Some people had Twitter accounts but hadn’t thought of tweeting during live TV. Our first step was to expand the conversation, before we tried broadcast integration. Otherwise it would have been too small a pool.

(Peter McEvoy, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)

Between corresponding weeks in January 2008 and 2009, according to Experian Hitwise, Australian visits to Twitter grew 517.9% (Hanchard 2009). Then, between January and April 2009, they grew a further 1067.3% (Hanchard 2009). On Sunday 19 April 2009, coinciding with Oprah Winfrey’s first tweet, Twitter broke into the top 40 Australian websites for the first time (at No. 37, measured by ‘visits’) (Long 2009). Nielsen reported that during 2009, 23% of online Australians read tweets, 13% posted tweets (up from 4% in 2008) and 14% followed companies or organisations (up from 5% in 2008) (NielsenWire 2010). Tim Bull (2010) estimates that there were 2.5 million Australian Twitter users in January 2010. In August 2011,
Social Media News reported 1.8 million ‘unique Australian visitors’ (UAVs) to Twitter, making it the sixth-most-visited social media site, well behind Facebook (10.5 million UAVs) and YouTube (10 million UAVs) (Cowling 2011).

By the end of 2009, Q&A’s second year, about 2000 tweets a week were being sent using the hashtag ‘#qanda’. But if we were going to start showing tweets on screen during the TV broadcast, we needed a moderation system to choose which ones’, McEvoy (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011) noted. The ABC approached Leslie Nassar, a digital strategist who had previously worked with the ABC, first on ‘audio-blogging’ in 2002 and 2003, and then building the podcasting platform for Radio National. In-between, he’d worked on SMS/broadcast integration with Legion Interactive for the country’s biggest telco, Telstra, and for the Victorian Police. ‘Once you go [to the ABC]’, he says, ‘you never really stop working for them’ (Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011). He later founded a company called TweeVee TV that builds Twitter tools for broadcasters.

People were tweeting Q&A well before Peter and Anna approached me about Twitter/broadcast integration … One of the big challenges was that the program is ‘agile’—it shifts around topics. Tony [Jones, the presenter] is very skilled at that. So you had to be able to get the tweets to air in a timely way. It’s easy to gets tweets to air; it’s hard to get them moderated and on air efficiently.

(Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011)

Q&A decided it wanted to be able to get tweets to air within a minute of their posting.

That became part of the specification. Then there were other elements. How would you display the tweets? As a ticker along the bottom of the screen? As a static display? Where? For how long? How many could you put up in each show? Rules didn’t exist for any of that. Now Twitter has its own guidelines about how it has to look on air. For example, we don’t put the Twitter logo to air. I had to explain to them [Twitter] that this was a public broadcaster and they couldn’t do that.4

(Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011)

A ‘tweet pathway’, from the tweeter to the broadcast audience, was agreed:

Tweeter → Twitter → TweeVee TV (where algorithmic filters are applied) → ABC initial moderator → ABC final approval moderator → TV broadcast → Viewers

Series producer Amanda Collinge was made the ABC’s final approval moderator, the person who decides which tweets go to air. A trial was done with about six months of tweets that Nassar had stored, ‘a slow release to simulate tweets going to air’ (Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011) and a trial over several weeks, involving selecting tweets for the live program without putting them to air, rather than a public beta (Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011). The first time it was done on the live show,
5400 tweets were sent using the #qanda hashtag, of which 55 were put to air. The format chosen was a static display at the bottom of the television screen, one tweet at a time. Several durations were trialled before it was decided to take the tweets down automatically after 10 seconds.

The algorithmic filters now prevent several categories of tweets getting to the ABC’s moderators. First, there are formal filters screening out replies, tweets with links to URLs and tweets longer than 115 characters (the maximum length for the broadcast display format chosen). Second, there are language filters screening out anything profane. Third, there are ‘fake identity’ filters screening out known fakes, especially those posing as politicians—the producers have checked the IDs of all the Australian politicians known to have Twitter accounts, and anything resembling these, other than the actual ID, goes on a ‘blacklist’ to ensure tweets don’t go to air, although they still appear on Twitter. Nassar (interviewed 17 May 2011) said around 30% of tweets using the #qanda hashtag were screened out by the filters, but that percentage had fallen as the Twitter community learned the conventions dictating what would be allowed to air. For example, for the 16 May 2011 show, 13,279 tweets were received, 4050 (30%) were filtered out, 549 were approved for broadcast by the initial moderators, and 84 were put to air by the final moderator (Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011).

For some time, a ‘whitelist’ of Twitter IDs was used. This was a list of fairly well-known Twitter users whose tweets were automatically fed straight through to the final moderator, although not necessarily selected for broadcast. This no longer operates, but the final moderator is now notified automatically of tweets that are popular within the Twitter community (Amanda Collinge, email, 15 Sep. 2011; Anna Klauzner, email, 24 Oct. 2011). In this way, the Twitter community effectively elects its most popular tweets. By choosing to take more notice of tweets re-tweeted by a large number of users than those from preselected thought leaders, the broadcaster shares a little of its traditional control with the tweeting members of its audience, illustrating Carruthers and Ballsun-Stanton’s (2010, p. 167) point: ‘Twitter’s power lies in the power of network amplification: the power of a single user is magnified by the power of their network plus their network’s network’.

Not all tweets that make it past the filters are considered. There are simply too many of them, and it is essential that they get to air while still relevant to the discussion.

There’s a significant random element in what goes to air, there’s just too many to deal with … we are trying to put a representative stream to air to give viewers an idea of what the Twitter community is thinking … We call it ‘digging for gold’, it’s that random.

The two initial moderators are digging in big buckets … They pull out handfuls, read them as quickly as they can, they can’t fully check them all … They send some on to me, and I choose 40 to 50 [the numbers have increased since then to 80 to 100] for the whole show … those that are not obscene, those that value add, are smart, irreverent but not offensive … you just can’t read 35,000 in an hour … I have to concentrate on the discussion as well, marry the tweets to the discussion.
Tweets selected for broadcast take an average of one to two minutes to get to air after they are posted to Twitter. The fastest has been around five seconds (Leslie Nassar, interviewed 17 May 2011).

Responses, impacts, adaptations

Q&A's makers have adapted their model of interaction, establishing and modifying ground rules for program staff and the audience, and continue to experiment with their formula.

Distractions

‘Lots of experienced TV producers said we shouldn’t do it, it would be distracting,’ says McEvoy (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011). Have there been complaints about that? ‘Yes, some,’ he says. One of the early complainants was the ABC’s own Media Watch presenter, Jonathan Holmes:

My initial reaction to the tweets on Q&A was very hostile. I thought it broke all the traditional rules of television: you don’t ask the audience to read one thing and listen to another ... It's about how people focus their attention. I was told I was very old-fashioned …

But it has been very successful. Ratings are up and they have a big Twitter following. Lots of people are trying to get their tweets up on-air. I now feel quite conflicted about it. I just don't read them ... It’s really a generational gap in how people consume media.

(Q Jonathan Holmes, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)

Q&A series producer, Amanda Collinge (interviewed 21 Jun. 2011) responds:

People have always watched TV and talked about it, started up conversations about completely different things ... Women ... knit while they watch TV ... people make love ... cook ... If the politicians are being boring, they are not missing anything ... It's partly up to us to get the rhythm right—we don't put up an information-heavy tweet while the conversation is heavy ... but CNN, ABC News Breakfast—they all run tickers ... Yes, I know three people who have put black tape across their screens because they hate the tweets—and they are not all old! ... But others love them and they are not all young ...

Some Twitter users believe Twitter is not a distraction but the main game:

The show is sometimes dull but the tweets are always entertaining, it’s like being in a room where everyone can yell out at those having the stage. Yet, they don’t interrupt the flow of the show. The tweets go on well after the show trending for hours. I say unmoderate the tweeter stream! By far the funniest never make it onto the TV screen.
Attractions

The size of the audience for the television program grew significantly after Twitter integration began. The average five-city metro audience (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide) for the episodes in February, March and April 2011 was around 580,000—17.5% higher than the same period a year earlier, before Twitter integration began (28% including the ABC News 24 and ABC1 audiences), although it is difficult to isolate its impact. A month after the first Twitter integration show, the Australian prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, was replaced as leader of his own party and, hence, as prime minister, a remarkable act by the governing Labor Party. An election was held a further two months later that resulted in the new Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, losing her majority but surviving as Prime Minister through the support of independents. Those months were perfect for a television program that fed off political controversy. The average five-city audience in the election month of August was over 800,000, including two special shows run with single guests, the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. A year on, the average audience in May, June and July 2011 was 5% higher than a year earlier including the ABC News 24 audience (1% higher for ABC1 alone), and 22% higher than for the much smaller number of shows in 2009 (15% for ABC 1 alone) (author analysis of OzTAM data: Overnight, All people, Five-city-metro average, 1 January 2008 to 31 July 2011, first release episodes only).

Choosing tweeters

The program makers and the ABC developed and refined rules and principles about the tweets selected for broadcast (the program’s published principles are quoted at the top of this article). The filters described above were designed to put them into effect, making moderation easier and excluding those items that could clearly be ruled out...
for civility (Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011). The ABC’s general approach to user-generated content is set out in its Editorial Policies:

The ABC seeks both to draw audiences to the platforms it controls and to reach audiences using suitable services that third parties control. The ABC takes editorial responsibility in proportion to its control of the media environment in which it operates. The ABC expects those who participate also to exercise responsibility for what they can control …

The ABC does not require content generated and submitted by individuals and organisations to meet the standard of accuracy required of content generated by the ABC. However, where the ABC is satisfied that it is appropriate to do so, the ABC may decline to broadcast or publish, or may edit, remove, correct or clarify content generated by public participants that contains error or is otherwise false, misleading or harmful.

Individuals and organisations who generate and submit content are not required to be impartial. The ABC recognises that social and political activity, including robust debate, is a necessary and desirable aspect of a healthy democratic community.

(ABC 2011b, p. 14)

Some less formal practices became working rules. First, speakers/tweeters need not identify themselves beyond their Twitter handle. Anonymity is unusual for material put to air on the ABC’s television or radio services (talkback callers are generally introduced by their first name and suburb), though it is now a common feature of ABC’s user-generated content. The identity of tweeters is known by the television audience, but only to the extent that individual tweeters choose to identify themselves through their Twitter handle. Fake handles are not an issue for the ABC if they are happening on Twitter, says Peter McEvoy (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011),

    but if they're happening on [the ABC's] screen, it is a problem for us. We can't always know if it is happening, but we won't publish a tweet that looks like it comes from a well-known person unless we know the account is genuine.

(Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011)

Second, nobody should get more than one tweet broadcast in a single show. When this has happened, other tweeters have complained. ‘Yes, it’s like the studio audience—you wouldn't get a second question,’ says Collinge (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011).

Third, the opening tweet of each show now gives the party political breakdown of the night’s studio audience. This is drawn from responses to the compulsory questions asked when people register online to be included in the studio audience. These include voting intention ‘if a Federal election were held today’ (Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011).
Fourth, while individual tweeters are not required to be impartial, the program makers say they try to achieve some kind of balance in the tweets they put to air. ‘My job is to balance them,’ says Collinge (interviewed 21 May 2011)—‘it’s hard because Twitter is overwhelmingly left-wing’. McEvoy says it is

... a relatively broad platform with many conservative and right-wing users. You could say it’s more left that right but it’s not overwhelming. The balance that Amanda achieves is in varying the points of view during the discussion. That can shift depending on the flow of the conversation and performance of panelists, as well as the politics of the twitterers.

(email, 10 Oct. 2011)

Fifth, the program makers aim to get a balance between known or celebrity tweeters and unknowns. The blurb for the show states: ‘It doesn’t matter who you are, or where you’re from—everyone can have a go and take it up to our politicians and opinion makers’ (ABC 2011c). Says McEvoy:

If all the tweets in a show were from celebrities, I wouldn’t be happy ... There’s a built-in advantage for high profile people—they tend to getretweeted, so as the river flows past the moderators, they are more likely to be scooped up in the bucket ... and there’s more chance of being noticed by the moderators. But it’s still no guarantee of getting to air—the choice of what goes to air is still made by the [final] moderator.

(Peter McEvoy, interviewed 1 Jun. 2011)

The public service broadcaster and the crowd

In this research, we were especially interested in the influences the Twitter stream and the television broadcast exert over each other.

Twitter’s direct influence over the narrative of the broadcast show appears to be limited, although it may be growing. At the time of the research at least, Q&A is very much a television show. It is tightly structured by its producers in ways that will be familiar to anyone who has watched a similar show put together live-to-air. It starts on-time, to the second; microphone booms need to be out of shot; audience members are carefully briefed about television-friendly behaviour, including the need to look straight ahead and not at the microphone when asking questions. As a show that is almost always about politics, Q&A grants panellists the right of reply. On such an interactive show, questions can come from many places but most are queued up—video questions submitted online that might be used in the show, and audience members who are likely to get the chance to ask the question they submitted in advance. The program makers are also starting to feed more tweets into the show as questions (Amanda Collinge, email, 5 Sep. 2011), but it’s prime-time television—it takes a lot of people, and if anything is going to happen, they all need to know what’s coming.

For the producers in the control room, Collinge (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011) says, the Twitter stream can be ‘a valuable barometer of the show. They’re [the Tweets are] a voice from home’. Tony Jones says he’d like to be able to see the tweets on a screen,
and occasionally a question or comment is taken from Twitter and fed to Jones via his headset and autocue (McEvoy can speak to him live). But McEvoy is wary of overusing the Twitter stream to assess and influence how the show is travelling:

The tweeters represent an important component of the program but only a small part of the audience—less than 1%. We have to balance many factors, making editorial judgments about the flow of the program. For example, if a politician has said something wrong or expressed an opinion, we need to make time for their opponent to respond. Reviewing all the tweets after the program is very useful in assessing audience response, but basing decisions on a few hundred tweets selected on the run is likely to simply re-enforce your preconceptions.

(Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct 2011)

One experiment, designed to give members of the public a guaranteed role in one show, became controversial. Q&A agreed to include a question chosen via an e-democracy platform run by a media organisation called OurSay. People were invited to post and vote for questions via the organisation’s website. Under the agreement, Jones would ask one of the five most popular questions during that week’s show. McEvoy chose the second-most popular question, about government funding for school chaplains, and not the most popular, which compared the levels of government funding for fast broadband and a new submarine fleet. An OurSay volunteer who watched the show from the control room that night as part of the agreement published a savage criticism:

McEvoy couldn’t bring himself to entrust the people with power over the agenda. He chose the question he thought was the most relevant and entertaining …

Q&A is in fact not democratic media It is nothing more than an adventure in autocracy, cleverly repackaged to make us feel as though we are controlling the news agenda.

(Newman 2011)

McEvoy responded, stressing the terms of the agreement and the fact that the question chosen was on the same topic as another high-ranking question:

… it represented a popular choice; it raised a fresh issue and it generated a vigorous debate.

We don’t apologise for making political discussion and debate entertaining and engaging. We make editorial decisions about how to structure the program to ensure we can cover a broad range of viewpoints and issues …

(McEvoy responding in Newman 2011)

The influence of Q&A’s Twitter integration over the Twitter stream seems more significant, although this is an impression rather than a conclusion from systematic analysis. McEvoy (interviewed 1 Jun. 2011) says: ‘We were always conscious that by
putting tweets on screen we would be shaping the conversation, and tweeters would adapt to be rewarded and see their tweets on screen’.

The show has both cultivated and been cultivated by Twitter integration. In some ways, the Twitter audience has become a symbolic extra guest on the program, with a capacity to comment within the moderator’s guidelines, yet with the luxury denied the show’s presenter, guests and studio audience, of reading the selected commentary appearing at the bottom of the television screen.

Moderation of tweets has deliberately stylised this community, or at least part of it. Collinge says:

We’re trying to show the Twitter community that a certain kind of tweet will get up and a certain kind of tweet won’t get up … They’ve changed over time, definitely become more thoughtful, we’ve trained them, they learn what is likely to go to air, what won’t …

(Amanda Collinge, interviewed 1 June 2011)

Leslie Nassar (interviewed 17 May 2011) agrees behaviour has changed, saying that the community has effectively self-regulated: ‘It’s … developing its own protocols—profanities and fake pollies have dropped from the ecosystem,’ as have replies and tweeting of URLs. These protocols and forms of interaction are increasingly consolidating, evidenced by a rise in retweeting, which Nassar suggests shows that ‘the community wants to endorse its own tweets’. This more cultivated part of the Twitter community has also become competitive: ‘it’s a status thing to have your tweet broadcast,’ says Nassar.

Yet if, as Carruthers and Ballsun-Stanton (2010, p. 167) suggest, relationships mediated via Twitter are like ‘a bowl of spaghetti’—‘multiple layers of affiliation groups are formed and users participate in many of those at the same time without centralized command and control’—it may be unwise to over-read even strong evidence at this stage about the broadcaster’s impact on the motivations of all or most tweeters:

We were sold a bill of goods with q&a [sic]. Read the ABC hype about ‘punters, pollies and pundits together in the studio to thrash out the hot issues of the week’. Peter McEvoy is kidding only himself to say the onscreen tweets ‘connects [sic] people to the program’ and ‘if the people are on Twitter … than [sic] that’s where the conversation must go’. Panelists and studio audience have absolutely no conversation with the tweeters, no knowledge of what the TV audience is seeing on air, of the tangent of the tweet so-called-conversation. There is no possibility of answers to questions posed there and no right of reply for panelists to the snide remarks, ridicule, challenges and assertions made. [H]aving a tweet featured on the program can be the ultimate validation of their participation’ … what a crock.

(ponose comment in Feeney 2010)
McEvoy responds:

Q&A isn’t just a Twitter conversation; it’s a melding of TV and Twitter, and to make that work there has to be a balance. The panellists and audience can’t stop the discussion to read 15,000 tweets or even the 70 or 80 we publish on screen, but we do take comments and questions from the Twitter stream and put them to the panel for a response.

(Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011)

Political discourse
Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 177) suggest public policy must acknowledge significant changes in ‘the complexion of public communication’. First, information and communication technologies are now ubiquitous, but are no longer controlled by industrially centralised, professional organisations. Second, any notion of ‘the public’ has become ‘more diffuse’ (p. 178). The idea of a singular public sphere dominated by codified standards of civility ‘is less realizable than a space of pluralistic interaction within and between diverse social networks’ (p. 178). Third, there is ‘less emphasis upon television as the provision of a public service, and more upon its ability to open up a public space’ (p. 178). Fourth, the idea of citizenship has to be recast, because ‘the political no longer relates only to the institutions of the state’ (p. 178). To promote citizenship, the media ‘must embrace more than occasional moments of voting in elections or being addressed by politicians’ (p. 178). Fifth, governments need to acknowledge that ‘the risks and complexities of governance cannot be managed without drawing upon the experience, expertise and networked linkages of the represented public’ (p. 178).

Q&A illustrates each of these. Although Twitter is now a large organisation and platform, it has been around only since 2006. The 80-year-old ABC prides itself on the reach and depth of its connections with Australians, but when it wanted to build a more engaged politics around a television program, it turned to the fast-growing platform established by this young, US-based company. The program tries to escape the combat of setpiece television current affairs discussion, turning the presenter into the host of a conversation among diverse actors rather than their representatives in interrogations of the powerful. Q&A wants to be a public space where politicians are almost always on-site, but where they are asked to behave differently, to drop their political guise and speak as independent-minded public figures.

‘Political actors were once concerned to produce polished, finished performances for public consumption,’ say Gurevitch, Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 171), but ‘contemporary politicians are compelled to think about interactive audiences and their capacity to question, challenge, redistribute and modify the messages that they receive’. On Q&A, politicians are made vulnerable in unfamiliar ways. Confronted with a live, studio audience, yet blind to a stream of public commentary to which they have no right of reply, they are under pressure, as Collinge (interviewed 1 June 2011) describes, to ‘engage in the spirit of the show … and [not] engage in spin’. Tony Jones (interviewed 1 June 2011) says the politicians say: “Don’t invite me on too often, because I have to do too much work!”. McEvoy (interviewed 1 June 2011) also adds,
Q&A is a good measure of authenticity. Election platform launches now are given in halls full of party stalwarts. On Q&A they know the audience isn’t. People are rewarded for being honest, for answering questions. There’s a price to pay if you’re obfuscating.

Q&A seems to offer complex and contradictory messages about political discourse. Its most popular shows have been the ones with the biggest politicians; the biggest ratings have been in the middle of political showtime, an election campaign. Yet veteran press gallery journalist Laurie Oakes, accepting 2010’s Gold Walkley Award for the year’s most outstanding piece of journalism, thought that in that election campaign ‘there were no issues, there was no policy inspiration, there were no ideas. We had two parties led by two political pygmies’ (AAP 2010). This stance prompts the questions: What is it the citizens are watching for, and what are they applauding?

Listen to talkback, watch Q&A, tune into the Internet and ask where the power and respect lies. Who lays the strongest claim to the record, the knowledge and the authority, charismatic or otherwise? Not the leaders. Most of what used to be theirs is shared between the host and the audience, for whom pretty well any opinion is as good as another. The politicians scramble for the residue.

(Watson 2011, p. 10)

Concluding thoughts

Three important, if tentative, conclusions about audience multi-tasking, live-ness and politics can be drawn from Q&A’s early Twitter integration experience.

First, on multi-tasking, the experience confirms the complexity of audiences. Standing in the control room watching Q&A’s director Mark Fitzgerald call switches between nine studio cameras, ‘supers’ of panellists’ names, recorded feeds for video questions and other elements, co-ordinating all these inputs into the single visual and aural stream the audience sees as a television program, one realises that Twitter integration does not ask the home viewer for an inconceivable act of visual and intellectual multi-tasking, but a level of competence that television professionals exercise routinely. The audience is asked to step up and act as slightly better-than-amateur constructors of experience and meaning.

Some viewers have made it clear they are not interested. They find Twitter distracting and would like to be able to turn it off. Two separate versions of the show could be offered if transmission capacity was available, one with the Twitter stream—‘Classic Q&A’, McEvoy (email, 10 Oct. 2011) calls it—and the other without it, although that would begin to undermine the idea of a single television program. Others, however, want even more options for shaping their interactions. An online tool was developed to allow viewers not just to watch the show live online, but to tailor a subset of the tweeters they follow just for Q&A. These can appear alongside the television image on the viewer’s computer or tablet device. This allows people to see what their own friends or like-minded tweeters are saying. McEvoy (email, 10 Oct. 2011) was interested to see if this would develop as a model for other Twitter applications, ‘like watching football while sharing a Twitter conversation with your mates’.
Second, for broadcasters, one of the crucial attractions of integrating popular platforms like Twitter into their own programs is to draw and retain audiences for scheduled television shows. If some viewers can’t conceive of watching Q&A without participating in ‘the Twitter conversation’, the only way to do it is to watch it live. That returns broadcasting to its supposedly dying business model, aggregating audiences for scheduled appointments (see Stelter [2010]). A senior executive from ESPN told the Australian Broadcasting Summit in early 2013 that television broadcasters were now celebrating the impact of online media on television viewing rather than fearing it would steal their audiences: ‘multi-platform users … create a “rising tide” that moves from platform to platform’ (Bulgrin 2013). The importance of this model to Q&A’s conception of itself as a national conversation is demonstrated by the successful campaign for the show to be carried on the national ABC News 24, as well as the locally scheduled ABC1:

We made Q&A live from the start, even before Twitter, so that the viewing audience could interact and the program could respond. I think that’s paid off now by creating a live event that people want to be part of. Q&A live definitely has the edge over Q&A recorded.

(Peter McEvoy, email, 10 Oct. 2011)

Third, like any other television show or other media experience, each episode of Q&A exists in a social, cultural and particularly political context. The program has chosen a particularly partisan moment for its adventures. Democracies are proving stubbornly hard to govern at a time when profound questions are being posed about their economic system and its consequences for the environment. Promised infinite choice, citizen consumers have come to expect they can get better answers from their politicians by rejecting the ones they have and buying different ones.

The political temperature outside is high; the conversation is tough. Online, it can stay that way. Inside, on television, the standards are still different. Q&A’s guidelines say: ‘The twitter conversation at #QandA is “vigorous”, “robust” and “bold” (as they say in politspeak). That’s great for twitter, but for ABC broadcasts we’ll set the bar at civil’ (ABC 2011a). Public broadcasters trying to host an engaged politics, seizing the technical opportunity to marry online speech with their one-way, single-channel authority, will be drawing the borders of civility, tweet-by-tweet.

Notes
1 Tweets are short messages posted via the Twitter website and other platforms like TweetDeck and HootSuite.
2 Jarvis posted about Twitter on 25 February 2008: ‘When I first used the microblogging platform Twitter … I thought it was silly. Or rather, the uses to which it was being put were silly: people announcing that they’d just woken up or what they’d had for breakfast. I couldn’t have cared less. But then I should confess that when I first used blogs and podcasts, I didn’t fully comprehend their impact either. So, when my son and webmaster told me I should take another stab at Twitter, I did. And I now see it is an important evolutionary step in the rise of blogging … All this springs from a deceptively simple idea and tool. And that is what never ceases to amaze me about the internet: create a platform, make it open, and people will do things with it that you never could have imagined.’ (Jarvis 2008a).
Three months later, Jarvis said Twitter was ‘becoming the canary in the news coalmine’ (Jarvis 2008b).

3 Sandra Hanchard stresses the importance of PR/marketing support in Twitter’s rise, especially the advocacy of influential tech/PR celebrities, including Steve Rubel and Tim O’Reilly … While smart user functionality is one necessary ingredient before a website can “take-off” … the role of online curatorial controls tends to be underestimated’. (S. Hanchard, email, 29 September 2011).

4 The ABC’s legislation prevents it accepting any payment or other consideration for broadcasting any announcement, program or other matter on its domestic services (Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983, section 25[3]).

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