This paper presents findings of two case studies which examine, each from a different vantage point, sequences of Twitter messages that engage with media events in real time. Twitter is a public web-based communication system by which individuals broadcast short messages – tweets – to their groups of followers. Tweet writers conventionally use hashtags (#) in order to link their messages to particular topics and make them searchable by others. Tweets are therefore oriented to a writer’s networked audience (i.e. their group of followers) and at the same time publicly accessible to anyone by means of a hashtag search. Our two case studies examine the temporal organisation of contiguous, hashtag-based threads of tweets which unfold during two German media events: a presidential debate in the context of the 2013 Bundestag elections, and the ever-popular Sunday evening crime series Tatort. In both cases, we assume that a temporally bounded and linearly structured aggregation of tweets with the same hashtag (such as #tvduell or #tatort) can be thought of – and is actually often read as – a multi-authored public commentary, which charts the course of the respective event and offers multiple, often contrasting interpretations of it. Applying methods from corpus linguistics and media linguistics, we examine how multi-authored tweets construct representations of the respective events unfolding through time. By focusing on time structures, it will be demonstrated how tweets are triggered by the media event and subsequently taken-up and diffused in a modified way in the network. We argue that understanding the flow of event-based Twitter engagement has important implications for theorizing linguistic diffusion and discourse circulation in the digital age.

Keywords: Twitter, diffusion, temporality.