

Keeping the Gates on Twitter: Interactivity and Sourcing Habits of Lebanese Traditional Media

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Using gatekeeping and sourcing frameworks, this study content analyzes Lebanese media tweets to examine the relationship between the use of sources and tweet popularity in a media environment marked by political parallelism and high diversity. The study revealed the media's tendency to rely almost exclusively on governmental officials and other political elites. Official and governmental sources also dominated tweets discussing news more so than other types. Tweets quoting officials, however, were not related to more favorites, retweets, or comments. Newspapers exhibited an increased tendency to lean on officials compared with television stations. Newspapers also seemed to be keener on keeping their own information flowing throughout by linking to their own outlets. The analysis points to traditional gatekeeping practices, evident in the use of the platform as a marketing tool to promote outlets' own content, to source governmental and party officials and journalists, and to discuss the news.

Keywords: Lebanon, news media, gatekeeping, sourcing, Twitter, television, newspapers

In a highly connected social world where liking, sharing, and commenting have become part of people's daily routines, the monopoly of traditional media as the sole disseminators of news has eroded (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). The unraveling of the hierarchies between mass media and media consumers (Hermida et al., 2012) brought with it changes in the media ecology, thus challenging the power of traditional news outlets to make and deliver news (Ahmed, Cho, & Jaidka, 2019). Nowadays, stories can gain popularity and become viral for various reasons, some of which might not be related to mainstream media. During a time when a dress could capture world attention because of people's perceptions of its color (Holderness, 2015) or an image of an egg could become the most liked photo on Instagram (Rosenblatt, 2019), the news media have found themselves competing with an infinite number

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of digital users who are adept at creating, recommending, and disseminating content (García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018). The introduction of these new media entrepreneurs has been linked to the erosion of gatekeeping roles as part of the transformation in storytelling techniques the media scene has recently witnessed (Bucy, 2001). Riding the wave of these changes, Twitter has presented itself as a useful tool for both the news industry and the public (Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, & Holton, 2014).

Extant research on Twitter points to two opposing directions. Whereas some studies have found the platform to facilitate information sharing from individuals (e.g., Groshek & Tandoc, 2017), others have found mainstream media to continue to exercise their traditional role of gatekeeping, using the medium as a reporting tool (e.g., Takahashi, Tandoc, & Carmichael, 2015; Vis, 2013). During Egypt's uprisings in 2011, citizen and nonelite media users rose to prominence, but traditional media were still able to drive the conversation, with most retweets originating from them (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Retweeting, as one type of social recommendation, increases the audience reach of traditional media (García-Perdomo et al., 2018). As they exercise their daily newsgathering norms, journalists work to maintain their role as gatekeepers of information. Along with this role comes journalists' choice of sources.

Using the theoretical frameworks of gatekeeping and sourcing, this study aims to examine the relationship between the use of sources and tweet popularity in Lebanese media, which differ from the heavily studied Western media in culture, political makeup, and adoption of innovation, to name a few. Although virality in the digital media age is not restricted to shareability, the latter plays a significant role in the traction a story gets. Because of the format of tweets as short and direct messages that resemble a typical hard news story lead, information from sources operates in a vacuum, giving more importance to these sources in the absence of other information. This is highly significant in a country divided among sectarian lines, such as Lebanon. Taking their cue from party leaders, Lebanese partisan media provide their owners and/or financiers a direct line to the audience, amplifying their reach and relying on them as sources. As a significant indicator of media trust, source use in tweets is important to examine, considering how information on social media is easily and quickly shared by everyone (Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2018). As Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith (2014) argue, Twitter's unique technical architecture, which allows users to use retweets or @mentions for the sources they cite, also offers an opportunity to study the relationship and engagement between journalists and sources. This study, situated in the Lebanese context, is also significant in that it provides additional support for sourcing studies, offering new insight into the use of sources on social media and journalists' gatekeeping practices in a highly partisan and diverse media system.

Literature Review

Sourcing the News

Sourcing studies have a rich tradition in journalism research, starting with Sigal's (1973) seminal study on reporters and sources. Extant literature has yielded consistent findings about government officials being the main sources the media turn to when they report on various types of news, including political issues, public affairs, and business crises, among others (Bullock, 2008; Powell & Self, 2003). Journalists depend on officials because they see them as legitimate sources who have the authority to speak about their institutions (Bennett, 1996; Schudson, 2010). Sources influence not only reporters' understanding of

an issue (Gans, 2004), but also the public's perceptions and judgments (Freedman, Fico, & Durisin, 2010). Lack of source diversity in news coverage contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, legitimizing the current social, economic, and political structure (Gans, 2004).

In the past, newsgathering constraints in the form of time and resources might have limited journalists from reaching out to laypeople for quotes. These routines, however, have seen new types of sources becoming widely available to the news media because of the public and speedy nature of social media. Today, traditional news media cannot cite journalistic norms as a reason to forgo ordinary citizens they have often neglected in their coverage, because social media have made them easily accessible (Deprez & Van Leuven, 2018). Research, however, has found that sourcing in the new media environment has not changed significantly. In the aftermath of Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson, for instance, journalists' coverage of the protests revealed their continuous reliance on official sources (Blackstone, Cowart, & Saunders, 2017). In Egypt and Tunisia, journalists adhered to the traditional patterns of sourcing, with politicians and other mainstream sources being mentioned first and featured more in news reports (Van Leuven, Heinrich, & Deprez, 2015). Another study, of Arab Spring coverage, found mainstream media to be sourced the most as an individual group, followed by institutional elites (Hermida et al., 2014). In the area of health communication, journalists tended to follow the accounts of elite sources, such as experts and fellow journalists, thus narrowing their network to the traditional newsgathering circle of officials and experts (Deprez & Van Leuven, 2018). An analysis of the Twitter accounts of 12 news organizations in English and Arabic languages revealed that powerful elites, whether presidents, government entities, or organizations, were the most referenced sources (Al-Rawi, 2017). Although instances of the news media relying on ordinary citizens as sources do exist, sometimes they appear in a less-than-ideal manner, through the use of humor and entertaining tweets (Broersma & Graham, 2012), or to illustrate information that already exists in the news articles (Van Leuven et al., 2015).

Lebanese media do not differ much from their Western counterparts in their sourcing habits. Although they are characterized by high diversity, the news media mirror the agenda of the political party that owns, manages, or finances them (Melki, Dabbous, Nasser, & Mallat, 2012). Lebanese media's partisan affiliations are the result of several factors, among which are institutionalized sectarianism and the 1975 civil war (Dabbous, 2010) that exacerbated the deep political divisions that have dominated the country since the 1970s. These divisions were particularly evident in broadcast media, where the partitioning of television channels in postwar Lebanon mirrored the sectarian ideologies these stations defended, making them mouthpieces of the parties they supported (Kraidy, 1998). Melki's (2014) examination of media coverage of the 2006 Lebanon-Israel war pointed to Lebanese TV stations' framing in parallel with their sectarian and ideological beliefs. Although print media are also politicized, low circulation and advertising rates have gradually weakened local newspapers (El-Richani, 2016), diminishing daily readership to a mere 5% of Lebanese respondents in a 2019 survey ("Media Use," 2019), even when 32% listed newspapers as an important source for news in 2017 ("Media Use," 2017). Only recently has the country witnessed a partial break from these long-held sectarian beliefs; three television channels, Al-Jadeed, LBC, and MTV, played an antigovernmental role during the October 2019 protests, as opposed to three, Al-Manar, NBN, and OTV, that downplayed the uprisings ("Spinning, Downplaying, Ignoring," 2019). With regard to sourcing the news, Nötzold's (2008) analysis of Lebanese TV stations revealed a sectarian bias toward the faction or party they represent, with a clear dominance of religious figures, who also play political roles, as sources in TV news reports. Empirical research on the use of sources in the Arab region as well has

indicated that the media favor official governmental sources in their news stories (Cozma & Kozman, 2018). Based on the previously mentioned studies, the following hypothesis emerges:

H1: Official sources are the most frequently used category in Lebanese media tweets.

As reviewed earlier, literature on sourcing has provided evidence on the prevalence of officials as sources across various news topics. Given the direct role that sources play in the news, we can expect them to appear more frequently in tweets about news. This relationship is examined through the following hypothesis:

H2: Official sources will appear more frequently in tweets that discuss news than in other types of tweets.

Gatekeeping on Twitter

Before journalists choose whom to source in their stories, they have to sift through information in multiple avenues. For these journalists, making sense of all the information they are bombarded with on a daily basis would be impossible without gatekeeping, which Shoemaker, Vos, and Reese (2009) define as "the process of selecting, writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating and otherwise massaging information to become news" (p. 73). Insofar as journalists provide us with news that shapes "the pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 10), it is crucial for researchers to understand how the media engage with the gatekeeping process (Shoemaker et al., 2009). Gatekeeping also offers insight into the various institutional, organizational, and professional factors that influence the messages we receive (Shoemaker et al., 2009). White's (1950) seminal research on gatekeeping in journalism highlighted the decisions that an editor makes to prepare the news agenda.

Journalists' gatekeeping roles, however, have been challenged in the new media environment because of the restructuring of the traditional sender-receiver relationship (Ahmed et al., 2019; Bucy, 2001; Hermida et al., 2012). Interactivity in digital media has offered members of the public the choice to act as both senders and receivers of information, allowing users to serve as sources, gatekeepers, and creators of content (Sundar, Oh, Bellur, Jia, & Kim, 2012). Citizens' ability to generate content in online channels has empowered the latter "as an alternative platform for political discussions, which bypasses the official gatekeeping of traditional media" (Ahmed et al., 2019, p. 21). On the other hand, individuals can amplify the reach of established media, among other sources of information on Twitter, by sharing their content through retweets that could be picked up by the users' followers and subsequently shared to their wider networks (Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, & Pearce, 2011; Shi, Hu, Lai, & Chen, 2018). At the same time, platforms such as Twitter facilitate unmediated communication (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), allowing individuals to proactively change the media frames by adding their own or engaging in citizen journalism and generating new content. Dubbing this phenomenon as audience gatekeeping, Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, and Wang (2010) contended that although the audience may extend the media's gatekeeping process, its choices of what to share and what not to share do not necessarily reflect the original journalistic news values that prompted the stories.

The mixed findings in research underline some basic observations: The interactive online world is complex and cannot be stripped down to simple questions of who sends and who receives. Klinger and Svensson (2015) argue that because of inherent differences between the way social media platforms and

traditional mass media operate, we cannot apply media logic to them. Theorizing a concept of network media logic, Klinger and Svensson (2015) contend power in the online world is not restricted to the usual big players of mass media, but rather moves constantly between them and other members of the public. The former, however, still hold some of the cards; “the majority of relevant information still comes from journalistic content production, is distributed via established mass media and is used by individuals with routinized media menus” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1251).

One such case involves that of crises, disasters, and emergencies; research has revealed the ability of both the public and established media organizations to act as disseminators of information (e.g., Takahashi et al., 2015; Vis, 2013). Other situations have also revealed various struggles over power. For instance, Bodrunova, Litvinenko, and Blekanov’s (2018) examination of media strategies on Twitter has pointed to a more or less uniform approach—a top-down hierarchical approach—in which media organizations play the traditional role of disseminator of information. Similarly, applying gatekeeping theory to 26 news outlets in the United States, Russell (2019) found that these media primarily used Twitter to link to articles on their websites, in addition to including photographs in their tweets. Through these interactive features, they tended to use Twitter to promote their content more so than any other function, thus using “Twitter for the gatekeeping purpose of directing audience members to online news content” (Russell, 2019, p. 96). Yet another study of Twitter revealed that journalists practice gatekeeping on Twitter through linking to their own organization’s content or to other mainstream media (Russell, Hendricks, Choi, & Stephens, 2015). Digital content creation, then, adds more items to consider in the gatekeeping process. Social media affordances, such as hyperlinks, hashtags, and mentions, play a central role in the gatekeeping cycle. Specifically, they mediate the process of selecting information through posts themselves, positioning it through mentions, hashtags, and hyperlinks, and repeating it through retweets—all of which make up the revised form of the basic elements of gatekeeping, as defined by Shoemaker et al. (2009). These theoretical linkages are also based on Singer’s (2005) and Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton’s (2012) studies that underlined the “normalization” of digital media; in these studies, journalists, broadly speaking, cling to normative practices and norms, while allowing blogging and microblogging to change some existing routines (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005).

Although citizens could play the role of gatekeeper (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017) and contribute to the framing of news (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) for specific events and contentious issues, such as the Egypt’s uprisings or Ferguson’s protests, their roles are limited outside these events. This could be partly due to the journalistic practices of constant news production, something that members of the public do not have to engage in on a regular basis. In the same manner that individuals have made use of the connectivity and broad access of computer-mediated platforms to connect with others in various social groups, so too have the media taken advantage of the affordances of these social networking sites, normalizing Twitter use and embedding it in their news routines (Tandoc, Cabañes, & Cayabyab, 2019; Tandoc & Vos, 2016)—mainly through the promotion of their own content (Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2017; Russell, 2019) that continually pushes messages to users.

To conclude, although nonelites and ordinary people are able to reframe chatter on Twitter and determine what is newsworthy, thus shifting the traditional gatekeeping exclusivity to include individuals outside the media and elite crowds (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), traditional media still play a major role in information dissemination; thus, studying them is crucial to understanding how they perform in the highly interactive and

amplifying age of social media. In addition to assessing Lebanese media as one group, we were also curious about differences between print and broadcast media. Similar to world trends that highlight dwindling print readership vis-à-vis television (e.g., Matsa, Silver, Shearer, & Walker, 2018), Lebanese audiences also gravitate toward television as a primary source of news. In 2017, 77% of survey participants said that they get their news from TV, and 52% said they did so in 2019, as opposed to reading newspapers, which registered a low 5% among respondents ("Media Use," 2019). Based on these figures, we were motivated to explore these differences to find out whether audience trends, diminishing resources, and media type were also evident in the way these media use Twitter. Extant research has rarely measured the differences between TV stations' and newspapers' uses of Twitter, usually focusing on one type of medium (e.g., Al-Rawi, 2017; Bodrunova et al., 2018; Broersma & Graham, 2012) or not distinguishing between the types (e.g., Russell, 2019). The current study follows Russell's (2019) conceptualization of traditional gatekeeping and technical interactivity through the presence of hyperlinks, mentions, hashtags, and retweets to examine the gatekeeping role of Lebanese print and broadcast media during an uneventful period in 2017 through the following research questions:

RQ1a: How do Lebanese media use hyperlinks?

RQ1b: Is there a difference between newspapers and TV stations in the use of hyperlinks in their tweets?

Situating the theoretical framework of gatekeeping within the larger conceptualization of journalistic norms in the social media environment (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Shoemaker et al., 2009; Singer, 2005) also entails an understanding of the role of images and videos in news production, focusing on whether traditional media will also adhere to normative practices in presenting news stories on Twitter. Additionally, including the use of visuals as part of normative practices follows Harcup and O'Neill's (2017) revision of news values to include audiovisuals as an element of newsworthiness. Linking photographs and videos to gatekeeping theory, Russell (2019) measured visuals as yet another indicator of technical savviness and social interactivity because they could potentially "extend Twitter's storytelling capacity, providing content users might wish to forward to their followers" (p. 85). Similarly, the following research questions address the role of visuals on Twitter:

RQ2a: How often do Lebanese media tweets include visuals?

RQ2b: Is there a difference between newspapers and TV stations in the use of visuals in their tweets?

RQ3: To what extent do visuals attract retweets, comments, mentions, and hashtags?

Missing in literature on social media is an examination of any links between sourcing and virality. Does journalists' documented reliance on official sources relate to the popularity of tweets? If so, in what way? News consumers' perceptions of sources is important because some might consider social media sources as less credible (Kruikemeier & Lecheler, 2018). This area is explored in the following question:

RQ4: Is there a relationship between the most dominant sources and the popularity of Lebanese media tweets, measured in retweets, comments, and favorites?

As Hermida and colleagues (2014) indicated, on the networked architecture of Twitter, journalists lay bare their usual behind-the-scenes interactions with sources through the use of @mentions and retweets that serve as citations. This study explores that form of engagement through the following question:

RQ5: Is there a relationship between the most dominant sources and interactive features of Lebanese media tweets (use of mentions, hashtags, and retweets)?

Method

For this study, a total of 1,300 tweets were content analyzed from a sample of 13 Lebanese broadcast and print media outlets that had a Twitter account. The print outlets consisted of the only five newspapers on Twitter: *Aliwaa*, *Al Joumhouria*, *Al Mustaqbal*, *Ad-Diyar*, and *An-Nahar*. The broadcast outlets consisted of eight of the nine local television stations, with the exception of Tele Lumière (excluded because it is a religious channel, not a news channel). These channels are Al-Jadeed, Al-Manar, Future TV, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Murr Television (MTV), NBN, OTV, and Télé Liban. With the exception of state broadcaster Télé Liban, all media in this sample are privately owned, either by individuals or by parties.

The Twitter accounts of the outlets were verified as official through following the Twitter icons on their corresponding websites. To ensure equality across samples, only one account was considered for each outlet. All these were the general news account in the Arabic language. To select the sample, a random date was chosen as the starting point. Using a stratified, systematic sampling procedure, data collection started at noon December 14, 2017, moving down in the account's timeline, and capturing 100 tweets. To ensure diversity in the results, the first tweet on the account's "Tweets & Replies" was captured, then the third, the fifth, the seventh, and so on, reaching 100. This sampling technique follows a similar procedure to the one used in Kilgo, Harlow, García-Perdomo, and Salaverría's (2018) study that randomly sampled 100 articles, which were shared on social media, from each of the four media outlets they included in their study. Six tweets were incomplete because of a mistake in data collection and were therefore replaced by the next tweet. December 14, 2017, was deemed a neutral day to start data collection because of the absence of any major local, regional, or international event surrounding it.

Variables and Measures

The Twitter post, called a tweet, is the unit of analysis. The variables used in this study are based on previous research on Twitter (e.g., Cozma & Chen, 2013; Russell, 2019; Van Leuven et al., 2015). Each tweet was coded as follows: (1) type of outlet (newspaper or television); (2) name of outlet; (3) use of hyperlinks (no link, link to own outlet, link to others); (4) use of visuals (yes or no); (5–8) number of hashtags, favorites, retweets, and comments; (9) type of tweet (original tweet, retweet/reply/quote of own outlet, or retweet/reply/quote of other outlets); (10) focus of tweet (discuss news, share opinion or random observations, promote outlet, and post questions or ask for leads information); and (11–21) frequency of governmental/party officials, organizational officials, nonofficials, experts, entertainers, athletes/coaches, journalists/media, blogs, citizens, and other (such as anonymous and veiled sources).

Intercoder Reliability

Four native speakers of the Arabic language from a Lebanese university who were majoring in communication coded the content of this study. Several training and pilot coding sessions were completed on a sample outside this study, after which the four coders worked on the intercoder reliability sample independently. The sample also followed a systematic random sampling procedure in which the first tweet and subsequent 10th tweet of each outlet were included until the count reached 10, making the sample 130 tweets. The intercoder reliability tests for 15 variables had a mean of 0.92 measured with Krippendorff's alpha, where the lowest alpha coefficient was 0.79 and the highest was 1.0.² In the case where the alpha could not be computed because of no variance, Holsti's percentage was accepted, as with four sourcing variables—nonofficials, experts, blogs, and other—which were at 100%. Holsti's percentage was also accepted at 99%, albeit with caution, for the citizen source, given that the four coders disagreed only on one case of the 130 in the sample (all other cases had a value of 0, corresponding to no citizen source).

Results

The 13 media outlets created their Twitter account as early as September 2009 (OTV) and as late as August 2013 (Télé Liban). The tweets in this sample were posted between October 12, 2017, and December 14, 2017.

In the sourcing categories, three variables—government officials, organizational officials, and nonofficials—each contained one outlier. These were dealt with by Winsorizing: that is, replacing the extreme value with the digit 1, which was the nonextreme number closest to it (Field, 2013; Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996), in all three cases.

H1, which posited that official sources are the most frequently used sources in the Lebanese media tweets, was supported (Table 1). Before running the tests, six source categories were collapsed because of very low frequencies (only one case of 1,300, for instance, for the citizen and blog variables, and only two cases had an athlete source). The final sourcing variable consisted of five categories: governmental officials; organizational officials; nonofficials; journalists; and professionals and citizens (experts, entertainers, athletes, citizens, blogs, and other). Descriptive statistics indicated that the most used sources per story were officials, almost 3 times more than all other sources combined. Among these, governmental officials were sourced more frequently than any other source. To produce inferential statistics, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted in which the independent variable was media type, and there were two dependent variables: officials and all others. The multivariate analysis of variance model was significant, based on Pillai's trace, $F(2, 1296) = 3.55, p < .05$, which is robust against violations to variances and covariances

² Krippendorff's alpha for each variable is as follows: outlet type (1); outlet name (1); hyperlinks (0.868); visuals (0.927); hashtags (0.931); favorites (0.991); retweets (0.997); comments (0.966); type of tweet (0.888); focus of tweet (0.818); governmental/party officials (0.859), organizational officials (0.79), nonofficials (no variance); experts (no variance); entertainers (1); athletes/coaches (1); journalists/media (0.827); blogs (no variance); and other (no variance).

(Olsen, 1974). The univariate tests indicated that only official sources varied significantly between the media types, $F(1, 1297) = 5.35, p < .05$, where newspapers used them ($M = 0.45, SD = 0.49$) more than television ($M = 0.39, SD = 0.49$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Source Categories.

	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Max
Sources	1	0.60	0.50	2
Institutional sources				
Officials	0	0.42	0.49	1
Governmental	0	0.35	0.48	1
Organizational	0	0.06	0.25	1
Nonofficials	0	0.05	0.23	1
Journalists/Media	0	0.06	0.24	1
Professionals and citizens	0	0.06	0.24	1

$N = 1,300$.

H2, which expected official sources to appear more frequently in tweets that discuss news than in other types of tweets, was supported. To test this hypothesis, the focus of the tweet was collapsed into two categories: discussing news (92.4%) and other, which included promoting own outlet, promoting others, sharing random observations, and posting questions. A t test revealed a significant effect for focus, where tweets that discussed news used official sources ($M = 0.45, SD = 0.49$) more than all other types of tweets ($M = 0.03, SD = 1.7$), $t(268.564) = 18.53, p < .001$. To evaluate differences in the tweets in the use of the most frequent source, governmental sources, another t test was conducted. Results indicated a significant relationship between focus and governmental sources, where tweets that discussed news sourced a governmental official more frequently ($M = 0.38, SD = 0.48$) than other tweets ($M = 0.01, SD = 0.1$), $t(643.276) = 21.4, p < .001$.

RQ1 examined the use of hyperlinks in tweets from newspapers and TV stations and the differences between them. One third of the tweets did not include any hyperlinks, while 70% ($n = 915$) linked to their own site, and only two tweets linked to an outside source. Because the test violates the cross-tabulations assumption of a minimum of a count of 5 per cell, we merged the two linking variables into a dichotomous hyperlinks variable (link or no link). Table 2 indicates the new chi-square test was also significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,300) = 10.02, p < .01$.

Table 2. Cross-Tabulations of Hyperlinks and Visuals Between Newspapers and Television Stations.

	Media Type		Total	χ^2
	TV	Newspaper		
Hyperlinks				10.02*
Link	539 (67.4%)	378 (75.6%)	917 (70.5%)	
No link	261 (32.6%)	122 (24.4%)	383 (29.5%)	
Visuals				15.56**
Yes	419 (52.4%)	317 (63.5%)	736 (56.7%)	
No	381 (47.6%)	182 (36.5%)	563 (43.3%)	

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

RQ2 inquired (a) about the use of visuals in Lebanese media tweets and (b) whether the use changes depending on media type. One case had an invalid value for visuals; therefore, it was excluded from the analysis. Results in Table 2 show slightly more than half the tweets included a photo or a video (56.7%, $n = 736$). As for differences between broadcast and print media in their reliance on visuals, the chi-square test indicated that a larger sample of newspaper tweets included visuals (63.5%, $n = 317$) than the television sample, which relied on them in slightly more than half the tweets (52.4%, $n = 419$).

Beyond descriptives, the study tested whether or not visuals attracted more retweets, comments, mentions, and hashtags (RQ3). For retweets, comments, and mentions, the Mann-Whitney U test was used because the dependent variables did not meet the assumptions of a normal distribution, given the presence of a large number of outliers (Table 3). The Mann-Whitney U test ranks the scores of the dependent variable and then compares the mean ranks for the groups. The use of visuals was significantly related to only retweets, $\chi^2(1, N = 1,299) = 194131.5, p < .05$. Tweets containing visuals were retweeted more than those without visuals. As for hashtags, a t test indicated a significant difference between the tweets, where those including visuals were related to a higher number of hashtags ($M = 0.8, SD = 1.2$) than tweets devoid of a photo or video ($M = 0.4, SD = 0.7$), $t(1,267.167) = -7.79, p < .001$.

Table 3. Mann-Whitney U Test for Differences in the Use of Visuals Across Interactivity Features.

	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Max	<i>M</i> rank	χ^2
Favorites	1	4.32	25.37	869		204045.5
With visuals					654.26	
Without visuals					644.43	
Retweets	0	1.01	7.16	238		194131.5*
With visuals					667.73	
Without visuals					626.82	
Comments	0	0.48	3.90	114		202818.5
With visuals					655.93	
Without visuals					642.25	
Hashtags	0	0.63	1.02	6		165951.5**
With visuals					706.02	
Without visuals					576.02	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

RQ4 examined the relationship between the most dominant sources and popularity of Lebanese media tweets. Results revealed that retweets and favorites were not correlated with any of the most used sources, which are government officials, organizational officials, and journalists.

Finally, RQ5 explored the relationship between dominant sources and interactivity features. Use of retweets and mentions did not correlate with type of source. Hashtags, however, were negatively correlated with government officials, $r(1,298) = -.06$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

Through a sample of tweets from Lebanese media, this study aimed to analyze the gatekeeping practices and sourcing habits of local newspapers and television stations on Twitter. Findings indicate that these media adhere to established newsroom practices in the type of sources they consult, the inclusion of audiovisual material in their posts, and their uses of social media affordances; this suggests that traditional media continue to play the role of gatekeepers, controlling the information flow in the traditional top-down approach, linking to their own media, and rarely allowing the audience an opportunity to interact.

Sourcing Habits on Twitter

As they reveal the near absolute dominance of officials in media news, and the presence of fellow media personnel, results of the current study conform to previous research on sourcing—particularly the prevalence of elites, such as officials (Al-Rawi, 2017; Deprez & Van Leuven, 2018; Van Leuven et al., 2015) and mainstream journalists (Hermida et al., 2014). The majority of the quoted officials in this study were political elites who held a position in the government or in a political party. Official sources in general, and governmental sources in particular, also dominated tweets discussing news more so than other types. Absent from the tweets were individuals, whether experts or regular citizens. This could be due to the uneventful nature of the period under scrutiny; research has shown that legacy media will cite ordinary

citizens mainly during the first stages of crises and uprisings, before they have a chance to deploy their own reporters to the scene (Hermida et al., 2014). Journalists and traditional media outlets also garnered some attention as sources, pointing to the fact that the media kept sourcing in-house, which indicates rigid gatekeeping practices. Adding to previous studies, results from the current research reveal newspapers' tendency to lean heavily on officials (e.g., Bane, 2019; Lecheler & Kruikeimeier, 2016) more than television stations.

Gatekeeping Through Interactivity Features

In this sample, newspapers practiced gatekeeping by keeping their own information flowing throughout, linking to their own outlets, more than television stations did. The reason could be that print media were trying to increase traction by linking to material already on their websites; this approach did not apply to some of the television channels in Lebanon that do not have a strong online presence, mainly because of limited resources. One such example is *Télé Liban*, whose tweets consisted of links to its own Facebook page with no other information present. The 1989 Ta'if Accord that ended the Civil War gave power to non-state actors whose media outperformed the state broadcaster, just like these politicians overpowered the state itself (Kraidy, 2012). Relying on poor technologies and old programming, *Télé Liban* has embodied, in the words of Kraidy (2012), "the collapse of the Lebanese state" (p. 184).

As part of the gatekeeping process, digital content creation lends the media more control as gatekeepers through social media affordances such as hyperlinks, hashtags, and mentions, alongside audiovisual material, as they dictate the process of information selection and positioning similar to traditional gatekeeping practices (Shoemaker et al., 2009). Concerning multimedia usage, Lebanese media included photos and videos in more than half of their tweets. The presence of visuals was related to more retweets, but it did not get the tweets more likes. These visuals thus failed to attract the attention they might have been vying for, considering the long-standing appeal of visuals to audiences, based primarily on their ability to arouse emotions (Joffe, 2008). Scholars contend that in a digitized online environment, videos can make a story highly shareable on social media (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This practice could be mimicking journalistic newswriting and reporting norms, in which photos and videos are typically part of a news item, while serving as evidence for journalists' preference for established institutional practices over innovations (Lowrey, 2011; Russell, 2019). Similar to journalists, institutional accounts on Twitter may be using digital platforms more as a technologically advanced option than as a means to change existing news creation practices (Singer, 2005). Coordinating their Twitter skills, Lebanese media tended to include more hashtags when they used visuals—most likely relating them to the content of the imagery—perhaps in an effort to create specific frames that are bolstered by visual material. Hashtags, which act as frames bringing individuals together around issues (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), have been shown to increase retweetability of content (Suh, Hong, Pirolli, & Chi, 2010). Our findings thus suggest that Lebanese media could have been trying to increase the likelihood of tweet shareability by harnessing the combined power of images in arousing emotions alongside the ability of hashtags to create attention through frames. Besides their affective power, audiovisuals form one of the contemporary news values that Harcup and O'Neill (2017) devised for online media. Their use, then, could be another way in which traditional media cling to their normative practices.

These results corroborate what Russell and colleagues discovered in their analysis of news organizations and journalists in the United States. Similar to Russell (2019) and Russell and associates (2015), the current research also found the media to link to their own outlets, to include photographs, and to promote their own content. The authors, therefore, echo Russell's (2019) statement that the media use Twitter as another opportunity to direct the public to their own content, whether through linking to online material or sourcing journalists and media outlets. By doing so, Lebanese media practice gatekeeping on Twitter in the traditional offline manner (Lecheler & Kruike-meier, 2016), and, similar to other media around the world, they play a key role in the flow of information, relying on the traditional top-down dissemination approach (Bodrunova, Litvinenko, & Blekanov, 2016).

Networked Gatekeeping and Sourcing

Lebanese media's partisanship, reflected through their ideological leanings and partisan content (Dabbous, 2010; Melki, 2014), and evident in their reliance on political sources, did not attract positive sentiments from the audience. The use of officials was not related to more favoriting, sharing, or commenting. If politicized media appeal to their target audience by their partisan content and sources (El-Richani, 2016), this approach did not translate to support on Twitter. The low traction of the tweets could be due partly to the low usage of Twitter by the general public in Lebanon, amounting to a mere 12% of online users ("Media Use," 2019). Interestingly, the tweets that cited officials used fewer hashtags, a Twitter mechanism that has been shown to increase the reach and visibility of tweets and mobilize both regular citizens and more influential actors, such as public figures (Meyer & Tang, 2015; Wang, Liu, & Gao, 2016). It is possible that the accounts of traditional media avoided using hashtags when citing officials to maintain an aura of objectivity, given that hashtags, in addition to findability, have a metacommunicative use akin to editorializing and are often used to emphasize, critique, or convey emotion (Giannoulakis & Tsapatsoulis, 2016). Alternately, it is possible the media did not make full use of Twitter's interactivity features and are unaware of how hashtags could increase audience engagement.

Klinger and Svensson's (2015) argument that the majority of relevant information comes from the mass media and is distributed by them is both supported and contradicted in the current study. While Lebanese media do make sure to cite themselves and one another, keeping a tight grip on the gate, they fail to spread the information through their networks. As they continue to open the information gates only to sources they deem significant, Lebanese media run the risk of alienating a public that now has the means to create and distribute its own content. Their fate could mirror those of legacy journalists elsewhere, who have lost their influence in generating conversation or gatekeeping news, partly because of their passive activity on the platform (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017). Given the interconnectedness of journalists' sourcing habits and gatekeeping practices, this study argues that as long as Lebanese media practice gatekeeping in its traditional format and rely on political elites to provide information to the public, they will further distance themselves from relevant conversations taking place among citizens and nonelites on social media. This observation was evident during the October 2019 protests, when online-only alternative media played a key role in giving activists a platform to voice their concerns (Lteif, 2019).

Conclusion

Scholars seeking to understand how people communicate in the social media environment have been busy restructuring the sender–receiver relationship that has dominated mediated communication since its inception. Researchers studying Western media have come to accept that in the nonlinear world of Web 2.0, information flow follows a complex route of sending and receiving where message sources are constantly changing. This has challenged the traditional gatekeeping role of established media. In Lebanon, however, that is not the case. This study has revealed that Lebanese media on Twitter mirror their original formats and draw distinct lines between the outlet and its audiences. While they continue to play the role of gatekeeper in controlling the information flow, they exert little effort in mobilizing their followers to widen their reach. In the absence of social recommendations from the Twittersphere, Lebanese media tweets stagnate, rarely reaching users on the platform. These problems are further exacerbated by the continual drop of Twitter usage by individuals who have mainly flocked to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to socialize and receive news (Kleis Nielsen, Newman, Fletcher, & Kalogeropoulos, 2019). It is also plausible that Lebanese journalists might behave more organically on Twitter and might attract the required interactivity, as compared with the official accounts of the media stations that are treated as automated newsfeeds with the sole purpose of making announcements and breaking news. Research on journalists' behavior on Twitter has indeed revealed its use as a personalized and flexible tool that reflects their own unique style (Canter & Brookes, 2016).

The practical implications of the findings point to the need for traditional media to allocate resources that treat digital media as a unique media ecology—one that requires revisiting the established journalistic practices of sourcing and gatekeeping—to attract large audiences who increasingly expect to be included in online news discourse. The authors also recommend these media devise new strategies to expand their influence on social media as part of a business model that is more suited to the evolving technologies that dictate the success of news organizations in the digital world. From a theoretical standpoint, the study builds on research on gatekeeping and sourcing in the social media environment to offer yet more evidence of the dominance of officials as sources. The combined influence of these factors further saturates the media, segregating them into individual units that give preferential treatment to political elites and rarely address potential audiences. Consequently, this study is significant for the field of media systems research as well; it adds an important element to take into consideration in theorizations of media systems in the digital environment.

In summary, the current study illustrates the practices of digital journalism in Lebanon by highlighting traditional media's reliance on a top-down information flow approach to disseminating news; they continue to fall back on their role as gatekeepers that safeguard established institutional and organizational journalistic routines. Beyond the empirical evidence of the mentioned findings, this study contributes to extant literature on this topic by expanding research on sourcing and gatekeeping, to include media behavior on Twitter in a small country not considered in existing journalism studies research. The findings thus point to the importance of reflecting on the state of affairs in a country, including media structure, political unrest, journalistic habits, and political alliances, among others, when analyzing media outside the West.

Similar to all scientific research, this study had several limitations. The small samples from the outlets do not reflect well Lebanese media behavior on Twitter. Although the sampling procedure ensured that the data are unbiased and reflect weeks of regular news cycles, they nonetheless represent only a small portion of actual content, thus limiting their generalizability. Future research could consider a larger time span and a bigger sample to properly represent these media. However limited, this type of sample is significant in its potential to provide a different picture of what extant research has done—which is study a specific event, restricting analysis to the event itself. Still, any interpretation of the findings should involve being careful about generalizing these results to represent all media. Another limitation is in Twitter's character cap, which might have favored the use of official sources in tweets. Quite possibly, these outlets could have cited a diverse pool of sources on their legacy platforms. Nonetheless, it is an indication of their gatekeeping practices that they chose to mention so many official sources in the little space Twitter provides, further legitimizing them and amplifying their voices. One final limitation is not analyzing the content of comments. Future research could include such an analysis to provide insight into the reasons that audiences engage with the tweets.

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