Peaks and troughs in a Twitter response to three televised debates during the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum campaign
The Referendum on Independence for Scotland (1)

Campaign dominated by two groups formed in May-June 2012:

**Yes Scotland:** led by Scottish National Party (SNP), with broad support from Scottish Greens and Scottish Socialist Party

**Better Together:** broad support from Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties
Thursday, 18\textsuperscript{th} September 2014
The Referendum on Independence for Scotland (2)

- Franchise extended to 16-17 year-olds
- Turnout: 84.6\% of electorate
- Highest turnout for any election or referendum in the UK since 1918
- 55.3\% voted against independence
- Unprecedented levels of political activity on social media throughout Scotland, and beyond

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BALLOT PAPER</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vote (X) ONLY ONCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should Scotland be an independent country?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Images: UK Electoral Commission
Aim and Objectives of Research

- To develop an understanding of how Twitter is used as a vehicle for communication during televised political debates
- To identify peaks and troughs in Twitter usage during each debate
- To explore the issues and incidents that generated the greatest and least levels of Twitter discussion
- Three debates studied, selected because of:
  - Timing – very close to polling day
  - Live broadcast with no editing
  - Status and high profile of participants
Debate 1

- 5 August 2014, Glasgow
- Alex Salmond & Alistair Darling
- Broadcast on Scottish Television (STV)
- Shown only in Scotland; although also available online, in real time
- Average audience of 765,000 viewers; peak of 920,000
Debate 2

- 25 August 2014, Glasgow
- Salmond & Darling ‘rematch’
- Broadcast on BBC Scotland and BBC Two (throughout UK)
- BBC Scotland: 843,000 viewers (37% share of audience)
- BBC Two: 1.7m viewers (7% share of audience)
Debate 3

- 2 September 2014, Edinburgh
- Live on STV and itvnews.com
- Described as a ‘town hall debate’

For Yes Scotland
- Patrick Harvie, Green MSP
- Elaine C. Smith, actor
- Nicola Sturgeon, SNP MSP

For Better Together
- Douglas Alexander, Labour MP
- Ruth Davidson, Conservative MSP
- Kezia Dugdale, Labour MSP
Our Sample: Compiled in Three Ways

- Collected all tweets using the neutral and widely-used hashtag #indyref, and all tweets using programme-specific hashtags (e.g. #ScotDecides, #BBCindyref)

- Collected all tweets geo-tagged as sent from Scotland

- Collected all tweets sent by around 300 accounts whose owners had a clear interest in Scottish politics and the referendum
### The Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Total Tweets Collected</th>
<th>Ave. Tweets per Minute</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Debate 1</strong> 5 August</td>
<td>120 mins</td>
<td>54,811</td>
<td>456.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Salmond v Darling, STV</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Debate 2</strong> 25 August</td>
<td>90 mins</td>
<td>64,041</td>
<td>711.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salmond v Darling, BBC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Debate 3</strong> 2 September</td>
<td>120 mins</td>
<td>31,715</td>
<td>264.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Hall Debate, STV</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Debate 2: Peaks and Troughs

Tweet volumes

- Vox pop video
- Oil revenues
- Audience attacks on Darling
- National Health Service
- Bedroom tax

Number of tweets per minute


Time
Debate 3: Peaks and Troughs
Debate 3: Elaine C. Smith Dominates Twitter Discussion
Twitter posts followed the agenda set by the media and the politicians very closely.

But topics that were the foci of the peaks in discussion varied from debate to debate.

Some topics failed to stimulate discussion throughout, particularly the IFS report.

Other peaks came during advert breaks, ‘spin room’ discussions, etc.

Sample responded most strongly to moments of ‘political theatre’.

Twitter users positive about diversity and conduct of panel in Town Hall debate.

Did the debates matter? Just 1.4% changed their mind after watching the Salmond-Darling debates (Edinburgh University, 2015).
Televised debates here to stay?

cf. 2015 UK General Election televised debates: diverse panels; no all-male head-to-heads

38% of UK public were influenced by the 2015 debates (Panelbase, May 2015)

Twitter response can indicate formats, issues and behaviours that engage or disengage the electorate
Thank you...