

Balding goes trolling? Cross-media amplification of controversy at the 2012 Olympics

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Abstract:

Victory by Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen in the 400 metre individual medley at the London Olympic Games provoked instant and controversial reactions. BBC presenter Clare Balding immediately linked Shiwen to doping. If ‘trolling’ online is the deliberate upsetting of audiences to trigger debate and reflection, was Balding trolling? Her comments triggered trajectories of affective engagement across social and mainstream media, in Britain and internationally, which fed back into BBC coverage. We trace the ‘event arc’ of controversy, finding complex tensions between broadcasters, journalists, celebrities and Twitter users as they compete to control the event’s framing. Continued controversy and attention – ‘remediated trolling’ – benefited these secondary actors. While framing influence appears more dispersed in a hybrid, transnational media ecology, we argue that prominent journalists have learnt to harness the interaction of television, newspapers and social media. These ‘stars’ gain additional prominence through event arcs. Consequently, they must take responsibility for controversies and affective engagement. Trolling brings ratings, but is it ethical?

Key Words: Twitter, trolling, Olympics, hybrid media, framing, BBC, audiences

Introduction

On 28 July 2012 the Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen won gold in the 400 metre individual medley at the London Olympic Games. Her victory provoked immediate controversial reactions. Aged just 16, her winning time was five seconds faster than her previous best for the race and broke the world record by a full second. She swam the final 50 metres more quickly than the winner of the men’s 400m medley, Ryan Lochte of the US. Debate was triggered across television and social media not just by her victory, but by comments from

high profile figures. John Leonard, the executive director of the World Swimming Coaches Association, brought up the issue of doping. ‘The one thing I will say is that history in our sport will tell you that every time we see something, and I will put quotation marks around this, “unbelievable”, history shows us that it turns out later on there was doping involved. That last 100m was reminiscent of some old East German swimmers, for people who have been around a while’ (cited in Wilson 2012). A less predictable source of controversy was the BBC presenter Clare Balding. After the race she asked her co-presenter and ex-British Olympic swimmer Mark Foster, ‘How many questions will there be, Mark, about somebody who can suddenly swim so much faster than she has ever swum before?’ (cited in Williams, Faulkner and Lawton 2012). This drew angry responses on Twitter from some of those watching. As Shiwen won, the first tweets were informative and praised the athlete. Balding’s allusions to doping drew ire. Over the next four days this controversy unfolded. We explain how different actors played different roles in sustaining, amplifying and then containing the controversy. This case is instructive for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand interactivity over time during global media events.

Controversy has long stirred public attention, driving ratings. Creating controversy is a ‘media logic’ (Altheide and Snow 1979), a way of doing things that creates value – news value, entertainment value and economic value. Producers, audiences and others interacting with media organisations come to recognise when this logic is unfolding. The limit of that logic is when controversy goes ‘too far’ – laws are broken, the ‘sphere of legitimate controversy’ in a public culture is breached (Hallin 1986:116), and conflict and even violence ensue. The strategic creation and management of controversy has become more risky in an increasingly participatory media ecology. That once-settled actor ‘the audience’ can intervene in and redirect a public story in ways beyond the control of those initiating the controversy (Al-Lami et al. 2012; Chadwick 2013). The unfolding of media logic is networked across actors and practices. How, concretely, does this work?

This article explores one high profile controversy in order to illuminate the tensions and interdependencies inherent to what Hoskins (2011) calls ‘interactional trajectories’. Hoskins uses the term in describing how survivors and the families of victims of the 7/7 London bombings of 2005 set up social groups, internet memorial sites and other relationships through which they could make sense of the bombings and life thereafter. Hoskins writes, ‘interactional trajectories are a useful way of conceiving of experiences as being extended as individuals/groups encounter or interact with objects, interfaces and others, which in an ongoing fashion shape remembering interactively in the present’ (2011:277). While Hoskins’ focus is on trajectories developing over months and years, we can identify such trajectories developing across minutes, hours and days during the 2012 Olympics. Public attention around the world was upon Shiwen over several days and races, anticipating but also later looking back – remembering interactively in the then present. Social media enabled a shared experience of watching her, speculating about her, celebrating or bemoaning her. This shared experience was part of the broader Olympic experience.

What were users saying? Several discourses were present in the Shiwen controversy: an Olympic discourse of fair play, participation and excellence; a sporting discourse of swimming and its history of times, characters and events; what we might call a 'global media event' discourse constituted by awareness of shared attention of diffused publics upon a single space and time (Dayan and Katz 1992). Overall, a single event such as Shiwen's race is a prism through which numerous discourses are inflected; discussion was not confined to a single order of discourse, but generated arguments about fairness and legality, about race, ethnicity and nationalism, and about how global media and audiences should discuss such issues.

Alongside the substance of discussion, the unfolding of the Shiwen controversy was also a matter of mediation itself; the *how* alongside the *what*. Coverage was broadcast to televisions, through the internet, quickly uploaded to media organisations' watch-again websites and to YouTube and other video-hosting sites. Those presenting the coverage were tweeting, alongside sporting officials, athletes, other journalists and public users. News producers once known as 'newspapers' and 'magazines' reported upon and analysed the event, its broadcasting and social media responses. Tracing the Shiwen controversy highlights a complex of tensions in the overlap of mediums and practices, professional and amateur, and in this case in British media culture and internationally.

Balding's role was all the more surprising for two reasons. First, as a BBC presenter Balding would be expected to uphold values the organisation identifies itself with: informing in an impartial and inclusive manner. However, as the Tweeting the Olympics project showed (see Themed Section Introduction), BBC staff were expected to generate 'buzz' and 'reach': to generate excitement and anticipation for their coverage that would result in greater audience attention. Balding would be expected both to report in an objective manner and to 'engage' audiences through friendly, informal comments. Analysis of Balding's tweets during the Olympics shows such informality is part of Balding's persona. This may be part of what helps presenters create 'connections' with audiences, but it creates a tension that in this case produced a jarring, dissonant set of statements that upset audiences.

Second, Balding's role was surprising because her Olympic performance as a presenter was instrumental to her winning a special award at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTAs), the main UK national awards for television. Andrew Newman, Chairman of BAFTA's Television Committee, said, 'Clare's body of work over the last 13 years speaks for itself, but it was through her expert coverage of the London 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games that Clare became a national treasure, who with her warmth and charisma helped bring the country together as we celebrated in Team GB and Paralympic GB's success. She is a trusted and intelligent live presenter with an ability to transcend genre' (cited in BAFTA 2013).

To illustrate her persona, **Figure 1** below shows a tweet on her page on the night of the Shiwen controversy. She has posted a photograph taken at the opening ceremony. 'What a start' implies there is no need to state what has started; she is intimate with her

audience enough to know they know that her tweets are about the Olympics. She also lets them know what is happening behind the scenes: she is heading to where the swimming finals are taking place. Her page also depicts her great love: horses. The tweet is a success: she has 88 retweets and 49 favorites, while a follower at the top of her stream is wishing her a good time.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Balding tweet on 28 July 2012

We argue that Balding can be considered a troll, an accidental troll perhaps, but a troll nonetheless. She may not have intended to provoke, but her words were interpreted as deliberately provocative. This is understandable; audiences are to an extent aware that presenters follow media logics to maximise engagement. It is habitual to ask questions that are controversial. Whether this is controversial and deliberately so is – if we are explaining the reactions it prompts – in the eye of the beholder. The meaning of the term troll in public communication usually applies to people commenting on internet forums who appear outwardly sincere but whose comments are designed to trigger upset responses among other commenters, creating a futile argument that wastes their time (Herring et al. 2009). Although in public discourse the term trolling has come to mean any form of abusive or apparently mean-spirited communication; this article approaches trolling from its original concept and contributes to an emerging sociology of trolling (Carrigan 2015; Merrin no date). Bartlett notes, ‘the word doesn’t actually refer to some greasy emotional terrorist firing out abuse from his suburban hovel, but rather the slightly less sinister technique of **trolling a baited line** to see what bites’ (Bartlett 2015, bold in original). The troll role or function is translated across mediums and contexts. Media organisations deliberately publish or broadcast objective reports or stories that appear sincere but which producers know feature controversial content that will generate viewer ratings or website hits and thus commercial revenue from advertisers¹ (Merrin no date). When the BBC’s primary

presenter and ‘national treasure’ accuses a Chinese teenager of doping immediately after a race, this fulfils the function of trolling. It generated angry responses, longer-term argument and debate, which filled time and kept attention directed towards the BBC and its coverage. Even if Balding was not deliberately being provocative, her statements were interpreted by audiences that way.

This article demonstrates how the initial act of trolling was amplified by other high profile figures and remediated by major news organisations to create continued controversy and attention that benefited these secondary actors. We describe this as ‘remediated trolling’ or ‘hybrid trolling’ because the function or agency that created the controversy was dispersed across a network of actors and over a number of days (cf. Bolter and Grusin 1999; Grusin 2010). We could also speak of ‘secondary trolling’ in which journalists or Twitter users knew ‘which buttons to push’ to further upset and engage audiences and amplify the controversy. While Shiwen’s race and Balding’s comments occurred on 28th July, it was not until the 30th and 31st that the controversy reached an apex. Not all actors seek to amplify controversy. In line with previous studies of public Twitter debates, we find some users seek to interject information and ‘correct’ inaccuracies (Ampofo et al. 2011). We also find users commenting on the appropriateness of speculation: a meta-discourse about norms of this public sphere. Some users sought harmony and a more informed resolution within the (assumed) community of ‘the’ audience (Anstead and O’Loughlin 2011:1341; cf. Couldry 2003; Marriott 2000). Analysis shows how the interaction of these competing logics and functions operated.

This analysis suggests further exploration of ‘event arcs’ or interactional trajectories. Having identified the principal actors, functions and dynamics present in the Shiwen controversy, we expect to find similar patterns in other global event controversies. How ‘buzz’ operates depends on who responds or deconstructs the initial event or statement; if a journalist from a major news organisation can find a concise way to express the controversy or add to it, their iteration will be retweeted by publics and even responded to by event participants. This is a continuity with pre-internet event arcs, because framing power lay with whoever could first find a template or precedent to make a new event intelligible in terms of an old one. In a social media age, this power is more contingent and dispersed. However, our analysis suggests prominent journalists are still ‘primary definers’ in such arcs; they have learnt to harness the interaction of television, newspapers and social media.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we offer greater theoretical contextualisation of trolling and hybrid media interaction, and set out our methodology. Our analysis responds to Karpf’s (2012) call for ad hoc, contextual, time-limited studies – what he calls ‘kludgy’ or work-around studies. The internet – and hence media ecologies more generally – was different in 2010, in 2012 and 2014, and our methodology emerged to fit the internet and media dynamics of summer 2012. The bulk of the paper presents analysis of the four days of the controversy. We conclude with empirical and normative questions for media practitioners and scholars of global media events.

Theory and Method: Tracing Interactional Trajectories

We did not intend to study the Ye Shiwen controversy. That we did indicates something about the possibilities for studying television and social media. As the Section Introduction details, we began with quantitative analysis of Twitter to identify trends in different Language Services. However, we also manually read and coded 1,824 English-language tweets as part of a discourse analysis to understand how users discussed issues of gender, religion and nationalism. That qualitative analysis directed us to the Ye Shiwen event and to a more specific set of research questions and theoretical concerns. The claims we make below are based on interpretive analysis of this body of tweets, not quantitative analysis (cf. Anstead and O’Loughlin 2015). Our methodology had a life of its own, and our questions and analysis are as much a consequence of what technology and resources allowed as what theory would have directed us to design and test.

Much reaction to BBC coverage was negative. Firstly, users interacted with BBC corporate accounts and employees to complain that the BBC sustained debate about the doping accusations. Criticism became more frequent after the Olympic committee had confirmed Shiwen had tested negative for performance enhancing drugs.

@Gabethevegan: @bbc5live please stop running with this malicious non story of the female Chinese Swimmer

@Mike4Wales: @DavidBondBBC Bordering on slander now. 1 “lone” voice and you lead on the doping “problem” facing the Games. Disgraceful negativity.

There were also a significant number of criticisms aimed at BBC sports presenter Clare Balding and her involvement within the live broadcast of the race. A number of these tweets were emotionally charged and users were evidently unhappy with her suggestion.

@JRomie : @bbc2012 Claire balding is out of order questioning Ye Shiwen’s Gold medal performance in the 400M #london2012 #bbc2012

@DionneHenry5: @clarebalding¹² You make me sick! A young chinese swimmer breaks world record, and you’re accusing her of drugs? Go and Get a life please!

Two BBC pundits did receive significant praise. Twitter users commended Ian Thorpe for his response to the accusations during a televised interview with Gary Lineker, especially his role in highlighting any biases against Ye Shiwen because she is a Chinese athlete. Twitter user @wheelerofads posted:

@GaryLineker some really good, objective comments from Ian Thorpe especially ‘taking nationalities out’ of the debate over Ye Shiwen.

The idea of ‘taking nationalities out’ expresses a cosmopolitan ideal – an interesting response to the nationalist and superpower discourse emerging. Shiwen’s nationality was seen to be a key factor in the accusations. Users highlighted Western bias against the Chinese, whether present in media coverage or in comments of members of the wider US sporting community. Often tweets suggested political tensions between the two nations were responsible for the sporting differences. Users suggested that if Shiwen were not Chinese then the accusations would not have been made, especially given the similar world record-breaking performances by US athletes, such as Michael Phelps. For example, one user tweeted:

@ullah_i: @London2012 US coach shame on you to accuse chinese of doping. Olympic committee should take note reprimand such irresponsible officials.

Jonathan Edwards (@JDE66) was also significant for his reaction to the accusations. He also showed evidence of engagement with a number of individual users on Twitter, even addressing some of the concerns raised over the BBC coverage. Through his interaction with users, Edwards achieved a small-scale global conversation and highlighted how the BBC can both simultaneously drive traffic to their coverage whilst also increasing participation by media consumers. Tweets included:

@JDE66: I feel very uneasy about accusations being leveled at Ye Shiwen - she’s 16! I’d prefer to believe in brilliance until proven otherwise

@JDE66: “@Lewisno1fan: @JDE66 Is it true that all medallists are drug tested in these Games? If that’s the case there should be no accusations.” yes

The Shiwen controversy – how it became a controversy – was an interactional trajectory that, by tracing how it developed, allows engagement with recent theoretical explanations of changing media technologies, functions and cultures. We formulated a new set of research questions and designed a methodology accordingly. We asked: What determines the direction of a controversy once it has been triggered, in a hybrid, multi-media ecology? What functions are observable, and what actors or actor-networks perform those functions? How do different actors negotiate the sphere of legitimate controversy?

Answering these questions required several methodological adjustments, beyond the BBC project. First, our research for the BBC only analysed tweets mentioning the BBC and its assorted hashtags and addresses. The controversy’s trajectory would inevitably leap beyond BBC-related conversation once other media reported upon it. We needed to understand the Twitter universe in general. We ran queries using search terms in Sysomos (see appendix). This generated two sets of Twitter data: a random sample of 5000 tweets about Ye Shiwen, from a total population of 30735 tweets, and 8058 tweets mentioning Clare Balding’s

account handle (@clarebalding1). All tweets collected were published between 28 July and 1 August, 2012, the time-frame used for our case study. Second, we analysed the range of national and international media through which this controversy unfolded. Our sampling strategy began with a systematic search using Lexis Nexis; we added further emerging stories once we began tracing the interactions. Users tweeted links to stories beyond our initial sample but which were important for understanding how the controversy was understood and propelled forward. By combining this new corpus of tweets with close observation of a range of national and international media, we offer an interpretative, cross-platform case study. Our qualitative approach breaks away from the quantitative traditions of our previous analysis (Dennis et al. 2015). Instead, we seek to build on our initial findings given the thematic overlap with the research aims. What follows is a detailed case study in which we zoom in on a global media event in order to trace the controversy as it moves between different media platforms, exploring how different actors use a range of mediums to sustain, amplify and contest how the controversy is framed.

Our methodology faced several limitations:

- Cooperation with the BBC enabled us to use Sysomos, allowing keyword queries retrospectively, a great benefit to us as academic researchers who do not have such access through universities. However, Sysomos is not fully transparent, delivering a restricted sample based on unknown criteria and often with non-GMT time stamps. It took much manual labour to organise tweets into the sequence originally posted.
- Using keywords to refine large collections of social data can compromise the data collected. The keywords implemented did miss other relevant tweets, such as those misspelt. This was evident in our own comparison of the data provided and data collected through Sysomos.
- Twitter is a problematic proxy for 'public debate' since its users are skewed demographically and user identities are difficult to verify (boyd and Crawford 2012:669).
- We can only speculate what news reports or television broadcasts Twitter users were exposed to. We can make inferences based on specific items they refer to, but their responses may have been formed through a cumulative engagement with several media sources. By 2012 two-screen viewing was common in the UK (Ofcom 2013). A majority of Twitter users would have been using Twitter on mobile devices while watching on a laptop or tweeting on a laptop or tablet while watching on a television set. The unit of analysis 'the audience member' or 'the user' and the unit of analysis 'media' have little validity in this environment.
- Data had disappeared. The Twitter account @ClareBalding1 Balding used during the 2012 Olympics had been closed. She now uses the account @ClareBalding. We found a workaround: Sysomos delivered us all of the

retweets of @ClareBalding1's tweets during the Games period. Since we could safely assume all of Balding's tweets were retweeted during the Games, these retweets were in effect a set of her tweets.

- Our analysis of news content relied on the online editions of a number of news providers. Furthermore, some publications, notably *The Times*, were behind a paywall and as such were not included in our analysis.

In the analysis that follows we have used original Twitter handles because there is some equivalence or horizontality to interactions between 'ordinary' users and journalists, athletes and commentators. Often, ordinary users perform journalistic functions such as retrieving and sharing information and adding headlines to events. It would warp the analysis to only cite the names of high profile figures.

Day 1: Triggering the initial controversy, 28 July 2012

At 8:15pm (GMT) on 28th of July the women's 400m individual medley began. Shiwen's world record was met with surprise and joy on Twitter. While some users preferred to report the results of the race and inform people about the new world record of Shiwen, others expressed their surprise at the young athlete's performance:

@Gachugo: Ye Shiwen is 16 years old! Damn! A 16 year old girl now holds the WR #LondonOlympics

When Balding asked Mark Foster how controversial Shiwen's victory was, discussions on Twitter concerning doping suspicion appeared immediately. At 8:32pm³ the first user, @hwallop, reacted angrily to Balding's intonation that the then-victorious Shiwen had cheated, directly quoting her:

Is that @clarebalding1 suggesting Chinese swimmer is on drugs? "How many questions will there be over a swimmer who improves so much?"

The Twitter user @hwallop had over 20,000 followers so would have received wide attention. By 8:37pm his tweet was retweeted. Three seconds later, recognising Shiwen's victory might be controversial, journalist Joshi Herrmann from the London newspaper the *Evening Standard* posted a link encouraging users to comment on their live blog:

Did @clarebalding1 just suggest that Chinese swimmer Shiwen Ye might be doping live on air? See the Standard live blog <http://t.co/loYlkyZk>.

There followed a number of users expressing their unhappiness in different ways that reflect differing uses of the medium. User PeteHuntley expressed this using the hashtag #justsayin:

@clarebalding1 that question re the chinese WR 'would questions be asked at that performance' was out of order IMO. #justsayin

Another expressed their curiosity by asking a question to an imagined audience:

@mikewhite14: Is it me or was @clarebalding1 suggesting the 16yr old Chinese swimmer was juiced up to warrant that explosive finish?

One user even created an account just to 'shout' at Balding:

@random2112: @clarebalding1 can't believe you insinuated that ye shiwen cheated! combined with your population and noise comments Id accuse you of bias.

That user had no followers and was following nobody. They tweeted this statement a few times, using @clarebalding1 to address her directly. Ali Harwood tweeted:

@clarebalding1 Pls think about fair coverage.My wife & I am disappointed by lack of respect & coverage given to Chinese swimmers & support.

Such tweets have the tone of a letter to the editor in bygone media days. However, through the evening a majority of tweets within our sample were retweets of the *Evening Standard's* @joshihermann or @standardnews, the newspaper's own address. Balding's own tweets that evening did not mention Shiwen's race.

Apart from Balding's statement, the comparison of Ye Shiwen with the American swimmer Lochte amplified the controversy on Twitter. A Princeton athlete, Brooks Powell, was one of the first to highlight that Shiwen's last 50 metres was faster than Lochte's in the men's race:

@powell_brooks: Shiwen Ye, just split 58.68 on that free... Lochte only split a 58.65 #wow

Although this user had only 295 followers, his tweet was retweeted 45 times. Freelance journalist Jens Weinreich made the same comparison and his tweet became one of the most popular tweets of the night:

Ye Shiwen did faster last 50 m than Ryan Lochte. I ask her why, her answer: "because I got a very good training in recent times" #London2012

Subsequent to Balding's televised comments, then, Twitter became a platform in which controversy and suspicion about Shiwen's performance were reinforced.

Apart from the *Evening Standard*, online news media were slow to react to Balding's trolling. Instead, initial coverage was framed around a national sporting narrative, the quest for a British Olympic medal in the pool, especially as the host nation had yet to win a medal. A number of articles expressed disappointment that the British swimmer Hannah Miley, who went into the Games with high expectations following her silver medal at the World Championships in 2011, finished fifth. The *Daily Mail* (Folley 2012; Ridge 2012) and The *Guardian* (Ingle 2012; Jones 2012b) reflected a sense of national disappointment as Miley represented the final realistic chance of a medal for Britain on what was the first day of competition. Shiwen's performance was mentioned in passing, with reports of her world record time forming a part of the story-arc (BBC News 2012f; Folley 2012; Ingle 2012; Jones 2012b; *Evening Standard* 2012a; Ridge 2012). In contrast to Twitter discussions, Ye's performance was treated with shock and awe rather than suspicion (Jones 2012b; Ridge 2012). The *Evening Standard* (2012a) emphasised the incredible achievements of both Shiwen and her male gold-winning counterpart, Sun Yang. The only doping suggestion found in our analysis was in below-the-line comments of a *Daily Mail* article (Folley 2012). These comments were immensely unpopular, with a post questioning Shiwen's performance receiving 70 negative votes.

BBC coverage did not mention Balding's comments, instead referring to her co-commentator, Mark Foster, who stated that the final 100 metres from Shiwen 'was something I've never seen before' (BBC News 2012e). The BBC uploaded race highlights but omitted the discussion that took place between Balding and Mark Foster (BBC News 2012f). Overall, online news sources were slow to register Balding's questions and the Twitter debate.

Day 2: Secondary trolling in bold, 29 July 2012

On the early afternoon of 29 July, *Guardian* columnist Andy Bull (2012a) reported: the unavoidable history of the Chinese swimming team and the comparison of Shiwen and Ryan Lochte. However, Bull refrains from speculating on the use of performance enhancing drugs, instead praising the talent spotting system in place in China (Bull 2012a). A *Daily Mail* article published at 22:00 repeats these themes (Lawton 2012), adding that Shiwen's time would have won the equivalent men's event in 1972. Reader comments largely condemn such questions without presentation of information on the swimmer's test results. The *Telegraph* develops this narrative and reported through a swimming discourse, highlighting the shock and suspicion within the swimming community and China's apparent 'history of doping' (White 2012). The *Telegraph* spread this news within the Twittersphere as well, thus indirectly justifying Clare Balding's question:

@TelegraphSport: Must read: swimming still in shock over as Shiwen Ye's clocks faster time the Ryan Lochte (Ye is a girl)

This is remarkably different to the comments on the next *Daily Mail* article published at 23:26.

The second article marks an important trajectory shift in which journalists amplified and fuelled the controversy on Twitter: a case of what we call secondary trolling. The *Daily Mail* linked the questions asked by Balding during the live broadcast to the doping controversy (Williams, Faulkner and Lawton 2012), and then illustrated angry audience responses to amplify the atmosphere of controversy. This placed the doping question, and the role of Clare Balding in triggering the accusations, as central to the emerging narrative. What is interesting is how and why certain screenshots of tweets are highlighted in the article. Firstly, the authors integrate a tweet from Ian Hyland, an entertainment reporter:

Did Clare Balding just stop short of wondering whether China's surprise 16 yr old Gold medalist might be on drugs? #london2012

Secondly, the article integrated tweets from Twitter users to illustrate the controversy surrounding Balding's reaction to the performance. For example, @aliwillson tweeted:

Ye Shiwen sets world record and Clare Balding immediate intimates she doping. Who the hell does she think she is?! #BBC pls fire her ASAP

What is interesting about this tweet, shown in **Figure 2**, is the terms that are in bold. When a user performs a search on Twitter, the search criteria appear in a bold typeface in the results. In Figure 2 "Clare Balding" and "doping" were the search criteria. It is unclear if a *Daily Mail* employee undertook this search, or whether another actor did and they simply copied the screenshot. However, the search criteria illustrate trolling *intent*: journalists consciously – and transparently – attempted to amplify Balding's role in the controversy. Reader comments seek to defend Balding, claiming that her line of questioning was justified and within reason (Williams, Faulkner and Lawton 2012).



Angered: Some users took to Twitter, with @aliwillson even calling for Miss Balding's sacking

Figure 2: Screenshot of the tweet by @aliwillson used in the *Daily Mail* coverage, 29 July (Williams, Faulkner and Lawton 2012)

The article reinforces comparison between Shiwen and Lochte. It includes a Table, **Figure 3** below, that compares the background, training regime and sporting history of both athletes.

This Table illustrates the overlapping race, ethnicity and gender discourses that are present throughout this case.



Figure 3: Comparison of Ye Shiwen and Ryan Lochte in *The Daily Mail*, 29 July (Williams, Faulkner and Lawton 2012)

This example illuminates the complex entanglements that can occur between different media platforms within a hybrid media system, as tweets that were formed by an active audience during a live broadcast formed the foundation of an article by a news organisation two days later (see Chadwick 2013). Tracing these information flows is more complex than in the broadcast era.

Day 3: *The storm builds, 30 July 2012*

After midnight, users and journalists began to support Balding. For instance, @45topchef tweeted:

@clarebalding1 no dishonour for you to question Chinese swimmer. it is curious for her to improve so much.

He then tweeted:

@clarebalding1 keep saying what you think, Clare! hadn't noticed Chinese swimmer's improvement, it is curious!

The *Daily Mail* has long had a hostile relationship with the BBC (Bennett 2013:109; Ellis 2008). In this context, it was no surprise to find that a third *Daily Mail* article quickly followed at 00:42, after midnight. This reinforced Balding's role as a potential 'troll' by including a response in which the BBC explicitly denied that its presenter accused Shiwen of doping offences. An article in the *Telegraph* also suggested a central role that Balding had played in triggering the speculation (Telegraph 2012a).

The *Daily Mail* suggests the origins of the controversy were on Twitter:

Miss Balding's question provoked a storm among BBC viewers on Twitter, with many praising her for daring to even hint at the possibility of cheating, but many criticising her for tainting the Chinese swimmer's achievement and some even calling for her sacking. (Williams, Faulkner and Gye 2012)

Balding's first tweet of the day at 7:53am was relaxed in tone:

Beautiful day. Perfect for X-Country at Greenwich or a dip in the pool. Morning heats, afternoon diving & evening swimming finals for me

However, at 8:10am she acknowledges – indirectly – the controversy she has created:

By the way, in the process of working on the telly today I may ASK some Questions. It's part of the job.

'By the way' either downplays what follows or suggests a rebuttal to those questioning her. Capitalising ASK and stating 'It's part of the job' adds a defensive quality to her tweet. Twitter users were supporting Balding in increasing numbers. @BarryRussell1 tweeted that morning in response to the *Daily Mail's* coverage:

@clarebalding1 just read the nonsense on DM website re Chinese swimmer. Keep asking the Q's Clare, thats your job!!!

Leanne, user @walkabout26, was fully behind Balding:

Yeah cos a chinese teenage girl out-swimming a massive lump of american man is no big deal. Just keep quiet and smile eh?

@JenRGilpin thought Balding 'absolutely right to question the Chinese victory', and @mandyandey (only confirmed followers can see his tweests) agreed:

@clarebalding1 job well done! It was a reasonable question given China's dubious doping history!

That afternoon the trajectory of the controversy changed again when the Guardian published an interview with John Leonard, the Executive Director of the American Swimming Coaches Association (Bull 2012c). Leonard labelled Shiwen's performance 'unbelievable' and 'disturbing'; her time was 'impossible' (Bull 2012c). Leonard argued Shiwen looked like 'superwoman' and that 'any time someone has looked like superwoman in the history of our sport they have later been found guilty of doping' (Bull 2012c). His comments drew together several circulating discourses. Leonard used a swimming discourse, comparing Shiwen's performance to that of Irish swimmer Michelle Smith, who tested positive for Androstenedione following the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. Leonard used a Cold War discourse, declaring that the 'last 100m was reminiscent of some old East German swimmers' (Bull 2012c). Thirdly, Leonard drew on gender discourse to claim 'a woman does not out-swim the fastest man in the world in the back quarter of a 400m IM that is otherwise quite ordinary. It just doesn't happen' (Bull 2012c; Elgot 2012; Orvice 2012). Leonard became a symbol for the US in subsequent online media coverage (Bryant 2012; Bull 2012b; Elgot 2012; Williams and Faulkner 2012).

Mark Foster (2012), the swimmer who featured on the live broadcast with Balding, challenged Leonard, arguing that Shiwen may be the 'female Michael Phelps'. Foster recalled controversy surrounding Michael Phelps' eight gold medal haul at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. These questions surrounding gender bias, xenophobia and tensions between China and the United States delineate the salient discourses for the following day. On this day, meanwhile, Shiwen produced a stunning freestyle leg by coming 0.18 seconds faster than the Olympic record she set in Monday's semi-final (BBC News 2012e). On Twitter, however, the day's trending topic was Leonard's statements, remediated by tweets from: the London Olympics official website; mainstream media such as the *Daily Mail* and London's *Standard*; and the sport webpage *Sporting Intelligence*. The *Daily Mail* described the controversy as a war between two great powers, China and the US.

Although Leonard's role was displacing Balding's within news coverage and on Twitter, users were relaying critical responses to Balding on Weibo, the Chinese social media site. At 22:17 the user @jkbloodtreasure tweeted:

This is the old woman who questioned the strength of a young Chinese girl'
<http://t.co/5rG9Jxeh> @clarebalding1 not popular on China twitter

He linked to a report on *Tea Leaf Nation*, an e-magazine 'for China experts of all stripes—journalists, diplomats, academics, analysts—while remaining fun and accessible to casual China watchers' (*Tea Leaf Nation* 2011). That same link was shared four minutes later by

Benjamin Ramm, a researcher and media contributor, who added a clause that effectively put a headline on this new twist in the story:

Weibo vents at @clarebalding1. RT @jkbloodtreasure “The old woman who questioned the strength of a young Chinese girl” <http://t.co/m3l5wvpp>

The interactional trajectory was broadening.

Day 4: *Apex of the controversy, 31 July 2012*

The vast majority of online news coverage surrounding the Shiwen doping controversy occurred three days after the event itself. Mainstream media had a major story; it could recap the controversy so far and pick out aspects that might drive it forward. While the IOC tried to close the story down, a range of actors – publics, celebrities, journalists – began a debate about whether such a debate is ethical. Critiques of Balding, Leonard and Shiwen continued from differing perspectives, but also critiques of critiques. This signified a meta-discourse about the quality and morality, as well as the norms and civility, of the very ‘global conversation’ the BBC is tasked to produce.

The day began with a number of articles revisiting the events so far (BBC News 2012b; BBC News 2012c; Collins 2012; Wilson 2012). News providers such as Metro UK and CNN, who had not engaged in the debates on Twitter so far, reported on Shiwen. Across coverage, Balding and Leonard were connected. The *Daily Mirror* reported that Leonard’s remarks ‘came after BBC presenter Clare Balding questioned whether Ye used underhand methods to compete’ (Collins 2012; see also Wilson 2012). Even the BBC confirmed Balding’s role in the controversy, highlighting the question she posed following the performance (BBC News 2012c), and reporting the anger directed at Balding on a number of Chinese websites (BBC News 2012b).

Public opinion on Twitter followed news reporting, and tweets were also more frequent on this day. In the morning, users voiced support to Balding similar to the day before, and pointed to hypocrisies in news coverage. Having perhaps picked up his morning newspaper, at 8:18am user @NorthGooner tweeted:

2 days ago the daily mail blasted @clarebalding1 for doubting the chinese swimmer. Today they do the same on the FRONT PAGE #hypocrites.

At 8.24am, noting CNN’s report on Balding’s role (Thompson 2012), @SamCullan also addressed Balding and the BBC directly:

@SamCullan: @clarebalding1 @BBCSport some US reports blame you for the doping speculation! Typical American bad sportsmanship.

Thereafter, reactions to Balding were entirely negative: she was told she was ‘spiteful’, ‘nitpicky’, ‘unfair’, ‘xenophobic’ and a ‘Bitch’; she should feel ‘a right clown’ and ‘ashamed of herself’ (“Bad Value Winners” 2012; “hlj” 2012; Finn 2012; Jessica 2012; “oscargracie” 2012; Whithair 2012; Wyatt 2012). Users wondered why she and the BBC had not apologised to Shiwen. The most retweeted comments came from @MadamMiaow, the writer and blogger Anna Chen. At 5.27pm she tweeted:

Has @clarebalding1 apologised for smearing Ye Shiwen yet? Would be nice to see some fair play from her. <http://t.co/xTAlnx7k>

This tweet linked to a *Telegraph* story by David Hughes, ‘The Olympic witch hunt started by Clare Balding is over’. Three minutes later Chen made the most explicit representation of Balding as a troll, bully, or ‘tormentor’. Chen’s second tweet refers to the arrest that day of a 17-year old man for posting tweets to GB diving competitor Tom Daley suggesting that by not winning gold he had let down his father Rob who died in 2011. Chen draws equivalence between the abuse directed to Daley and statements Balding made about Shiwen.

@MadamMiaow: Tom Dayley’s [sic] Twitter tormentor arrested. Hope @clarebalding1 has apologised for accusations about 16 yr-old Ye Shiwen. #olympics

We could infer that Chen draws equivalence between intent and effect: between the harm caused by one and the other.

Two lines of criticism followed. One referred to the norms of civil discourse: the problem was not what Balding said but how she said it. @tonyhatfield suggested,

@clarebalding1 was a bit quick off the druggie -Ye Shiwen allegations

He suggested what was wrong was how soon after the race she made the allegation, not the substance of the allegation. The *Daily Mirror* journalist Ian Hyland tweeted of Balding,

I still think she stepped over the line on Ye Shiwen.

Others in our sample suggested Balding had not just ‘smeared’ but ‘slandered’ Shiwen, stepping beyond civil discourse into defamation.

The second line of criticism referred to national and cultural difference. Users accused Balding of unevenness by making no allegations of cheating against US athletes. That evening @LewisNo1Fan posted a tweet that included the blogger @blacbloc:

@blacbloc So 1st @clarebalding1 smears the Chinese girl, now @BBCsport are attacking “Oriental culture”. Really sick of this shit now #racist

@LewisNo1Fan was Amy Wyatt, a user with 312 followers. @blacbloc retweeted her comment to their 3137 followers. In this way we see users knowing how to amplify their complaints. Whether @BBCsport read this tweet and reflected on whether they were being racist is another matter.

Around 08:00, Jonathan Edwards, triple jump world record holder and BBC presenter, also expressed his unhappiness about cheating accusations towards Shiwen in a tweet that was re-tweeted by 94 users:

@JDE66 I feel very uneasy about accusations being leveled at Ye Shiwen - she's 16! I'd prefer to believe in brilliance until proven otherwise

One major remediator of criticism towards Leonard was Adam Liaw, food columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, with 25,781 followers. Liaw criticized Leonard for making accusations without evidence.

Around midday two Olympic officials tried to contain the controversy. Mark Adams, the International Olympic Committee Communications Director, claimed Shiwen's critics should 'get real' and recognise her achievement given the strict drug testing regime at the London Olympics (Kirkup 2012; *London Evening Standard* 2012). Likewise, Lord Colin Moynihan, the chairman of the British Olympic Association, confirmed in a press conference that WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) had passed Shiwen as clean and that speculation in the press was 'regrettable'. He claimed WADA's announcement should be 'the end of the story' (Dominiczak and Cecil 2012; *Telegraph* 2012b; Wilson 2012). Former swimmers defended her in print (*Daily Mirror* 2012; *London Evening Standard* 2012) and on the radio (see Dominiczak and Cecil 2012; *Telegraph* 2012b). The IOC and WADA announcements reinforced the third trajectory shift, from fervent speculation surrounding Shiwen to coverage discussing whether speculation was appropriate.

From this point, public and celebrity Twitter users followed the official statements, attempting to counteract the accusations and celebrate the performance. Footballer Vincent Kompany claimed that the appropriate response to Shiwen's victory was to congratulate her:

Well done Ye Shiwen and thank you is all we should be saying. #London2012

Sarcasm proliferated. For instance, the tweet of Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, fictional character of author Paul Howard, was one of the most popular comments regarding doping accusations towards Shiwen:

Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen has tested positive for an outboard engine.

In the same way, the tweet of English comedian Milton Jones was retweeted 70 times out of our 5000 tweet qualitative sample.

‘Ye Shiwen denies doping’. So Do Ping came second?

Following the announcements from the Olympic officials, Leonard’s comments came under intense scrutiny. Shiwen (Sun 2012a), her family (Branigan 2012), and a number of Chinese sporting officials, including Xu Qi, head of the Chinese swimming team, responded with anger to Leonard’s claims. The *Guardian* formalised the debate by posting a poll on their website in which 98% of the respondents felt that Shiwen deserved an apology from Leonard (Guardian 2012).

At this point, the geopolitical Cold War discourse featured again. Much anger aimed at Leonard was deemed to be part of broader tensions between China and the West. London’s *Evening Standard* (2012b) and the BBC (BBC News 2012b) cited posts from Chinese citizens on Weibo that questioned the reaction from both Leonard and the British media. News articles suggested American ‘sour grapes’ (Kirkup 2012; Lefever 2012; *Telegraph* 2012b; Williams, Faulkner and Durante 2012). This event was even interpreted as an indication of China replacing the US as the hegemon in the global order (Tang 2012). The *Daily Mail* again attempted to ignite the controversy by explaining that Shiwen’s world record performance was due to a gruelling training regime she undertook as a child; the article was entitled ‘Forging of the Mandarin mermaid: How Chinese children are taken away from their families and brutalised into future Olympians’ (Jones 2012a). This article is an obvious attempt to provoke a reaction from audiences, publishing photos of Chinese children apparently in pain from their training. The article makes an explicit comparison to the ‘robotic’ training regime of Eastern Germany, discussing the experiences of swimmer Petra Schneider. The article compares Shiwen to Schneider: ‘Ye Shiwen possesses that same masculine, almost wall-like figure; the same impossibly wide shoulders and huge, rounded thighs; the same armchair-leg calves... Ye, though barely out of adolescence, appears androgynous.’ (Jones 2012a).

This article generated interaction and buzz, with 639 user comments, the most popular of which reflect the numerous overlapping discourses present within this single event: race; gender; sports; ethnicity; and nationalism (Jones 2012a). Similarly, the buzz spread to Twitter. However, news media were misleading audiences: Ye Shiwen actually trained in Australia as well as China (BBC News 2012c).

A resolution?

On the night of 31 July there were only 12 tweets connecting Balding to Shiwen, though all of them were critical. Balding herself did not mention the controversy again. She offered supportive tweets to GB equestrian athletes and expressed excitement to be at swimming finals when she would witness ‘Phelps make history’. She also continued to construct her role as part of the imagined community of Olympic watchers. At 10:34 pm she tweeted:

Woman on the table next to me tonight “You’re in my house every day. I’m going to have to start charging you rent”

She acknowledged her role in the Durkheimian media event in which the ‘we’ is assembled via media, with Balding reaching directly into homes over the Olympic period. That night, Shiwen won a second gold in the 200m women medley. Users reacted with joy:

@MichCheesman: Ye Shiwen wins! Yay! When is someone gonna accuse her of doping? #you’reAmazingYe!

Twitter user Philip Hersh (@) used sarcasm to refer to previous doping allegations:

Did Chinese tell Ye Shiwen to win without blowing away record and attracting more doping attention? Oly rec, no WR

Thus, while Balding did not mention the controversy again, the debate continued on Twitter. Indexing online news media during the day, users began to refer to US-China tensions and unfairness towards China. For example:

@MaddyLovesBlog: So pissed at everyone saying Ye Shiwen is cheating. Of course when Chinese win, it’s cheating, when westerners win, it’s amazing. WTF

Others even related these accusations to the ambition of Americans:

@Ebuka: This noise about Ye Shiwen... Americans always kick up dust when a non American becomes so dominant in ‘their’ sports. They did it with Bolt

Thus, the interactional trajectory that began with Balding and Leonard, amplified at different stages by mainstream media, met reactions of Twitter users who ultimately felt the necessity to defend the young Chinese athlete. Amazed by her individual power, users supported this new talent in swimming history.

Conclusion

The BBC explicitly set out to act as the hub not just for British audiences but for global ones (see Section Introduction). What responsibilities come with this, and did the BBC fulfil them? The media ecology of summer 2012 presented problems for a BBC seeking to balance the need to represent the diverse views and hopes of global publics with its home national audience backing ‘Team GB’; Balding’s statements could be instantly reposted on Twitter and cause a backlash in China. However, could controversy be used to promote collaborative

discussion? Could even intentionally contentious opinions or incorrect statements be used to trigger productive discussions across national borders or political perspectives? Could a form of cosmopolitan trolling be used strategically to allow the BBC to create a global conversation?

This analysis suggests trolling as a function can in some circumstances create productive interactions. The Twitter conversations that emerge around controversial marching events in Northern Ireland have been shown to bring perspectives together, for instance, and expose people to views and solutions they might not encounter (Black 2015). Controversial statements draw out assumptions from audiences-cum-users about what *can* and *should* be said, and what is unfair, irrelevant or plain malicious. Balding's provocation triggered audiences to 'do work' to 'correct' the BBC or anti-Shiwen sentiments. Debate contained much speculation but partly about the appropriateness of the debate. This was not limited to tweets about the BBC. Users also corrected pronunciations and referred other users to alternative news sources on the story. This raises the question of whether there can be normative value in trolling.

This knowledge can be instrumentalised. It has been evident for some years that media organisations have learnt to integrate social media to remain primary gatekeepers of media events (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2011). The interactional trajectories traced in this article show evidence of feedback loops in the framing process; it is no longer a clear-cut scenario of news organisations shaping the information users consume. Evidence indicates how Twitter users contributed to the controversy, especially in the immediate aftermath of the event. For example, the comparisons between Lochte and Shiwen seem to have originated on Twitter and filtered into news coverage. Furthermore, the controversy would most likely not have existed in the same form without the evidence of controversy on Twitter. As the *Daily Mail* highlighted, anger on Twitter acted as fuel for news reports. However, the key trajectory shifts, the two 'accidental' trolling acts by Clare Balding and John Leonard, took place on television and as part of the journalistic output of a leading newspaper, the *Guardian*, respectively. Certainly, feedback loops can drive trajectory shifts between different discourses. For example, discussion on Twitter led to a shift in the news output from a nationalised sporting discourse to one based upon fairness, doping and gender. The chaotic debate of social media is still contained. Indeed, secondary trolling shows how news organisations are using social media controversy to generate further controversy in their own journalism, regaining a central role in the framing process.

A number of future areas of research emerge from this. A first is temporality. News coverage and Twitter activity peaked on 31 July: the Balding controversy was latent for some days. This seemed not only to be a function of the story's newsworthiness but the deliberate instrumentalising of the story by journalists after they recognised a polarized set of public responses on Twitter. The decay time (Willis, this issue; Hoskins 2013) of Tweets and other content can be explained by different factors. Second, how is visual content used to represent, enjoy and contest the meaning of global events? Can we develop methodologies to capture and analyse the circulation of images and the text that accompanies those

images? Can an image link divergent communities (Bruns and Burgess 2012), bridging distinct networks through sheer iconicity? Third, how does the medium shape argument and how are arguments resolved? Do differences need to be overcome for public dialogue to proceed, or can conversations flow past one another, for example with different hashtags for different political or national positions? Do Twitter's affordances such as @ and # conventions make users of different dispositions more accessible to one another and thus make conflict more likely? Are less vocal social media users drawn into conversations? Honey and Herring (2009) show that many users rarely post and use social media rather to follow celebrities or friends or seek information. Could they be drawn into participation?

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Appendix:

Sysomos Analysis: Methods Log

1) Shiwen (All)

Search terms: Shiwen AND (ye OR “chinese swimmer” OR doping OR dope OR cheat OR drugs OR scandal OR china OR chinese OR Balding)

Timeline: 28/07/2012 - 01/08/2012

Language: EN

2) Clare Balding

Search terms: RT@clarebalding1

Timeline: 28/07/2012 - 01/08/2012

Language: EN

Notes:

¹ This practice is distinct from clickbaiting, which generally refers to headlines, used to boost the click through rate onto more substantive content. Clickbaiting is not appropriate for our reflection on the cross-medium tactic of engaging audiences with controversial content.

² Clare Balding changed her Twitter username following our data collection, from @clarebalding1 to @clarebalding. All tweets posted by her original Twitter account handle are still accessible on her new Twitter profile.

³ Times are all GMT. Readers looking at these tweets in different time zones may find they are given different times due to Twitter’s location services.