

News via Voldemort: Parody accounts in topical discussions on Twitter

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Abstract

Parody accounts are prevalent on Twitter, offering irreverent interpretations of public figures, fictional characters, and more. These accounts post comments framed within the context of their fictional universes or stereotypes of their subjects, responding in-character to topical events. This article positions parody accounts as a ritualised social media practice, an extension of fan practices and irreverent internet culture. By providing a typology of parody accounts and analysing the topicality of selected parody accounts' tweets, the research examines how these accounts contribute to topical discussions. In-character framing of topical comments allows parody accounts to offer original interpretations of breaking news

that receive more attention than their other tweets. The presence and longevity of parody accounts underlines the importance of humour on social media, including within news and topical coverage.

Keywords

Social media, Twitter, parody, fandom, rituals, play, tropes, humour, irreverence, news and commentary

Word count: 8156 words including all tables, notes, and references.

Introduction

Riots break out in central London, and social media become go-to channels for sharing information and organising responses. Tweets about the unfolding crisis come from major news media and government bodies, participants and people directly affected... and Lord Voldemort (the Dark Lord: @Lord_Voldemort7), villain of the *Harry Potter* series.

The US government goes into shutdown when budget negotiations stall, attracting widespread commentary from citizens, pundits... and the Public Relations department of the Galactic Empire (Death Star PR: @DeathStarPR) from *Star Wars*.

Prince George, son of Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, is born to a cavalcade of global attention. Queen Elizabeth II (Elizabeth Windsor: @Queen_UK) provides regular tweeted updates. Except, of course, this is not the actual British monarch.

Parody, satirical, and spoof accounts are prevalent on Twitter, offering irreverent takes on public figures, fictional characters, and more; as Vis (2013) notes in response to accounts parodying the Queen, Lord Voldemort, and fellow *Harry Potter* character Professor Snape tweeting about the UK riots in 2011, such practices have become ‘part of the fabric of [Twitter]’ (35). However, despite the presence of these accounts within topical social media datasets, their contributions are considered a sideshow to the main corpus: tweets from parodies are topically relevant outliers, framing their comments within the context of their fictional universes or stereotypes of their subjects.

The number and notoriety of parody Twitter accounts, though, demonstrate that there is a sizeable audience for their comments. Even if the word of Lord Voldemort is less vital than an update from emergency services, a parody’s topical commentary is still seen and shared by social media users. This research examines this practice in detail, identifying approaches to

parody on Twitter, and using three examples (the Dark Lord, Elizabeth Windsor, and Death Star PR) to analyse the topicality of their tweets – their references to current or newsworthy subjects – and what response these receive, especially in comparison to their more mundane remarks. Parody accounts are positioned as a ritualised practice on social media, an example of fandom of individual media texts and of internet culture; studying these accounts is important for understanding social media cultures, as well as for examining how humour and irreverence are employed in topical contexts.

Research context

The irreverent internet

The internet can be a silly place. This comment is not meant to be flippant, or to denigrate non-serious online communication; rather, it means that not everything that happens online is political or aimed at anything other than being fun – and indeed, the trivial and political can be easily combined. Hartley (2012) identifies a wider trend towards ‘silly citizenship’, in which playful elements are key to the ‘performance of political deliberation and participation’ (151). This development extends from the growing importance of comedy as the ‘go-to source for civic understanding’ (146), through television shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*. Humorous framings are also prevalent online, where websites such as *The Onion* present satirical commentary.

Social media platforms provide opportunities to creatively participate in public debate, whether sharing extended commentary or remixing or spoofing political videos. These practices extend beyond political aims, with such approaches also part of participatory culture. This is the context for the ‘irreverent internet’: where engagement with issues, texts, and events takes more jokey forms, and where humour and online culture inform

communication practices. Platforms are employed for purposes for which they were not originally intended, media content is appropriated for critical, sarcastic, and ironic commentary, and seemingly pointless phenomena such as planking become fleetingly inescapable. Irreverence is found in the creation and promulgation of tropes and in-jokes, highlighting a heightened awareness of the form and conventions of online communication.

Irreverent practices have long been featured online, pre-dating social media, social networking sites, and Web 2.0. While early approaches required particular technical abilities and infrastructure, over time they have transformed from exclusive activities to uncomplicated, established parts of online discourse. Internet users have developed cultural and technical literacies for participating in these practices, and are able to share and reframe media content for a vast, dispersed audience (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Memes and image macros, for instance, are participatory in that part of their appeal and longevity lies in their adaptability for numerous contexts, and internet users have the capacity to make these adaptations themselves (see Leavitt, 2013; Miltner, 2014; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; the special issue of the *Journal of Visual Culture* edited by Nooney & Portwood-Stacer, 2014). Leaver (2013) argues that this means that ‘the rapid distribution and remixing of memes is now a core part of online culture... a feature of everyday discourse and discord in a digital culture.’

Participatory practices gain resonance through their references to, and appropriation of, other media texts. The creation of spoof trailers, where existing films are recut to produce trailers depicting the film as a different genre, for instance, plays on incongruity and juxtaposition: the success of this practice is also due to it being part of ‘a broader popular culture trend structured through the relational character of popular media and its mutation into a variety of intertexts that function in direct contiguity with other artefacts from diverse origins’ (Rodríguez Ortega, 2013: 151). Spoof trailers, mash-ups, literal lyric videos, and other

irreverent participatory practices succeed through the combination of different, dissimilar texts and contexts to create new content or commentary.

Parody accounts are a further part of these playful practices. In addition to deliberately humorous presentations of public figures and fictional characters, they also reflect awareness of internet culture and its conventions. Familiarity with the (user-defined) norms of platforms and online communities fuels irreverence. The spread of these norms to other users and communities means that such practices become reinforced and expected. Participating in these practices may demonstrate an individual's higher level of online capital than casual users, where their recognition of social media conventions adds a further level of meaning to their comments.¹

Fandom and audiencing

Referencing multiple media texts in irreverent practices online also demonstrates how these approaches show internet users as fans. The intersections between fandom and participatory culture online are well established: Jenkins (2006) highlights the various ways that fans use online technologies to produce and share their interests and new content, from text-based fan fiction to video content. The convergence of media, producers, and consumers online gives fans increased opportunities to engage with their favourite texts in new ways, including creating their own interpretations of content and characters, and interacting with similarly-minded communities. Fans, artists, and producers can also interact with one another, potentially bringing increased awareness and familiarity of the audience (Baym, 2013).

Playing with established texts and characters online is not new. Role-playing and parody accounts on Twitter are an update of practices found on older platforms, such as fan-created

MySpace profiles for characters from the US version of *The Office* (Booth, 2010). The views of media producers and social media platforms towards such accounts have changed over time, though. While character-based Twitter accounts are now commonplace, in 2008 fan-created accounts for characters from *Mad Men* were suspended following queries by the producers of the show and potential copyright infringement (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). The later recognition of the value of fan engagement, and Twitter's policy on parody, satire, and role-playing (Twitter, 2014), demonstrates the shift in understanding of fan practices on social media – the *Mad Men* accounts, as playful takes on established characters, were examples of fans engaging with texts in new ways and creating paratexts not intended to be harmful to the original text.

Sharing unofficial texts and paratexts can lead to the creation of fan communities and communal experiences of texts online. The integration of social media, especially Twitter, into television broadcasts, and formal and ad hoc uses of these platforms as both backchannel and 'virtual lounge room' (Harrington, 2013), fosters shared cultural experiences online (Deller, 2011). While live-tweeting may be carried out by casual viewers, it can also illustrate more fan-specific behaviours with repeated engagement with texts and other users, including the recognition of tropes of both text and platform (Highfield, 2013). The importance of humour is particularly notable here, as droll comments can promote a particular interpretation of the broadcast and are widely shared.

These irreverent takes on media texts also reflect aspects of ironic, critical, and anti-fandom (Gray, 2003). In addition to enjoying media texts with genuine positivity, fans can be critical of texts they like: Haig (2014) notes that, for fans of the *Twilight Saga*, their critical enjoyment of the series 'does not simply recognise *Twilight* as rubbish and enjoy it *in spite of* that recognition; the recognition *itself* and the analysis, discussion and parody that it permits, provide much of the fans' pleasure' (15). On social media, practices like snark, which is

humorous and critical but also affectionate and immersive in its commentary (12), are ideally matched with Twitter: the limits put on tweet length mean that short, sardonic and pithy remarks are common forms for fan commentary, including critical and anti-fan practices such as hatereading and hatewatching (Harman & Jones, 2013: 959).

Parody accounts are examples of these fandoms. Like other online practices such as recapping, the parody's reinterpretation of the source text can be seen as an extension of 'an existing canon, and which demonstrate[s] an extensive knowledge of, and pleasure in, that canon' (Haig, 2014: 14). Parodies are presented as fans themselves: they have their own genuine and ironic engagement with texts and topics, with elements of snark and anti-fandom in their comments. If anti-fans 'position themselves as gatekeepers, thus reinforcing their subcultural capital which in turn enforces specific taste cultures' (Harman & Jones, 2013: 952), then the parody Dark Lord's mocking of *Twilight* fans and characters could be seen as anti-fandom on the part of the character, the parody's author/s, and/or underlining existing tastes among its audience.

Social media rituals

At the confluence of the irreverent internet and fandom practices, there are social media practices highlighting an awareness of playful content drawing on other media texts. These practices also demonstrate an appreciation for internet culture. Just as individual texts and genres have their own tropes and conventions, so social media activity is ritualised, with users encouraging recurring practices, themes, and content.

Shifman (2014) describes a 'hypermeme logic' (23) that accounts for the spread of memes and similar content, and for their audience's ability to comprehend them. This logic can be

extended to a social media literacy, where users are aware of, play with, appropriate, and circumvent the conventions and affordances of platforms and content (just as each platform has its own cultural logic – see Burgess & Green, 2009, for instance). The adaptation and sharing of image macros and memes like *Condescending Wonka*, *McKayla is Not Impressed*, or *Imminent Ned* in response to different themes and contexts demonstrates an affinity with the source text or event (or at least a learned understanding of the source through exposure to other instances of the macro) and, perhaps more importantly, an understanding of the macro form, its applications and attributes (Leaver, 2013).

The social media literacy apparent here is not restricted to memes and macros. Popular content begets its own imitations, remixes, and parodies, further developing ‘vernacular creativity’ online (Burgess, 2008). Practices such as hatewatching, snark, and live-tweeting bring their own conventions, which may have their roots outside of the social media context, such as treating communal experiences documented online as drinking games. This is apparent during television broadcasts, particularly where frequently-featured content or behaviours are the norm (Highfield, 2013), but is also applicable to other contexts that have their own tropes and are narrated in backchannels. By extension, these practices become part of ritualised experiences; political parodies, for instance, are an established part of the ‘mediated spectacle of mainstream politics’ (Wilson, 2011: 458).

Parody accounts on Twitter reflect irreverent practices, textual and cultural fandom, and social media fandom; they are ‘meta-memes’ (Shifman, 2012: 190) of contemporary social media discussions. Such accounts mix memetic and viral aspects: Shifman, studying YouTube videos, argues that viral content receives wide circulation and attention without the audience changing it. Memetic texts, though, attract ‘extensive creative user engagement’ (190), particularly through imitation and remixing, and parody accounts demonstrate recurring participation and reimagination of the form. The presence and awareness of parody

accounts shows their creation to be ritualised: unusual developments within major events are inevitably accompanied by new, topically-relevant parody accounts.

Certain types of event engender humorous interpretations. The Super Bowl, as a major sporting, media, cultural, and social event, is an annual mix of live-tweeting, commentary, and snark (and has its own recurring ‘Superb Owl’ irreverence, a by-product of word concatenation in hashtag creation). The mass audience for this event means that the slightest disruption or unusual development will inspire further comment: when, during the 2013 Super Bowl, the power went out following Beyoncé’s half-time show, the #lightsout hashtag and ironic and humorous commentary inevitably followed (as did tweets from the likes of the Dark Lord) (Blasiola & Carviou, 2013). This was also seen in February 2015 through the sudden explosion of the cult of ‘Left Shark’ on social media, in the wake of Katy Perry’s half-time performance.

Such responses are not limited to Twitter, and take advantage of the affordances of different social media. During the 2012 US Presidential debates, humorous tweets were prominent popular comments (Driscoll *et al.*, 2013), and these translated into other irreverent content: Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s reference to ‘binders full of women’ not only inspired comic tweets and parody accounts, but Tumblr sites, Facebook pages, and other online content critically, politically, and humorously mocking the comment and its implications. These reactions show the transformation of prominent news, trending topics, and major events into memes and humorous devices to be commonplace on social media, with parody accounts just one part of online irreverence.

Research design

This article is interested in the activity of parody accounts on Twitter, particularly their incorporation of topical commentary into their tweets. Three questions guide this research:

1. What forms do parody accounts take on Twitter?
2. To what extent do these accounts incorporate topicality into their tweets – and what responses do these comments receive from the accounts' audiences?
3. How do parody accounts frame topicality in their comments?

To answer these questions, a typology of parody accounts first provides an overview of different approaches to Twitter parodies. Parody accounts are identified here as those that imitate other people, characters, groups, or objects for humorous purposes, and which are not by the subject of the account: 'parody account' is an overarching, inclusive term for this typology. The typology also notes other approaches that share characteristics but are not necessarily seen as parodies. The inclusion of examples is not an endorsement of their remarks or a comment on the success of their humour.

A case study of three prominent parody accounts – the Dark Lord, Elizabeth Windsor, and Death Star PR – then analyses how parodies present topical content, and the attention such comments receive. The accounts were chosen due to their different subjects and their presence within previous datasets. While not central accounts leading these topical discussions, their presence demonstrates that they do still receive attention within these contexts.

To determine the extent to which the selected accounts incorporated topicality into their comments, five months of tweets from each account were categorised as either original tweets or interactions, with original tweets then coded manually by the author in an iterative

process, using the following schema (with categorisations mutually exclusive, to distinguish sponsored content from other comments):

Topical: mentions subjects which are current or newsworthy, and which are not necessarily related to the world of the character; for example, upcoming films, political developments, or celebrity gossip.

Trending: are also grounded in current discussions, responding to popular hashtags and trending topics on Twitter. Such tweets may provide a character-related twist to these conversations, or comment on what is currently trending on Twitter.

Character-specific: original comments from the parody accounts that contain no topical or trending content. They remain within the world or context of the characters, reflecting their everyday comments rather than responding to external stimuli.

Sponsored: promote another company or product. They may be identified by using hashtags such as #sp or #ad. These tweets might have topical relevance, but are categorised as sponsored rather than topical tweets since the primary purpose of the comment is promotional.

Self-promotion: promote the account's extra-curricular activities, their own products, media ventures, and associated accounts. Self-promotional tweets might include topical content; as with sponsored tweets, though, they have not been categorised as topical due to the motivations behind the tweet. This decision was made in order to compare how Twitter users respond to tweets with distinct promotional intentions and the parody accounts' other comments.

There are also various types of **interactions** that are treated separately. **Retweets** (RT) are republications of another user's tweet (with attribution), and may be published using

Twitter's automated RT function or manually. A **modified retweet** (MT) uses another's content but either includes additional comments or is published in a different style than a standard RT (such as using quotation marks). Finally, an **@reply** is a message directed to another user, starting the tweet with that user's name; such tweets only appear in the timelines of users following both accounts invoked in the reply.

A typology of parody accounts

Twitter's parody policy requires such accounts to identify themselves as separate to their subject, protecting other users from impersonation and hoaxing (Twitter, 2014). Having formal guidelines has not restricted the spread of parody on Twitter; instead, it can be seen as an endorsement of the practice. Parody accounts reflect different motivations, from specific, pointed political commentary to general comedy and intertextual play. A distinction is apparent between ongoing and topic-specific parody, though. The latter are created in response to specific phenomena or events, and so are briefly pertinent but lose relevance once their context disappears from public consciousness. These accounts reflect the ritualisation of the parody account form, despite their short lifespan. For the ongoing accounts, their subjects are not as context-specific, encouraging a sustained audience and enabling commentary on numerous topics over an extended period. The audiences for individual parody accounts vary dramatically, as their context may be geographically and temporally limited.

Public figure-specific

Parody accounts of public figures act *as* a known, real person, for obviously comedic purposes. There should be no risk of mistaking their tweets for their subject's actual views;

these accounts play with stereotypes of these figures, or juxtapose their public image with a very different, behind-closed-doors persona.

Character-specific (fictional)

Fictional characters are not immune to parody. Humour is found by integrating the character into contemporary settings, mixing the fictional and the real. These accounts play on character traits, the author's intentions, and fan responses to the texts, offering alternative interpretations of the characters. There is an element of fan-fiction to these accounts, since they extend the world of the characters beyond the original texts and create new content.

For both account types, the creation of accounts for multiple figures from the same context does not mean that personal or canonical connections will be replicated on social media. The authors of different parody accounts might not be the same, and users may have conflicting approaches to parody. Avoiding connecting to other accounts, and as such possibly endorsing them, can allow users to maintain control over their specific parody.

Stereotypes/perceptions of people or groups

These accounts mock and challenge stereotypes and common perceptions of general groups of people. The Journal of BS (@AcademicTitles) satirises the styling of titles for academic papers, often incorporating puns and topical commentary, while @MatureAge plays with stereotypes of mature-age university students. Perception-oriented accounts can be mixed with public figure and character-specific approaches; the @NotTildaSwinton account, while in the name of the actor Tilda Swinton, presents her as an even more enigmatic figure, tweeting riddles and impossibilities, with heightened awareness and operating on a different plane to others.

Organisations

Official institutional and corporate uses of Twitter are widespread, with businesses and government departments among the organisations present on social media. Unsurprisingly, parody accounts exist for real and fictional organisations (such as @FakePewResearch and @DeathStarPR, respectively), mimicking companies and corporate communication styles. These accounts can attract greater attention than their sources; following the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill, the @BPGlobalPR account, which posted sardonic comments about the disaster, was more widely followed than BP's official account (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Non-human entities

These accounts present tweets as if from animals, artworks, cities, and other non-human subjects, without necessarily extending any parody beyond the use of this device. They have their basis in reality, but project for entities that would not otherwise be on social media, giving objects their own personalities such as Self Aware ROOMBA and BiCuriosity Rover (Johnson, 2014). Often these accounts are topic-specific: for instance, when the actor Clint Eastwood addressed an empty chair at the 2012 Republican National Convention, using it as a stand-in for President Obama, numerous parody accounts representing the chair appeared.

Related approaches

Other types of Twitter account might share characteristics with parody accounts, but without comedic intentions. **Hoax** accounts present themselves as real public figures or organisations; however, unlike parody accounts, hoaxes have more malicious rationales. Such accounts are deliberately deceitful, with negative and hostile intentions in attempting to damage a public figure's reputation, rather than playfully engaging with their image (Hutchins, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Official character accounts accompany television broadcasts and other media products, created and maintained as a canonical, transmedia extension of a fictional entity's activities.

Role-playing, meanwhile, also uses character-oriented accounts, drawing from media texts to create accounts that interact with one another following the relationships and plots established in their sources. Twitter role-playing sees fans acting as characters from books, films, and television programmes, including *The Hunger Games* (Magee *et al.*, 2013), *Glee* (Wood & Baughman, 2012), and *The West Wing* (Kalviknes Bore & Hickman, 2013). These accounts demonstrate similar practices to character-specific parody accounts, including hooking in to existing hashtags and trending topics in their tweets; while operating within the general narrative and setting of their source text, role-playing accounts also make use of the affordances and tropes of social media in their tweets.

There are also humorous Twitter accounts without a parody angle, including professional comedians, and other performative accounts, including **bots**; while bots do not necessarily have comedic aims, they are an established part of the Twitter landscape. Furthermore, not all perceived bots are actually bots, raising questions about hoaxes, fakery, and parody.

@horse_ebooks, for instance, 'went from being a bot to being a human impersonating a bot impersonating a human' (Bucher, 2014), before being eventually revealed as a performance art piece.

Parody, topicality, and framing

The typology of parody accounts establishes the different subjects that might be parodied on Twitter. How accounts then treat topicality within their tweets is the focus of the following case study, examining the comments of three parody accounts to identify user practices and how their topical content intersects with both their ongoing activity and the parody's context.

Tweets posted by these accounts between 1 May and 3 October 2013 were captured on 6 October 2013 as a snapshot of their activity: the capture was carried out after the fact in order to collect data about responses to each tweet through the numbers of retweets and favourites they received. While these figures do not provide the total of all retweets and favourites, since users can still respond to tweets weeks, months, and years after publication, this approach does provide a guide to patterns of responses.²

All three accounts are of a similar age, with each created between 4 May and 29 June 2010. However, their activity since 2010 is not quite as alike; as of October 2013, the Dark Lord had posted 5555 tweets and had 2,259,943 followers, Elizabeth Windsor 7231 tweets and 1,101,700 followers, and Death Star PR 4829 tweets and 263,750 followers. Death Star PR was also the only account of the three to follow other users, following 152 Twitter users.

Each of the accounts presents a particular persona, providing a twist on their original source. The Dark Lord parodies Lord Voldemort from *Harry Potter*, mixing current events and topics with the fictional wizarding world created by J.K. Rowling. The Dark Lord's tweets make use of ideas from the series (using magic spells to explain celebrity behaviours, for instance: 'Someone disappeared Miley Cyrus' clothes!'). The parody is more tolerant than the original character, though; while still opinionated and ostensibly presenting themselves as an evil villain, this is more toned down than the tyrannical antagonist of the books.

Elizabeth Windsor, while based on a real person, depicts Queen Elizabeth II as a vocal supporter of things she loves (gin, television) and very blunt about what she does not enjoy (suggestions of abdication, Nick Clegg). In addition to political and royal commentary, the account regularly revises popular culture references with the Queen's own versions of song lyrics, rewording them in the monarch's manner of speaking (for example, adapting the

chorus of Rebecca Black's 'Friday' to 'Friday, Friday, one's gotta get down on Friday.'). The account's success has led to a book, an online store, and op-ed columns for MSN UK.

Death Star PR takes a similar approach to the Dark Lord by presenting *Star Wars*-themed tweets while putting a positive spin on the antagonists of the series ('% of Death Stars blown up by Rebels: 100% % of planets blown up by Empire: 0.000000000000000000001% Pretty obvious who the REAL bad guys are.'). The account uses *Star Wars* references to explain current events and provide meta-commentary: 'FAIR WARNING: If the number of terrible #RoyalBaby parody accounts goes over 9000 today, we WILL destroy your planet.'

Each account's activity between 1 May and 3 October 2013 is shown in Table 1. Elizabeth Windsor, with 605 original tweets and a tweeting rate of 3.90 tweets per day, was the most active of the three accounts, while the Dark Lord and Death Star PR had tweeting rates of 1.07 and 1.27 tweets per day. Death Star PR was the only account to repeatedly engage with other users through retweets and tweets directed at others, posting a combined 52 interactions of this kind. In contrast, the Dark Lord and Elizabeth Windsor had two and four interactions respectively over the five months.

[Table 1 here]

The patterns found in Table 1 can be explained in part by events occurring during this period, most notably the birth of Prince George on 22 July 2013. As 'the Queen' (and thus the royal baby's great-grandmother), Elizabeth Windsor provided extensive commentary about the birth, publishing 60 consecutive tweets on the subject between 21 and 24 July 2013, including quoting fictional text messages, making joke announcements, and posting

promotional tweets for bookmakers. The account's direct connection to this subject sets it apart from the other parodies; while the Dark Lord and Death Star PR both mentioned the royal baby (Death Star PR: 'The #RoyalBaby is on the way. If it's twins, we'll just save everyone the trouble and blow up the new Death Star ourselves. '), it was not to the same extent as Elizabeth Windsor.

The royal baby was not the only subject discussed by these accounts, though, and topical commentary was not omnipresent in their tweets. Using the schema outlined previously, the tweets published by each of the three accounts was manually coded, with each original tweet categorised as either topical, trending, character-specific, sponsored, or self-promotional. The distribution of tweet types for the three parody accounts, and the average number of retweets and favourites each type receives, can be seen in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

Table 2 shows that topical tweets attract more retweets and favourites for each account, even though for the Dark Lord and Death Star PR such tweets were a minority within their overall output: topical content accounted for 21% of the Dark Lord's original tweets, 28% for Death Star PR, and 62% for Elizabeth Windsor. For Elizabeth Windsor, this higher level of topicality is due to the parody's origins, and includes mentions of politicians, current events, and the Queen's own activities, such as live-tweeting opening Parliament and Trooping the Colour ('Crown on. Royal iPhone to silent. Let's do this thing. #QueensSpeech'). Only the Dark Lord regularly engaged in trending discussions, such as '#WorstPickupLines Is that a wand in your pocket or are you happy to see me?'. However, these tweets did not receive the same level of response from followers as either their topical or character-specific posts. This

latter category formed the majority of tweets for the Dark Lord and Death Star PR, presenting mundane comments, usually through the character's framing (The Dark Lord: 'Mondays suck out your soul faster than a dementor.'). Although character-specific tweets were a popular device, Table 2 shows that they still received less attention overall than the accounts' topical comments.

Self-promotional tweets were less well-received for all three accounts, from Death Star PR's links to its YouTube webseries to Elizabeth Windsor's plugs for their book. This suggests that Twitter users read parody accounts for their pithy contributions on their timelines, but are less invested in their external activities. Similarly, sponsored tweets were also less retweeted and favourited: Elizabeth Windsor's use of topical framing to advertise bookmakers (for example, 'Gin o'clock at the Palace - thanks to one's @Coral winnings. Had a few quid on the Royal Baby being called #George, funnily enough. #ad' – 441 retweets), meant that these tweets still received more attention than the account's self-promotional content (such as only 12 retweets for 'You can buy one's book here: [link redacted] #YourQueenLovesYou #eurovision'), but there remains a noticeable difference in responses to sponsored tweets and the accounts' other comments.

Interestingly, Death Star PR averaged more retweets and favourites per tweet than Elizabeth Windsor, despite the latter having four times more followers. The fake Queen's higher level of tweeting may make for more variable responses, with the sheer amount of tweets and their inconsistent relevance to a global audience meaning that followers did not automatically respond to all comments with retweets or favourites. With retweets a more widely-used response for followers than favourites, it may be that Twitter users also feel a desire to share a parody's interpretation of topical events with their own followers without needing to bookmark it as a favourite tweet.

Only Death Star PR repeatedly engaged with other accounts. Interactions overall attracted far fewer retweets and favourites, which may be due to the reduced visibility of such comments, their origins from other accounts, and their directed nature. The minimal level of interactions on the part of the Dark Lord and Elizabeth Windsor may also reflect each account's general approach to Twitter, as neither of these accounts followed other users.

While a parody account's topical content attracts more retweets and favourites than its quotidian posts, what passes for topicality is not necessarily subjects that dominate the traditional news agenda. Popular topical content, especially subjects common to all three accounts, reflected the general media, technology, and cultural interests of the Twitter audience. Politics, for instance, was not a major form of topical content – except for Elizabeth Windsor, due to their political context – with only an exceptional issue like the US government shutdown mentioned by all three parodies. Instead, celebrity and popular culture news were more prominent foci, from the baby of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West to casting announcements for *Batman* and *Doctor Who* (The Dark Lord: 'Ben Affleck as Batman will be the opposite of "movie magic." That is "movie muggles."'). Even the birth of the royal baby, while a news story of international interest, is also indicative of this celebrity culture. Other topics to receive attention from all three parody accounts included the season finale of *Game of Thrones* and the release of Apple's iOS7 mobile operating system (Death Star PR: 'Just upgraded to #iOS7 and now our exhaust port force field is on the fritz. Oh well, what are the chances of Rebels attacking us n'): these references show the parodies, and their audiences, to be culturally and technologically aware. Such topics then connect the accounts to geek and youth cultural phenomena, already popular content on social media, potentially making the parody relevant to a wide audience.

Discussion: Parody on Twitter

The examples of the Dark Lord, Elizabeth Windsor, and Death Star PR indicate the place of topicality within the wider context of Twitter parodies. Each of these accounts is positioned around a specific character, whether inspired by fictional or real origins, but all engage with contemporary culture and events beyond their perceived interests and settings. The discussion of topical developments by parody accounts generally remains in-character, with humour derived from the combination of juxtaposition (the very idea of the Queen live-tweeting the telly), character-specific references, and from elements required for the successful construction of a one-liner within the 140-character limit (including phrasing).

While topical content accounted for a majority of original tweets for Elizabeth Windsor alone, all three accounts found topical tweets to attract more reactions from Twitter users than their other comments. This attention for topical content suggests that such tweets draw an extended audience in comparison to a parody's more mundane comments. Rather than playing just to an audience that appreciates their character's particular style and setting, the connection between the parody and topical discussions could make these accounts more accessible to more readers.

Framing topical discussions within the world of the parodies might account for this response; by commenting on the US government shutdown from the perspective of Lord Voldemort ('Clearly this whole "shut down" is just the US government's way of hiding the dementor attacks. '), the tweet offers an original take which sets it apart from related commentary. The popular culture setting, and the humorous intentions, means that the parody's tweets are different in form to updates from journalists, and this unique presentation may be welcomed to a user's timeline – and spread further – as something irreverent within an otherwise serious or uniform discussion. Exploring this impact, and any audience overlap, is beyond the initial

scope of this study, since the dataset is specific to the parody accounts rather than the extended discussions around these topics. However, this paper offers a foundation for future research to contextualise and explain the role of parody within topical datasets.

Prominent topics for the three parodies – popular culture, celebrity news and gossip, and Western (especially US and UK) politics – reflect the context for these accounts and popular themes on social media in general. More sombre news topics are not as well-represented in these tweets, and their presentation is still linked to potentially frivolous subjects: Elizabeth Windsor was the only account of the three to refer to the ongoing Syrian Civil War, but this was connected to popular culture by also mentioning (in separate tweets) Miley Cyrus and *The X Factor* (for example, ‘Text from President Obama: "Shit got real". Not sure if he's talking about #XFactor or #Syria’). This might underline the importance of humour to the parody accounts, and the dilemma of making comedy about a major conflict. The tweets demonstrate the accounts’ awareness of their audiences: these parody accounts are presumably not followed for detailed analysis or insight, but for the comedic incongruity of the Galactic Empire commenting on the British royal family.

It may be that successful humour and timeliness are more important for a parody account to receive increased attention than the combination of topicality and parody. Of the featured accounts, the comment receiving the most retweets during the study period was a response to celebrity news with no in-character framing; when A-List celebrity couple Kim Kardashian and Kanye West announced in June 2013 that their baby would be called North West, the Dark Lord’s remark that ‘So I’m assuming that North West won’t be a One Direction fan?’ had received over 28,000 retweets and 11,000 favourites by October 2013. Despite making no link to the world of *Harry Potter*, the combination of celebrity culture, reference to another popular act (boy band One Direction, who have an extensive fan presence online), and the humorous one-liner itself allowed the tweet to attract substantial attention. Indeed, the

accessibility of the comment – responding to a trending topic without framing it within the parody – meant that this tweet had greater salience for a wider Twitter audience; another North West tweet by the Dark Lord (‘Kim Kardashian and Kanye allegedly named their daughter North West. It's official, there IS a name worse than Marvolo.’), published four minutes earlier but containing *Harry Potter* references, only received 4377 retweets and 1764 favourites.

There are obvious limits to any generalisations that can be drawn from these accounts. All three are examples of ongoing parodies, with multiple topical interests, rather than event- or issue-specific accounts (for instance, political themes would be more prominent for explicitly political parodies). Similarly, each is a popular account – Death Star PR’s 263,000 followers in October 2013 was the lowest of the three – and less prominent parodies may exhibit different patterns with regards to retweets, favourites, interactivity, and topicality. Global cultural awareness regarding *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and the British monarchy also accounts for the large audience for these accounts, and for the accessibility of their comments: residual media literacy and decades of references to associated texts mean that a Western audience in particular could make sense of these parody accounts without necessarily needing to be intimately familiar with their sources. For event-specific parodies, or accounts playing with local public figures and characters from less well-known texts, the context might not be as easily understandable for a mass audience. It should also be noted, though, that while these three accounts are widely-followed, the proportion of retweets and favourites to the total follower numbers was very low: the Dark Lord had over 2 million followers, yet received on average only 2600 retweets per tweet during this period. Even for prominent parody accounts, while many followers might read their content, not many users (comparatively) *share* these comments further.

Responses to parody tweets are also predominately one-way: the three parodies featured have very limited engagement with other Twitter accounts. Even Death Star PR's interactions reflect different motivations: mentions of @JerkSuperman, another account by the same author/s, reflect self-promotional intentions. The awareness of parody accounts being a creation of other people, rather than 'genuine', might be a factor in a parody's success: many parody accounts have unknown authorship, at least early on, and part of the appeal might be in not knowing their provenance, as this can make the suspension of disbelief easier (followers know that Lord Voldemort is not really tweeting, but not knowing the specific identity of the person/s pretending to be the character could mean that the fantasy can be maintained).³

The lack of engagement with other accounts extends to recognition of other parodies. While there are accounts mimicking other members of the Royal Family or *Harry Potter* characters – with the royal baby accompanied by myriad parodies, from embryo to foetus to tiny person – Elizabeth Windsor and the Dark Lord did not mention them. There is high awareness of the Twitter context, with parody accounts engaging in meta-commentary rather than acknowledging other parodies: established accounts are dismissive towards the inevitable influx of new parody accounts in response to breaking news, while staying in character as the 'real' subject rather than breaking the fourth wall by confirming their fakery. Parody here operates in a bubble: while accounts participate in very social discussions, including live-tweeting or contributing to trending topics, they do not respond to their audience or their surroundings. These accounts encourage and attract retweets from other users, but if someone replies to their tweets, a response from the parody account is not usually forthcoming.

These practices highlight the importance of humour to topical discussions, and the presence of an extensive audience for such commentary. This is not limited to parody accounts, but covers satirical websites, comedians on social media, podcasts, and other combinations of

news and comedy. Humour accounts for widely-retweeted content across multiple Twitter discussions, from the coverage of political debates (Driscoll *et al.*, 2013) to live-tweeting (unintentionally comedic) broadcasts (Highfield, Harrington & Bruns 2013). Such practices are well-established on social media, and are endorsed by other media organisations aggregating humorous topical commentary. The acceptance of these rituals and practices could lead to further topical comments as a means of getting increased attention, albeit for a parody-specific view of topical.

Conclusion

Parody accounts are established presences on Twitter, providing a means to lampoon public figures and contemporary issues. While parody accounts might have specific comedic aims, they share characteristics with other fan practices, including role-playing, snark, and anti-fandom. The ritualisation of parody account creation positions this practice as another form of fandom: that of social media itself, its tropes and conventions. While the examples here suggest parody is a less interactive practice than other interpretations of characters, parody accounts do highlight the extensive literacies of their authors and audiences; their tweets reflect the media literacies around popular culture and news, and digital literacies around social media and the internet, that inform their creation.

Although topical content might not form the majority of a parody account's tweets, these posts can appeal to a wider audience and attract more attention than their everyday tweets. The attention given to topical parody and the prevalence of such accounts underline the importance of the irreverent to social media and internet culture. While not all parody accounts will remain relevant or attract large audiences, their continued presence reinforces

the popularity of humour, play, and silliness online, including as devices for presenting topical comments.

Acknowledgements

An early version of this research was presented at IR14: Appropriation and Resistance, Denver, CO, on 24 October 2013. Thanks to the attendees of this session, and the anonymous conference and journal reviewers, for helping to improve this paper.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

¹ Irreverent practices are not universally playful. While this research studies what might be seen as ‘nice’ or ‘soft’ irreverence, social media and sites such as 4chan and Reddit are used for trolling and lulz that can reflect humorous but also intolerant and incendiary intentions; this is examined by Milner (2013), among others.

² These figures also do not discriminate between genuine users, fake accounts, and bots retweeting popular comments.

³ How the authors of parody accounts perform characters and identity, including the presentation of gender and race (especially when the character and author differ), is an important consideration beyond the scope of this initial paper.

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	The Dark Lord (@Lord_Voldemort7)	Elizabeth Windsor (@Queen_UK)	Death Star PR (@deathstarpr)
Original tweets	165	604	146
Retweets of others	2	2	10
@replies to others	0	2	43
Total	167	608	198
Mean (tweets per day)	1.07	3.90	1.27

Table 1: Total tweeting activity by selected parody accounts, 1 May-3 October 2013

Original tweets	The Dark Lord (@Lord_Voldemort7)			Elizabeth Windsor (@Queen_UK)			Death Star PR (@DeathStarPR)		
	n (tweets)	mean (RT)	mean (Fave)	n (tweets)	mean (RT)	mean (Fave)	n (tweets)	mean (RT)	mean (Fave)
Topical	35	3982.71	1864.14	374	816.38	225.44	41	949.88	248.98
Trending	41	2164.93	1114.71	0	0	0	2	335.50	140.50
Character-specific	72	2853.01	1539.79	159	535.39	165.41	88	609	234.61
Sponsored	16	93.19	103.19	5	703.2	168.2	0	0	0
Self-promotion	1	76.00	155.00	66	106.42	44.44	14	26.36	32.93
Total	165	2637.22	1355.27	604	663.00	189.16	145	645.36	217.90

Interactions

RT	2	2315.50	1611.50	2	139	53.5	9	733.67	128
MT	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	95	55
@reply	0	0	0	2	70.5	39	43	5.28	10.09
Total	2	2315.50	1611.50	4	104.75	46.25	53	130.66	30.96

Overall total	167	2633.37	1358.34	608	660.22	188.44	198	507.59	167.86
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Table 2: Distribution of tweet types for selected parody accounts