

Studying Political Microblogging: Parliamentary Candidates on Twitter During the February 2012 Election in Kuwait

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Kuwait boasts high levels of political and media freedoms compared to many countries in the Middle East, and it enjoys a vibrant social media scene. The Kuwaiti parliamentary election in February 2012 was the first election in which candidates widely utilized Twitter during their campaigns. This article presents a content analysis of tweets sent by the 50 winning members of parliament (MPs) during the campaign period. It seeks to ascertain the Twitter usage patterns of MPs and determine whether Twitter was an effective tool in gaining votes. Although Twitter was widely used among MPs, it was employed less for information sharing or communicating about political issues and more for engaging with followers. This article concludes that no relationship existed between using Twitter and gaining votes. Rather, the social media platform acted as a natural extension of off-line interactions between MPs and the electorate.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, Kuwait, election, political communication, member of parliament, MP

Introduction

The role of social media in the Arab world has been much debated since uprisings started in the Arab world in 2011, because social media seemingly facilitated the development of social movements that brought about regime change. Pundits such as Wael Ghonim claim that the January 2011 protests in Egypt began on Facebook and that the social media network was instrumental for the success of the uprising (Smith, 2011). On the other hand, Malcolm Gladwell (2011) believes that social revolutions in the pre-Internet era did not suffer from a lack of cutting-edge communication and organizational tools. Ongoing and future research efforts will undoubtedly lead to a more nuanced assessment of the role social media tools played during the Arab Spring. However, the research needs to be extended to include countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, because repercussions from the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were also felt in countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.

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Kuwait has experienced a peaceful and gradual process of political change long before the revolutionary events of 2011. Levels of political and media freedom are high in Kuwait, and the country has an entrenched history of political participation and activism. For example, it was the first country in the region to adopt a constitution, it has the longest standing parliament in the region, and Kuwait's 2009 parliament featured four women members. Kuwaiti citizens have traditionally expressed their views openly in *dewaniyas*, which are centers of gathering, debate, and opinion formation on diverse topics. *Dewaniyas* take place in the home of a host and thus offer a safe civil space to discuss topics ranging from politics and economics to education and social issues (Salem, 2007). Kuwait's media freedom consistently ranks among the highest in the Middle East (Freedom House, 2012), although there have been some limitations on the freedom of expression. In November 2010, Kuwaiti lawyer Mohammed Abdulqader Al-Jassem received a one-year prison sentence for slandering the prime minister before being released on appeal in January 2011. Another prominent case was the detention for three months of Obaid al-Wasmi, a law professor at Kuwait University, on accusations that he insulted Kuwait's emir, instigated the security forces to disobey government orders, and spread false rumors abroad ("Kuwait Extends Activist's Detention," 2010). Users of social media are also targets of the government's online surveillance efforts, as demonstrated by the arrest of Nasser Abul in June 2011. His tweets criticized the ruling families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, for which he was sentenced to three months in prison (Motaparthy, 2012).

Nevertheless, there was some debate on whether Kuwait was experiencing its own version of the Arab Spring (Brown, 2012). A vibrant social media scene exists in Kuwait, boasting 117,304 Twitter users who posted more than 11 million tweets in September 2011 (Mourtada & Salem, 2011b). This tweet volume was the highest among Middle Eastern countries. Like many of its regional peers, Kuwait has a large youth population, but they are more connected through information technology than most youths in the region. Kuwaiti youth activists are savvy users of social media and were keen to replicate online tactics used by demonstrators in the Arab Spring to change the political landscape in their country. Two-thirds of Kuwaitis aged 18 to 24 use social media when they are online (ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, 2011), and the youth have been organizing themselves into various movements in response to the "weakening of political institutions, both royal and parliamentary" (Diwan, 2012, p. 17).

Much of Kuwait's political activism has been organized and disseminated on social media sites such as Twitter, where elected officials and citizens actively interact. According to Ayed Al-Manaa, a political science professor at Kuwait University, "Twitter is the 'tool' today to discuss public opinion issues," and he predicted that Twitter would prove a "make or break tool" in the 2012 elections ("New, Social Media," 2012, para. 2). This article investigates the role of social media in Kuwait's February 2012 parliamentary election by conducting an empirical analysis of Twitter use among the 50 winning candidates. The study specifically investigates to what extent the candidates used Twitter to engage the electorate, the typology of their tweets, the degree of interaction between them and the electorate, and whether Twitter made any noticeable difference in obtaining votes. This study is significant because the February 2012 election marks the first occasion in which Kuwait's parliamentary candidates extensively used Twitter as an engagement tool.

Overview of Twitter Conventions

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to make a posting with a 140-character limit to their followers. A user can follow any other user on Twitter by subscribing to the user's postings, which are called tweets. This means that every time a user posts a message, the follower receives it in his or her Twitter account. There is no need for a reciprocal relationship between user and follower, although it is possible for a follower to respond to tweets as well as repost them to his or her own followers. This mechanism allows for a two-way conversation between users directly, but tweets can also be disseminated beyond the network of the user who originally posted the tweet. The specific form of communication on Twitter is denoted through characters, and some conventions have emerged over time, which will be referred to throughout this article. The combination of the @ sign with a username denotes a tweet mentioning a specific addressee, and it is possible to deliver a tweet to more than one addressee. This mechanism allows for conversations between specific Twitter users, even though other followers are able to read these tweets, too. Retweets (RTs) refer to the practice of one user resending the tweets posted by another user, a practice that leads to the original tweet reaching out to a wider follower base. Tweets can also include a hashtag, denoted by the # character, in conjunction with a word or a phrase to link a tweet to a particular subject. Hashtags are searchable in the Twittersphere, and users can subscribe to hashtags to follow topics or discussions related to their interests.

Background to the February 2012 Parliamentary Election

On December 6, 2011, the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, issued a decree to dissolve the 50-member National Assembly (parliament) after a protracted crisis involving corruption allegations against the government headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah. Contentious relations between the executive and legislative bodies had been building up in Kuwait ever since Prime Minister Nasser took office in 2006. The ongoing conflict between him and opposition parliamentary members eventually galvanized the population, which increasingly became politically active in Kuwait's streets and on social media. The discontent reached its apex on November 16, 2011, with the storming of the National Assembly by protestors comprised of the youth and several members of parliament (MPs). Prime Minister Nasser resigned from office on November 28, 2011, amid rising political and public pressures, particularly from youth groups and opposition MPs.

New elections were held on February 2, 2012, which marked the fourth time in six years that Kuwaitis appointed new parliamentarians. Kuwait is divided into five electoral districts, and the top 10 vote getters from each district are awarded parliamentary seats. The registration process for parliamentary candidates began on December 21, 2011, and ended on December 30, 2011, during which time 389 parliamentary hopefuls registered (Kuwait News Agency, 2011). A total of 400,296 voters were registered, and nearly 60% cast up to four ballots to elect the 14th National Assembly (International Foundation for Election Systems, 2013). The vote resulted in a 54% turnover rate in parliamentarians. In an unprecedented move, however, Kuwait's constitutional court declared on June 20, 2012, that the February 2012 elections were nullified because the Amiri decree dissolving the previous parliament and a second decree inviting Kuwaitis to elect the new parliament were unconstitutional. The result was a reinstatement of the previous parliament, which had been elected in May 2009. Many opposition MPs were

angered by the decision and threatened to mobilize the people back to the streets for protests. At least 24 MPs from the 2009 parliament submitted their resignations, and veteran opposition MP Musallam Mohammad Al-Barrak described the ruling as a "coup" against the constitution (Saleh, 2012).

Literature Review

Since the successful employment of Twitter during the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign, many academic studies have examined the use of the microblogging platform in a political context. The research generally investigates the demographic characteristics of politicians who use Twitter, the degree of interactivity between politicians and either their constituents or the electorate, how politicians use Twitter for image management, what kind of political conversations occur on Twitter, and whether Twitter enhances political deliberation.

One strand of the literature deals almost exclusively with predicting election results through Twitter. Gayo-Avello (2012) reviewed 17 relevant studies in this strand. Some of the studies reviewed by Gayo-Avello claimed that a relationship exists between tweets mentioning a party or candidate and election results, whereas others modified the earlier methodology by incorporating data on sentiment, demographics, or incumbency. Still other research concluded that no correlation existed between electoral polls and Twitter sentiment data, or that Twitter data was only slightly better than chance when predicting election results. The reservations concerning the predictive power of Twitter were confirmed in a subsequent article by Gayo-Avello (2013), who concluded that sentiment analysis is often applied with naiveté and that all predictions are done post hoc through data dredging that could suffer from various selection biases.

Another strand of the literature investigates Twitter use by elected officials serving in representative bodies. Jackson and Lilleker (2011) reported that 7.9% of MPs in the United Kingdom used Twitter in June 2009, whereas Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers (2010) found that 25% of U.S. congresspeople used Twitter in May 2009. Both studies found that politicians used Twitter more for self-promotion than to communicate with citizens. Grant, Moon, and Grant (2010) analyzed how Australian politicians employed Twitter from November 5, 2009, to February 28, 2010, and they also discovered more broadcast than conversation tweets (replies and retweets). They concluded that Twitter is a platform in which "ideas, issues and policies are first announced, discussed, debated and framed" (Grant et al., 2010, p. 599). Sæbø (2011) analyzed randomly selected tweets made by Norwegian MPs between January and June 2010 and found the most common type were links to information sources, followed by tweets about the daily activities of representatives. He determined that these tweets generally did not meet deliberative standards, but instead linked Twitter to the liberal democracy model in which the "main purpose is to communicate information to electors and market the representatives' activities to the audience" (Sæbø, 2011, p. 11). Finally, a study conducted by Rauchfleisch and Metag (2015) of the 246 Swiss members of parliament with a Twitter account is of particular note because the authors classify Switzerland as a least-likely critical case. The country is unique in that it has a strong federal system, a fragmented party system, a small size, and semiprofessional politicians. In the context of this unique political system, Rauchfleisch and Metag suggest that "the age of the politicians clearly predicts the activity level of politicians" (p. 15) and that financially weaker parties generally had a stronger

representation on Twitter. More importantly, they characterize Twitter as an elite network, because political journalists, politicians, and lobbyists mainly interact with one another and not with the general public.

The strand of literature that is most relevant for this article pertains to the use of Twitter during elections. Momoc (2012) analyzed how candidates in the 2009 Romanian presidential election used Twitter and found that they promoted their off-line activities, such as their participation in radio and TV shows, generated news in the traditional media; linked followers to other content posted on the Internet; and mobilized people to vote.

Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams (2011) studied the use of Twitter by candidates for the European Parliament elections of 2009 in the Netherlands. They observed that candidates from opposition parties started microblogging significantly earlier, sent more messages, and were more successful in securing larger follower networks than ruling parties, which demonstrated very little adoption of and activity on Twitter. The research revealed a correlation between microblogging use and the number of votes a candidate received, but Vergeer et al. cautioned that this relationship could be explained by prior electoral success and a candidate's priority. In another study conducted in the Netherlands, Effing, Hillegersberg, and Huibers (2011) found that politicians with higher social media engagement received relatively more votes within most political parties during the 2010 national election in the Netherlands. Small (2011) performed a content analysis of the most popular Canadian political hashtag, #cdnpoli, and found that the hashtag's primary purpose in April 2010 was for information sharing rather than political dialogue and reporting.

Burgess and Bruns (2012) conducted a study of topic-based conversations, albeit in the specific context of the Australian federal election in 2010, and discovered that Twitter users were mainly commenting on the performance of the mainstream media and politicians rather than engaging in direct political discussions. Larsson and Moe (2012) explored the hashtag #val2010 pertaining to the Swedish general election in 2010 and found that most tweets were nondirected messages and that Twitter activity was largely dependent on other mediated events. Spikes in Twitter activity were linked to televised debates, statements made by politicians, or media coverage of off-line events such as political rallies.

In contrast to the 2010 Swedish election, Norwegian party leaders overwhelmingly used @ messages to communicate with Twitter users during the 2013 national election campaign, according to a study by Larsson and Ihlen (2015). But the interactions were typically limited to one or two exchanges, and they occurred mostly with unique clusters of users that did not overlap. The primary purpose of the Twitter exchanges was thus to maintain good relations with followers. Focusing on the content of Twitter postings of political parties and their leaders during the 2013 Italian general election, Ceron and d'Adda (2015) observed that running negative campaign messages had positive effects, whereas positive messages generated only circumstantial effects related to clientelistic and distributive appeals.

In conclusion, the literature is inconclusive regarding the general impact of Twitter as a tool to democratize political deliberation, facilitate interactivity between politicians and the electorate, and increase voter mobilization. Events in the off-line world seem to drive content in the online world and not

the other way around, elites dominate the online discussions in many studies, and politicians do not use Twitter much to communicate or discuss political platforms and policies.

Research Objectives and Method

During the May 2009 election in Kuwait, only 2 of the 50 winning MPs maintained a Twitter account. More MPs opened Twitter accounts in the intervening years, which made the February 2012 election an unprecedented opportunity to study how parliamentary candidates in Kuwait used Twitter for their elections campaigns. This study is most closely linked to the second and third strands of the literature reviewed above, because it seeks to determine the scope of Twitter use by parliamentary candidates, identify different types of users, determine the types of messages posted, and examine to what extent Twitter influenced voters' behavior on election day. This article seeks answers to the following research questions:

R1: To what extent did candidates in the 2012 Kuwaiti parliamentary election use Twitter during their campaign, and what was the topography of use?

R2: What were the key modes of Twitter engagement used by MPs?

R3: To what extent was Twitter effective in gaining votes?

The first research question is addressed through a descriptive analysis of Twitter use during the election campaign period, defined as the period starting with the registration day, December 21, 2011, and ending on election day, February 2, 2012. The ideal universe for this study would have comprised all 389 parliamentary candidates. Given the lack of an official Twitter account list published by, for example, the Kuwait Electoral Commission, it would have been impossible to verify Twitter accounts for all 389 candidates. To maintain the integrity of the data set, it was decided to focus on the 50 candidates who were elected to parliament, because these accounts could be verified with a high degree of certainty. The Kuwait News Agency and various local newspapers ("List of Winners," 2012) published the election results, together with photographs and short biographies of the 50 winners. This information was used to confirm the Twitter user ID of the winning candidates. The Twitter user IDs of parliamentary candidates were obtained through an iterative process that involved English and Arabic keyword searches in Google and Twitter and searching through follower lists of MPs with confirmed Twitter accounts. The authenticity of accounts was established by screening the public profile featured under each user ID, along with cross-referencing the photograph posted in the public profile to those published in the newspapers. Additionally, the tweets were examined for appropriate political content. If this multiple-step process did not determine a MP's Twitter user ID, it was concluded that a candidate had not opened a Twitter account. As a final check, a research assistant contacted the election committee of respective MPs to receive final confirmation of candidates' Twitter handles.

It was determined that 45 of the winning candidates had personal Twitter accounts by the time of the election, although three candidates did not tweet during the campaign period after they had opened their accounts. It was impossible to discern whether candidates managed their Twitter account personally

or if staffers performed this duty. Some candidates also maintained election-specific Twitter user IDs, such as @AlSadoun_Camp or @Aashour_2012, in addition to their personal accounts. Two candidates with no personal Twitter account had election-specific Twitter accounts: @Alanjary_Majlis and @Alsager_Camp. All nonpersonal accounts, however, were excluded from this study, because their identity could not be independently verified.

A software program called NextAnalytics was used to retrieve all information fields embedded in tweets sent by the 45 verified users during the election campaign period. The program connects directly to Twitter's server and has full access to the Twitter API (application programming interface) from within Microsoft Excel. The data can then be manipulated and analyzed in Excel by using pivot tables. Without exception, tweets from MPs were available from the date of their respective account opening to the time period of analysis of this study. Table 1 provides summary statistics about the tweet activity of the 50 winning candidates, and these findings form the basis of our analysis.

Table 1. MP Twitter Statistics and Electoral Votes for the February 2012 Kuwaiti Parliamentary Election.

Name	Twitter ID	Account opening	No. of MP Tweets	No. of Retweets	% of Votes
Abdallah Al-Barghash	@Al_Barghash	Jan. 1, 2011	32	284	2.4%
Abdulhameed Dashti	@adashtimp	Dec. 14, 2011	590	5,246	1.7%
Abdullah Al-Turaiji	@dr_a_alturaiji	Feb. 23, 2011	252	943	1.3%
Abdullatif Al-Ameeri	@aalomaire	Jan. 21, 2011	620	2,203	0.8%
Abdulrahman Al-Anjeri	no account	-	0	0	1.0%
Adel Al-Damkhi	@DrAldamkhi	Mar. 13, 2011	395	1,102	1.4%
Adnan Abdulsamad	@adnanabdulsamad	Dec. 30, 2011	268	1,253	1.4%
Adnan Al-Mutawwa	no account	-	0	0	0.9%
Ahmad Abdullah Al-Azmi	@drahmadmote3	Dec. 7, 2011	290	690	2.6%
Ahmad Al-Saadoun	@Alsadoun	May 6, 2009	86	3,189	1.7%
Ahmad Lari	@AhmedLari	Feb. 11, 2011	246	1,209	1.4%
Al Saifi Al-Saifi Al-Ajmi	@alsaifialsaifi	Jan. 12, 2011	78	714	2.6%
Ali Al-Diqbasi	@AliAldeqbasi	Dec. 24, 2010	1,204	1,454	2.5%
Ali Al-Omair	@alialomair	Dec. 27, 2010	287	1,981	1.7%
Ali Al-Rashed	@alialrashed	July 30, 2011	0	0	1.1%
Ammar Al-Ajmi	@ajmi777	Dec. 20, 2010	468	1,366	1.2%
Bader Zayed Al-Azmi	@aldahoombdr	Mar. 31, 2011	154	52	2.6%
Faisal Al-Duwaisan	@Faisalduwaisan	Dec. 27, 2010	0	0	2.5%
Faisal Al-Mislem	@faisalalmuslem	Dec. 11, 2010	254	7,028	2.9%
Faisal Al-Yahya	@faisalalyahya	Nov. 1, 2010	890	1,496	2.1%
Falah Al-Sawwagh Al-Azmi	@falahalsawwagh	Jan. 7, 2011	30	922	4.7%

Hamad Al-Matar	@HamadAlmatar	Dec. 13, 2010	556	2,075	1.0%
Hussein Ali Al-Qallaf	no account	-	0	0	2.0%
Jama'an Al-Hirbish	@AlHerbesh	Dec. 14, 2010	106	2,770	1.5%
Khaled Mashaan Tahous	@k_altahous	Nov. 17, 2010	1	9	4.0%
Khaled Shukhayyer Al-Mutairi	@drkaledshukhair	May 21, 2011	238	1,730	2.2%
Khaled Sultan bin Essa	@khsultann	Feb. 7, 2011	147	1,737	0.8%
Marzouq Al-Ghanim	@MarzouqAlghanim	July 28, 2010	194	2,357	1.0%
Mohammad Al-Dallal	@maldallal	Aug. 30, 2010	321	3,628	1.9%
Mohammad Al-Hatlani	@Alhtalani	Aug. 1, 2010	13	118	1.3%
Mohammad Al-Juwaihel	@M_Aljuwaihel	Jan. 29, 2011	37	2,342	1.5%
Mohammad Al-Saqer	no account	Feb. 4, 2011	0	0	1.1%
Mohammad Hassan Al-Kanderi	@Al_Kandary	Feb. 4, 2011	485	3,869	2.0%
Mohammad Hayef Al-Mutairi	@mhamdhaif	Jan. 27, 2011	53	750	4.5%
Mohammad Khalifa Al-Khalifa	@alkhalifa_4	Dec. 7, 2011	177	2,406	1.9%
Mubarak Al-Waalan	@mubarakalwaalan	Feb. 2, 2011	104	3,234	2.6%
Munawer Theyab Al-Azmi	@mnaawernqaa	Jan. 14, 2012	53	4,602	2.0%
Musallam Mohammad Al-Barrak	@MsallamAlbarrak	Dec. 3, 2011	1	2	5.3%
Nabeel Al-Fadhli	@nabeelalfadhel	Dec. 28, 2011	584	7,668	1.5%
Nayef Abdulaziz Al-Ajmi	no account	-	0	0	2.4%
Obaid Mohammad Al-Mutairi	@dr_alwasmi	Feb. 10, 2011	30	4,658	3.9%
Osama Ahmad Al-Munawer	@OsamaAlMunawer	Jan. 24, 2011	479	1,096	1.9%
Osama Essa Al-Shaheen	@Oalshaheen	July 13, 2009	411	2,279	1.9%
Riyadh Al-Adsani	@R_Aladasani	Dec. 26, 2010	911	4,151	1.1%
Saad Ali Khanfour Al-Rashidi	@alkhnfour	Apr. 1, 2011	3	90	1.5%
Saleh Ashour	@SalehAshoor	Dec. 18, 2010	43	328	1.7%
Salem Namlan Al-Azmi	@salemnmlan	Jan. 5, 2012	0	0	2.1%
Shaya Al-Shaya	@shaya_alshaya	Jan. 9, 2011	62	729	1.6%
Shuaib Al-Muwaizri	@shuaibmuwaizri	Jan. 27, 2011	12	494	1.9%
Waleed Al-Tabtabaei	@Altabtabie	Nov. 10, 2011	156	7,251	2.0%

The second research question is addressed through a content analysis of sample tweets. A random sample of 372 tweets was drawn from the overall data set of 11,321 tweets. This sample size equates to a 95% confidence interval and a +/-5% margin of error. After drawing the sample, all tweets were translated by a native Arabic speaker from Arabic to English. The authors then independently

grouped each of the 372 tweets into a mutually exclusive category based on the main content of the tweet. The dominant category was easily identified as tweets beginning with the @ID convention, meaning direct communication, and these tweets numbered 239 out of the entire sample. The remaining 133 tweets were split into groups based on the main theme or content identified by the reviewers, which resulted in six categories of nondirect communication.

We had intended to address the third research question by conducting a regression analysis, but the results did not reveal any correlations between the dependent variable and various independent variables. Instead, we made qualitative observations about the relationship between tweeting and votes received.

R1: To What Extent Did Candidates Use Twitter During Their Campaign, and What Was the Topography of Use?

In line with the Twitter communications principles and usage patterns described above, Larsson and Moe (2012) suggest a simple classification of tweets into the following categories: (1) A singleton is a statement made by a user without mentioning any specific address; (2) a reply is a tweet using the @ sign together with a username; and (3) a retweet is a tweet marked with RT that goes beyond the follower base of the original sender. The blue dotted line in Figure 1 shows the time line of the 11,321 tweets posted by the 50 winning candidates during the election campaign period. These tweets can be subdivided into 3,884 singletons, 7,406 replies, and 31 retweets. As shown by the red line in Figure 1, the candidates’ followers sent 91,505 retweets of the original messages sent by the MPs.

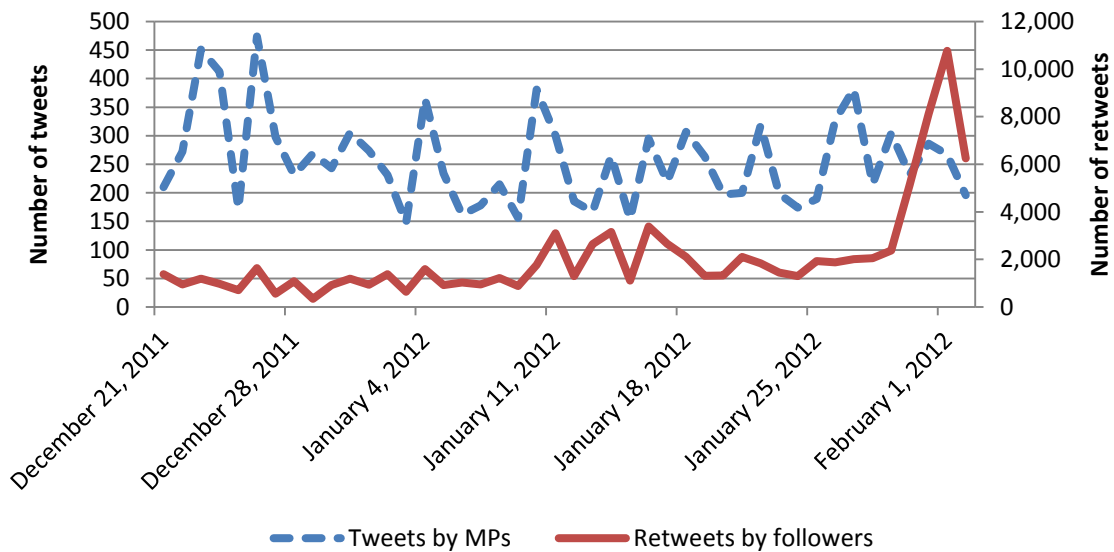


Figure 1. Longitudinal distribution of tweets and retweets.

Tweet volumes were initially high during the registration period, which ran until December 30, 2011, but then ebbed for several days. Several off-line events in January coincided with spikes in tweets and retweets (shown in Figure 1). On January 2, 2012, the Scope satellite television channel was ordered to stop airing for three months because its presenter, Ahmad Al-Fadli, conducted an interview with columnist Nabeel Al-Fadhli. It was alleged that former Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser's character was defamed during the interview. On January 10, 2012, the Ministry of Interior said it would not allow the *bedoun*, stateless Arabs living in Kuwait, to stage any more demonstrations or rallies. Kuwaiti riot police used tear gas and batons to disperse hundreds of stateless demonstrators for the second day in a row on January 13, 2012. The nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch subsequently criticized the Kuwaiti government's decision to bar *bedoun* from further protests. On January 31, 2012, members of the Mutairi tribe burned down the election tent of candidate Mohammed Al-Juwaihel after he made disparaging remarks about the tribe at his election headquarters the previous day. As the elections day neared, candidates devoted less time to Twitter and sent few postings aimed at mobilizing the electorate. Conversely, the number of retweets increased.

Classification of Users According to Tweet Activity

Although most candidates had accounts by the time of the election, tweet volumes differed significantly. Three candidates did not tweet at all during the campaign period after opening their accounts. It is therefore necessary to determine the number of active Twitter users among the 50 winning candidates. The Dubai School of Government defines an active user as someone who tweets at least once per month (Mourtada & Salem, 2011a), but this threshold is too low in the context of the short campaign period in Kuwait of 43 days. Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2008) used a two-tweets threshold to define an active user, but expanded the methodology by examining an active user's time spent on tweeting. This is defined as the time elapsed between the first and last post. The median active time spent by the 50 winning parliamentary candidates is 40 days, which indicates an active user base during the campaign period. This metric, however, does not account for the frequency of tweeting within that time span and thus provides an incomplete measure of tweet activity. In a study of the 2009 German federal election, Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, and Welp (2011) examined Twitter's public message board between August 13 and September 19, 2009, and grouped users according to their tweet activity: (1) one-time users, (2) light users, (3) medium users, (4) heavy users, and (5) very heavy users.

The group distribution of five types of users was adopted for this study, although one-time users were omitted because they accounted for only two occurrences in the February 2012 election. One candidate, Ali Al-Diqbasi, was classified as a super user because his activity by far surpassed that of the very heavy user base. A distribution in Kuwait of users across the five user groups defined by Tumasjan et al. (2011) is displayed in Table 2: 50.3% one-time, 32.9% light, 12.9% medium, 3.3% heavy, and 0.6% very heavy. In the German study, one-time and light users constituted 83.2% of the total share, whereas in Kuwait's February 2012 elections, light and medium users constituted 81.1% of the total share.

Table 2. Distribution and Equality of Tweet Activity.

User group (Number of tweets)	No. of users in group	Share of total	No. of tweets in user group	Share of total
Light (1–243)	23	54.8%	1,810	16.0%
Medium (243–485)	11	26.2%	4,156	36.7%
Heavy (485–727)	5	11.9%	2,350	20.8%
Very heavy (727–969)	2	4.8%	1,801	15.9%
Super user (969–1,211)	1	2.4%	1,204	10.6%
Total	42	100.00%	11,321	100.00%

Looking at the plurality of user engagement, a study of the Swedish general election in 2010 similarly found that “high-end users constitute a substantial part of the [Twitter] activity” (Larsson & Moe, 2012, p. 741) and that these users belonged to the established elite made up of politicians, established journalists, and prominent bloggers. This vocal minority was also present in the 2009 German federal election, where heavy and very heavy users comprised roughly 4% of the user base, yet they accounted for more than 40% of the messages (Tumasjan, 2011). In Kuwait, the seven heavy and very heavy users constituted 19% of the user base and were responsible for 47.3% of tweets. The plurality of engagement in Kuwait was thus greater than in the two more politically advanced European examples.

Even though Twitter is a free service and offers plurality of access and voice, further research is required to determine why some politicians deem outreach on Twitter worthwhile, whereas others clearly do not feel compelled to use the technology.

Classification of Twitter Users by Adoption Date

The prevalence of Twitter accounts in the February 2012 election differs vastly from the previous election held in May 2009, when only Ahmed Sadoun maintained a Twitter account. By looking at the Twitter account opening date, it is possible to classify candidates according to the technology adoption cycle, although the sociological makeup of technology users in Kuwait might differ from that of Western users on which the model is predicated. As shown in Table 3, a few of the candidates were early adopters of Twitter, with accounts opened for more than one year before the election registration date. These candidates had ample time to build a network of followers, devise and implement social media communications strategies, and become well versed with the language and etiquette used on Twitter. A second user group can be identified as being the late majority. These candidates opened accounts anywhere from 6 to 12 months before the election registration date. This group may have felt compelled by the prevailing competitive environment to join the Twitter bandwagon as opposed to strong personal characteristics that led early adopters to embrace the new technology. The third user group comprises laggards, but they could be more aptly labeled as opportunists in the context of the election. Three candidates opened accounts immediately following the dissolution of the National Assembly on December 6, 2011, and four others opened accounts during the registration period of December 21 to December 30, 2011.

Table 3. Distribution of Twitter Account Age.

Account age in days^a	Frequency of age group	Relative frequency	Cumulative frequency
-15 to 181	10	22%	22%
181 to 377	28	62%	84%
377 to 573	5	11%	96%
573 to 769	0	0%	96%
769 to 965	2	4%	100%
Total	45	100.0%	

^a Account age in days is defined as the difference between the date a Twitter account was opened and the first day of the election registration period. A negative number means that the account was opened after December 21, 2011.

Geographical Analysis of Twitter Activity

Kuwait is divided into five electoral districts, with each district furnishing 10 deputies to the parliament. The socioeconomic composition varies greatly among the districts. The fixed number of allocated mandates per districts, along with the allocation of residential districts to election districts, has created a situation where some districts have more voters than others (see Table 4). Districts 1, 3, and 5 experienced a 60% turnover of MPs in the National Assembly's 14th legislative term; districts 2 and 4 experienced a 40% turnover rate (Eid, 2012).

Table 4. Tweet Activity by Voting District.

Voting district	Number of registered voters	Number of tweets by MPs	Share of total	Number of retweets by followers	Share of total
District 1	71,146	2,690	23.8%	16,229	17.7%
District 2	45,400	2,534	22.4%	15,293	16.7%
District 3	67,063	3,299	29.1%	36,730	40.1%
District 4	103,280	2,076	18.3%	18,154	19.8%
District 5	113,407	722	6.4%	5,099	5.6%
Total	400,296	11,321	100.0%	91,505	100.0%

District 1 is largely suburban, and it is estimated that Shi'a voters comprise 50% of the electorate, and another 15% are from the Awazem tribe (Kuwait Transparency Society, 2008). The remainder includes Sunni *hadhar* (urbanites). District 2 has the lowest number of voters among the five areas and features a mixture of the major components of Kuwait's society, which includes 20–25% tribal voters and 15% Shi'a voters. The rest are *hadhar*. District 3 contains a mixture of Islamist, tribal, and minority Shi'a voters and a large concentration of merchant and business families. This district stands out in terms of having the highest number of tweets and retweets despite being the second smallest district. It appears that candidates in these two highly contested and heterogeneous areas believed that Twitter

was an effective communications tool. Districts 4 and 5 are located outside of Kuwait City and are the largest in terms of voters and the number of residential areas. Tribal groups dominate the composition of these two districts. District 5 is noteworthy for having the largest electorate base but by far the smallest number of tweets and retweets.

In sum, the data concerning the first research question reveal that off-line events often triggered the biggest spikes in Twitter activity, although they were not linked to specific election messages. It is also noteworthy that most candidates were late adopters of Twitter. Their adoption period coincides more generally with events surrounding the Arab Spring of 2011 and less with the February 2012 election. Finally, Twitter played an insignificant role in reaching out to tribal voters who may have been unfamiliar with social media or simply lacked access to mobile technologies.

R2: What Were the Key Modes of Twitter Engagement Used by MPs?

Elections of public officials are matters of public concern, and political theory postulates that a vigorous debate of political issues is a quintessential feature of a deliberative democratic system. Social media are well suited to widely disseminate information relevant to a populace, encourage a dialogue about public issues, and connect voters with people running for an elected office. As such, online political discussion facilitated through, for example, Twitter allows for greater inclusion and access to public decision making. A content analysis of a random sample of 372 tweets sent by Kuwaiti parliamentary candidates is used to explore whether Twitter indeed enriched the democratic conversation prior to the February 2012 parliamentary elections.

A study of 6,000 tweets sent by members of the U.S. Congress revealed seven distinct categories of communications (Golbeck et al., 2010), and five of these—direct communication, personal message, activity, information, and requesting action—apply to the election communications of Kuwaiti candidates. The two remaining categories in the study by Golbeck et al.—fund-raising and unknown—were replaced with two others more appropriate to the political and cultural context in Kuwait. These were labeled as acknowledgment and religious. The seven categories are defined as follows:

1. **Direct communication:** This category includes tweets starting with the @ID convention, which denotes a response to a specific person, a group of people, or relevant to a specific user. Generally, tweets in this category denote an engagement between a parliamentary candidate and a particular user, and the content was very varied. It was possible to further divide tweets in this category according to the recipient:
 - a. **Direct communication—general public:** These are tweets between a parliamentary candidate and a citizen.
 - b. **Direct communication—other candidates:** These are tweets sent by an elected candidate to another elected candidate where that person is identified by name or by @ ID. This category includes a tweet sent to an election-specific @ ID—in this case, @Aashour_2012.

2. **Personal message:** This category includes tweets containing non-election-related information such as personal opinions, greetings, or religious beliefs.
3. **Acknowledgment:** This category includes tweets through which candidates express thanks for support during the election campaign, apologize for not being able to attend certain events, or apologize for being unable to respond to communications received.
4. **Requesting action:** This category includes tweets that encourage people to contact candidates with their opinions or messages, visit election headquarters, vote for specific candidates, tune into election-related broadcast programs; it also includes tweets that stress that voting is a duty for every citizen.
5. **Activity:** This category includes tweets reporting on the activity of a candidate, such as registering his or her candidacy, giving an interview on television, meeting voters, inviting people to events, holding events at election headquarters, or casting a vote on election day.
6. **Information:** This category includes tweets to the general public that contain a URL link to a media site, provide a fact or opinion pertaining to the election or political matters, outline a position on a campaign issue, or contain information provided by news agencies.
7. **Religious:** This category includes tweets containing citations from the Holy Koran or messages with overriding religious content.

Table 5 summarizes the typology found in the sample. Tweets in the direct communication and information category comprised 81% of all Twitter communications by parliamentary candidates.

Table 5. Frequency of Tweet Typology.

Category	Number of sample tweets	% of total sample
Direct communication—general public	239	64%
Information	62	17%
Activity	17	5%
Direct communication—other candidates	14	4%
Personal message	13	3%
Religious	10	3%
Acknowledgment—not direct communication	9	2%
Requesting action	8	2%
Total	372	100%

The high level of addressivity indicates that Twitter was actively used as a forum between parliamentary candidates and a wide range of their followers. This contrasts with previous research conducted in the context of elections held in Western countries. For instance, in the 2009 German federal election, about one-third of sampled messages included an @ sign (Tumasjan et al., 2011), and only 7% of message were replies in a study of the 2010 Swedish general election (Larsson & Moe, 2012).

Although Twitter was generally used to disseminate information in the Western elections, the high degree of direct communication witnessed in Kuwait could stem from the relatively small size of the respective voting districts and thus greater familiarity between candidates and citizens, especially in the smaller voting districts. Twitter thus might act as a natural extension of off-line engagements. In fact, the distinction between off-line and online engagement might be more blurred in Kuwait than in Western countries. The content of the tweets in Kuwait focused very little on political issues or a candidate's proposed policies, similar to the findings of a study about the 2009 Romanian presidential election (Momoc, 2012). The main content of direct communication to potential voters had to do with acknowledgment, thanking or apologizing, in a very personable manner. There were, however, some tweets related to corruption, which was a major public issue preceding the election. There were also some tweets about the burning down of parliamentary candidate Juwaihel's headquarters, which had a tribal undertone. Most direct communications between candidates were addressed to Nabeel Al Fadhl, a liberal MP. These tweets commented on diverse issues such as restoring Kuwait to its former glory, the removal of the previous speaker of parliament being a great loss, and the *bedoun* issue.

Of the 62 tweets classified as information, only 12 tweets, or 3% of all sampled tweets, contained links that referred people to other sites such as other Twitter postings (5 tweets), online newspaper articles (3 tweets), a personal website (1 tweet), a blog (1 tweet) and a YouTube video (1 tweet). This percentage is low compared to the fact that 72% of information posts made by U.S. congresspeople as of February 6, 2009, contained links and that these posts "often read like mini press releases" (Golbeck et al., 2010, p. 1616). However, a study of eight Kuwaiti MPs' leadership behavior on Twitter conducted in 2011 found that only Islamist and liberal MPs sent Twitter messages containing multimedia and graphics (Salem, 2012). Such tweets numbered 19 out of a total of 278 messages, which equates to 7% (Salem, 2012). It is conceivable that some of the Kuwaiti parliamentary candidates, or their staffers, faced a technological learning curve given their relatively late adoption of Twitter. This would offer one explanation for why they did not fully utilize the interactive possibilities offered by Web 2.0 technologies despite the ubiquity of smart phones in Kuwait.

The smaller categories listed in Table 5 are fairly equally represented, and their low occurrence is likely to have made little impact during the 43-day Twitter campaign examined in this study. Tweets in the activity category predominately informed followers about a candidate appearing in the media or about activities in election headquarters. The low percentage of activity tweets in Kuwait contrasts markedly to a study of the Romanian presidential election in 2009, which found that most of the candidates used Twitter to promote "offline campaign actions, namely their participation at radio and TV shows" (Momoc, 2012, p. 34). It appears that Kuwaiti candidates had less interest in using Twitter to promote off-line events that might be of interest to potential voters. Tweets in the personal message category conveyed, for example, hope for a better Kuwait, dismay at future generations inheriting a Kuwait in worse condition, greetings,

comments on ethics, and words of encouragement. Within the acknowledgement category, candidates thanked voters for their support, attending events, and listening to political seminars; extended their apologies for being unable to visit *dewaniyas*; and received condolences for the passing of family members. Although Islamist candidates won 14 seats in the 50-seat parliament and many of the 21 tribal candidates also had strong Islamist leanings, religious messaging did not feature prominently in the campaign tweets. According to Okruhlik, "religious fervor was not a central campaign call" (2012, p. 22), and this claim is supported by the results of the tweet content analysis. Surprisingly few tweets requested action from followers such as tuning into broadcast programs featuring candidates or voting on election day. Interestingly, tweet volumes declined as the election approached, and not one single candidate asked voters to cast their ballots for him. Instead, they inferred that voting was a duty performed for Kuwait.

In summary, Twitter does not appear to be an elite network in Kuwait, because direct communications between parliamentary candidates and the general public are widespread. Twitter functions primarily as a platform to maintain personal and cordial relations with followers and to occasionally share information about political issues.

R3: To What Extent Was Twitter Effective in Gaining Votes?

Previous studies have suggested a correlation between the number of Twitter mentions of a political party or a candidate's name and the number of votes garnered in an election (Tumasjan et al., 2011), though the margin of error can be improved by additionally accounting for the sentiment of tweets (Birmingham & Smeaton, 2011; Lampos, 2012; Sang & Bos, 2012; Skoric, Poor, Achananuparp, Lim, & Jiang, 2012). In Kuwait, however, political parties are banned even though MPs do form political affiliations, which are based on affinity toward the government, religious inclinations, or identity, among others. It is difficult, however, to definitively place each of the 50 MPs into a specific affiliation, because they might have publicly declared a certain affiliation but, in fact, vote in line with a different group. MPs are also known to shift affiliations during their tenure in parliament.

Unlike some studies that have found a positive correlation between higher social media engagement and the number of votes received (Effing et al., 2011; Vergeer et al., 2011), we did not find this relationship to be true in the February 2012 parliamentary election in Kuwait. No significant statistical relationship was found between the number of tweets sent during the campaign period and the number of votes received. This observation was true for both incumbent and newly elected MPs. In fact, there were 11 MPs who tweeted fewer than three times or not at all, and together they garnered 24% of the total votes. Musallam Mohammad Al-Barrak, who in February 2012 received the most votes in Kuwait's political history (Ulrichsen, 2012), has had a Twitter account since December 2011 but sent only one tweet during his February 2012 election campaign.

Conclusion

This article presents a multilevel analysis of the use and impact of Twitter during the February 2012 parliamentary election held in Kuwait. Compared to previous studies in Western democracies, different usage patterns emerged in Kuwait, which are partly explained by the absence of political parties

in Kuwait and the novelty of using Twitter for the first time in a parliamentary election. Although widely popular in Kuwait, Twitter was only one of many platforms employed by parliamentary candidates to engage voters, but they did so in a less strategic manner than demonstrated by Western election candidates.

One finding of this article suggests that Kuwaiti MPs used Twitter as an engagement forum rather than an information-sharing or discussion forum between parliamentary candidates and a wide range of their followers. The content of the direct communication tweets focused very little on political issues and policies and had more to do with acknowledgments using addressivity—that is, giving thanks and asking for a blessing in a personable manner. The large amount of direct communication suggests a high degree of familiarity between candidates and citizens, especially in the smaller voting districts. Another finding of this article is that Kuwaiti MPs who never tweeted or were light users (tweeted fewer than five times) accounted for a quarter of the total votes received, which suggests that MPs considered formal and informal civil spaces such as *dewaniyas* or campaign events more important than social media as venues to rally support. This might also explain why districts where tribal groups dominate the demographic composition recorded the fewest tweets and retweets despite having the largest electorate base.

Nevertheless, the finding that nearly all the candidates who won a seat in parliament had a Twitter account during the election campaign period signifies the willingness of MPs to embrace new technology and use it to communicate with the electorate. Some candidates might have been avid Twitter users before the election, others might have been jostled by the election to join the technology bandwagon, and some might have sought any means possible to reach more voters. Although Twitter did not play a role in rallying voters to support parliamentary candidates, Twitter can still act as a natural extension of off-line engagements. Being active on Twitter does put candidates in an advantageous position, especially for newly elected MPs, because Twitter works as a cost-effective platform with low barriers of entry and potentially high levels of public exposure.

Studies of Kuwaiti elections after February 2012 should explore whether Twitter emerged as an integral part of a candidate's political communications campaign in which they focused more on political discussions within the constraints of Kuwait's democratic system. It would be a testament to the strength of Kuwait's political system if parliamentary candidates were elected on the merits of their political programs or vision and not for reasons of patronage systems or tribal affiliations.

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