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### Twitter as a news source

Broersma, M.J.; Graham, T.S.

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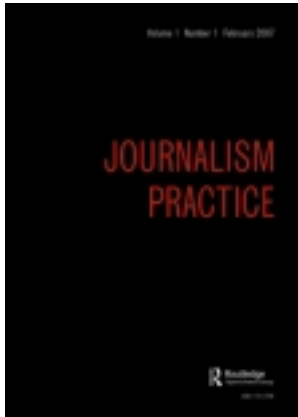
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Marcel Broersma & Todd Graham

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# TWITTER AS A NEWS SOURCE

## How Dutch and British newspapers used tweets in their news coverage, 2007–2011

**Marcel Broersma** and **Todd Graham**

*Twitter has become a convenient, cheap and effective beat for journalists in search of news and information. Reporters today increasingly aggregate information online and embed it in journalism discourse. In this paper, we analyse how tweets have increasingly been included as quotes in newspaper reporting during the rise of Twitter from 2007 to 2011. The paper compares four Dutch and four British national tabloids and broadsheets, asking if tabloid journalists are relying more on this second-hand coverage than their colleagues from quality papers. Moreover, we investigate in which sections of the paper tweets are included and what kinds of sources are quoted. Consequently, we present a typology of the functions tweets have in news reports. Reporters do include these utterances as either newsworthy or to support or illustrate a story. In some cases, individual tweets or interaction between various agents on Twitter even triggers news coverage. We argue that this new discursive practice alters the balance of power between journalists and sources.*

**KEYWORDS** journalism; news reporting; newspapers; social media; sources; Twitter

### Introduction

Journalism and social media have entered a convenient marriage. Especially Twitter has become popular among journalists in the years after its launch in July 2006. News outlets have used it to distribute news, market stories and reach out to news consumers, while reporters have employed it as a tool to find and approach sources (Ahmad 2010; Hermida 2010; Broersma and Graham 2012). In a survey conducted in June and July 2011, 70 per cent of 667 British journalists indicated that they used Twitter for their reporting and nearly half said they employed it to source stories (Cision 2011a, 2011b; Gulyas 2013). Twitter actively promotes this type of use, for example, by launching *Twitter for Newsrooms* in 2011. This manual helps unfamiliar reporters use the microblogging network by providing practical hints about finding sources, engaging with the public and publishing information through tweets.

The growing popularity of Twitter among journalists has much to do with the steep rise of active users. In March 2012, Twitter (2012) claimed to have 140 million active *tweeps* who sent 340 million tweets daily. Even more appealing for journalists is the number of influential people and celebrities who are using the network to post information and opinions, market themselves and relate to others. Twitter, more than any other social network, has succeeded in connecting ordinary people to the popular, powerful, rich and influential (cf. Marwick and boyd 2011a). It actively tries to engage “interesting” individuals in its network and is even offering courses to get them to post regular tweets that suit their purposes (O’Leary 2012). This should have an appeal on others to join, which Twitter keenly promotes:

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If you joined Twitter this year, you're in excellent company: other new Tweeters include Nelson Mandela, Joe Biden, Plaxico Burrell, Christina Aguilera, Salman Rushdie, New York Times Executive Editor Jill Abramson, and the Pope . . . And they're just a few of the 100 million people around the globe who use Twitter to see what's happening in the world right now, share stories and information instantly, and connect to anyone, anywhere. (Twitter 2011)

Because users can follow one another without the necessity of reciprocity and accepting or following each other, there are no obstacles to connect with others. Moreover, the large majority of tweets is public and accessible to everyone. This creates a disparity between the well known who are followed by many and "ordinary" people who mainly follow others. Equally, there is an imbalance between those who tweet on a regular basis and those who never or only incidentally post. For most users, the information function of Twitter thus prevails over its communication functions (Kwak et al. 2010; Van Dijck 2011). However, the public nature of tweets and opportunities for interaction make it a convenient and useful space for reporters to find information, interact with possible sources and test the temperatures of popular debate (cf. Marwick and boyd 2011b).

As we argued elsewhere (Broersma and Graham 2012), this accumulation of people who share information and opinions has turned Twitter into a convenient beat for reporters. Classic studies into news production (Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980) have emphasized that a beat is both a physical and a social place. Reporters who are assigned to specific beats, like parliament, the police or a court of law, go there to gather, share and negotiate information with sources. By doing so, they are assimilated into the social network that constitutes a beat. The establishment of long-term relations rooted in mutual trust promotes the exchange of tips for news stories and facilitates verification of information. Gans (1979) argued that these close personal relationships function as a point of departure when reporters start working on articles. They rely on sources they know, consider credible and reliable, and who are accessible and willing to talk. This leads to a preference for elite news sources while existing sourcing patterns tend to be replicated over and over again. News thus duplicates the power structure of society and maintains the existing social and political order (Manning 2001; Schudson 2003; Reich 2011).

The rise of Twitter as a beat reflects the general transformation from *place* to *space* that is a result of the digitization and familiarization of social media. Reporters do not have to "go out there" anymore to find information. Moreover, the social scope of their beat is stretched beyond traditional elite sources. As BBC's Richard Sambrook stated: "social media sites are the new towns, or cities, or neighbourhood bars where the public gather and discuss things" (in Newman 2009, 10). Social media offer easy access to a large range of interesting and otherwise hard to approach sources. Reporters can get in touch with relevant people, pose questions or simply take a statement from Twitter and include it in a news article. It offers reporters a range of instant snippets of information that are always on-hand. Due to the current economic situation of journalism and the speeding-up of the news cycle through the internet, it becomes increasingly important to rationalize information gathering. Reporters have fewer resources and less time to write more stories. To investigate stories and to check information, they thus have to rely heavily on second-hand information that is available on the internet, in other media or press releases (Davies 2008; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Broersma 2010; Phillips 2010).

In this study, we investigate how journalists are using Twitter as a source for reporting, and more specifically, how they quote tweets in news texts. Previous research

on journalism and Twitter focuses primarily on either interviews with journalists or an analysis of their tweets. However, we are interested in the interplay between social media and newspaper reporting, and how this new discursive practice of including tweets in news texts developed over time. We therefore analysed tweets that were included in four British and four Dutch tabloid and broadsheet newspapers during 2007–2011. We asked what kind of people were quoted, in which sections of the paper their tweets appeared and what function they had in news articles. Moreover, we asked if there were any differences between the quoting practices of tabloids and broadsheets, and between both countries.

### Twitter as a Source for Reporting

Journalist–source relations are at the heart of professional practice. Journalists need expert knowledge when they gather and verify news, and explain and contextualize events and developments. A growing body of scholarship focuses on how journalists are integrating social media in reporting practices. Hermida (2010, 302) described Twitter as an “awareness system” that helps people to know and make sense of each other’s activities and discover “trends or issues hovering under the news radar”. On digital platforms, a constant sharing of all kinds of information takes place which, on the one hand, threatens journalism’s claim to provide an authoritative and legitimate representation of the social word (Broersma 2013), and, on the other, possibly opens up journalism to new voices, topics and publics. Twitter is used by journalists in four ways. It can lead them to new stories, helps them find sources and information, provides them with quotes, and is useful for verifying information by using the wisdom of the crowd.

Because it facilitates a very fast dissemination of information, Twitter is particularly useful when stories break. Eyewitnesses on the ground can instantly post their first impressions while journalists can immediately start reporting. They can post short updates while events evolve, in advance of or accompanying their “final” fully sourced news reports on other outlets such as television, newspapers and websites. A range of studies have investigated how media outlets cover breaking news on Twitter, analysing tweets on events such as riots (Vis 2013), revolutions (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012; Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith 2012), accidents (Murthy 2011) or natural disasters (Bruno 2011). Based on the use of hashtags, such as #Egypt or #ukriots to identify news on a certain topic, these studies show how journalism interacts and merges with messages of non-journalists, such as activists, eyewitnesses and officials, into an ambient practice (Hermida 2010). Twitter seems to broaden the scope of news coverage beyond traditional news sources. Research on NPR’s Andy Carvin’s tweets during the political uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia found that he also included alternative voices, especially when retweeting information (Hermida, Lewis and Zamith 2012).

Others have studied whether journalistic norms change fundamentally when social media are applied as tools for reporting. Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) argue that journalists “normalize” social media by adapting them to existing professional norms and practices while adjusting these norms to the dynamics of Twitter. They found that especially reporters from elite media are more reluctant to change because they have vested interests in maintaining the existing norms that support their authority (cf. Lasorsa 2012). Other studies suggest that norms are shifting on social media. Journalists share

personal and opinionated information in their tweets by mingling facts and opinions. Moreover, information is not always verified before it gets disseminated. Journalists defend this practice by emphasizing that news on Twitter is an evolving story and that verification of sources and information takes place over time (Bruno 2011; Vis 2013).

Studies on the impact of social media on existing professional routines mainly focus on journalists' online behaviour. They analyse tweets on extraordinary events, sometimes complemented with interviews or surveys among reporters. Hardly any research has been done on how traditional media outlets such as broadcasters or newspapers include tweets in their daily news coverage (cf. Knight 2012). Hermida (2012) and Bruno (2011) suggest that news organisations are hesitant to use information from Twitter and, if they do, use it in a rather opportunistic way. They take information from social media streams to fill the information gap that exists from the sudden moment a crisis breaks out until the moment the first reporters arrive at the scene. When journalists are on the ground and gained access to sources, social media are less important. This observation conflicts with survey research among British journalists. They considered social media an important primary (73 per cent) and secondary source (72 per cent) for news (Cision 2011b).

For officials and celebrities, the possibility of their tweets being replicated in traditional media, thus reaching out to an even larger audience, is very appealing. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, for example, considers the interaction between old and new media particularly attractive to politicians: "What we do on social networks leads to extra attention on television and in the newspapers" (*De Volkskrant*, 3 June 2010). For journalists, harvesting Twitter adds value to established reporting techniques. They can flavour their stories from behind the desk by "cherry picking" useful quotes. Moreover, tweets themselves or the interaction between persons on Twitter can be newsworthy. An American newspaper journalist voices what fascinates him and his colleagues:

The best part is any inside information that comes out or when a politician like Sarah Palin or someone else makes news with their comments. Because it's on Twitter, it's fair game to use for the news media... As a journalist, that's what I look for in tweets: nuggets of interesting, new and exclusive information. (quoted in Parmelee and Richard 2012, 152)

Using Twitter in such a way might be convenient, but it does change the relationship between journalists and sources. Traditionally, the latter trade inside information for news coverage in a process that is "driven by a strategic complementarity of interests" (Franklin 2003, 47). In a negotiation process that takes place either face-to-face or by telephone, news is collaboratively crafted as a "product of transactions between journalists and their sources" (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989, 377). The dynamics of interactivity in generating or checking information allows journalists to test the waters, asking questions when they are not satisfied with an answer or doubt it, and trace new stories through serendipity. When reporters rely solely on social media, this *negotiation-through-conversation* is bypassed. Journalists do not get in touch with sources but simply include information that has been published on their websites, blogs or other social media.

To examine the use of Twitter as a news source, a comparative study design of British and Dutch national dailies was adopted. A content analysis of news coverage was employed as the primary instrument for examination. An additional qualitative textual analysis was conducted as a means of providing more depth to the study.

## Research Design and Methodology

The United Kingdom and the Netherlands differ significantly with regard to their media systems, representing two of the three models distinguished by Hallin and Mancini (2004). More specifically, the Netherlands is a smaller and less competitive newspaper market compared to the United Kingdom in which journalism is more market oriented. Whereas the distinction between tabloid and broadsheet markets has been clear in the United Kingdom, in the Netherlands, there is an overlap between the two. The tabloids in the Netherlands are typically more subdued than British tabloids when it comes to, for example, populist rhetoric. That said, they are clearly popular in character. The British press, on the other hand, has been characterized by sharp ideological divisions, particularly between the broadsheet and tabloid press. Overall, we believe that the similarities and differences between the two will provide a fruitful context for better understanding the use of tweets as news sources by journalists.

A total of eight British and Dutch newspapers, two broadsheets and two tabloids for each country, were selected for the analysis. The newspapers analysed in the United Kingdom were the *Financial Times* (broadsheet), *The Guardian* (broadsheet), *The Sun* (tabloid) and the *Daily Mirror* (tabloid). In the Netherlands, *De Volkskrant* (broadsheet), *NRC Handelsblad* (broadsheet), *Algemeen Dagblad* (tabloid) and *De Telegraaf* (tabloid) were studied. These newspapers were selected because they are among the largest circulating papers in their respective categories and are spread fairly evenly between the left–right political spectrums.

The sample was selected based on a five-year period, 2007–2011, which corresponds with the rise of Twitter. In order to make the study more manageable while maintaining the meaningfulness of the data, four months for each year were selected: January, April, July and October. Articles were obtained through the LexisNexis database by using the search query 'tweet! or twit!'. Two rounds of reading the articles from this query were carried out. All articles that quoted or paraphrased tweets were selected and included in the analysis discussed below. After applying these criteria, the sample consisted of 5813 tweets quoted as news sources in 3361 articles.<sup>1</sup>

### *Coding Categories*

The content analysis coding scheme, which was developed in an earlier study (Broersma and Graham 2012), consisted of two levels of coding.<sup>2</sup> First, the *topic* of the article was identified. The unit of analysis at this level was the individual news article. In order to identify the topic, coders categorized the *primary* topic of each news article, which included: (1) politics and government; (2) international relations; (3) social welfare; (4) business and economy; (5) accidents and disasters; (6) crime; (7) sports; (8) nature and the environment (including weather); (9) education; (10) science and technology; (11) health care; (12) religion and beliefs; (13) arts and culture; (14) (multi)media; (15) human interest; (16) lifestyle; (17) royalty; (18) mixed content; and (19) other.

The tweets used as news sources were then coded for three variables. The unit of analysis at this level was the individual tweet, and the context unit of analysis was the article in which it was used. First, tweets were coded for the manner in which they were sourced; i.e. did the journalist use a direct quote or paraphrase the tweet? Second, coders categorized the function of the tweet, which consisted of four types: illustration, trigger, standalone and Q&A. Tweets that were used to illustrate news events or larger trends in

the article were coded as an *illustration*. All those tweets that triggered a news story because the tweets themselves were newsworthy were coded as a *trigger*. In some newspapers, tweets were simply published on their own (e.g. the tweet of the day); these were coded as a *standalone*. All those tweets that were used as part of a question and answer exchange in the article were coded as *Q&A*. The third variable was authorship: who is being sourced? The author of the tweet was identified, and their occupation was then categorized. Tweets were coded as: (1) politician; (2) lobbyist; (3) professional (e.g. corporate executive, performing manager); (4) expert; (5) journalist/media; (6) comedian; (7) actor (television/film personality); (8) athlete, (9) musician/singer; (10) model; (11) cultural producer; (12) vox populi; (13) person involved; and (14) other.

### *Reliability*

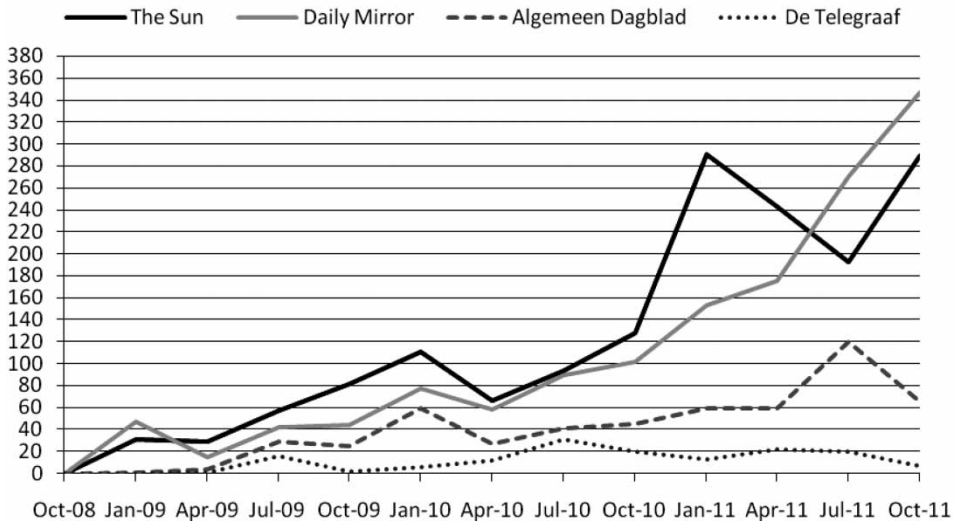
Three coders were trained over two training sessions and assigned to code approximately a third of the sample each. The intercoder reliability test consisted of a random sample of 40 articles from each of the eight dailies. Cohen's kappa was used to estimate intercoder reliability. It was chosen because it is a conservative measure; it does not give credit for chance agreement. The reliability scores for the average pairwise Cohen's kappa were as follows: topic, 0.69; function, 0.78; occupation, 0.68. We note that the actual reliability for the variables topic and occupation, as presented below, is most probably higher because we have clustered these extensive coding categories during the data analysis into broader categories to obtain more analytical clarity.

### **Tweets as Sources**

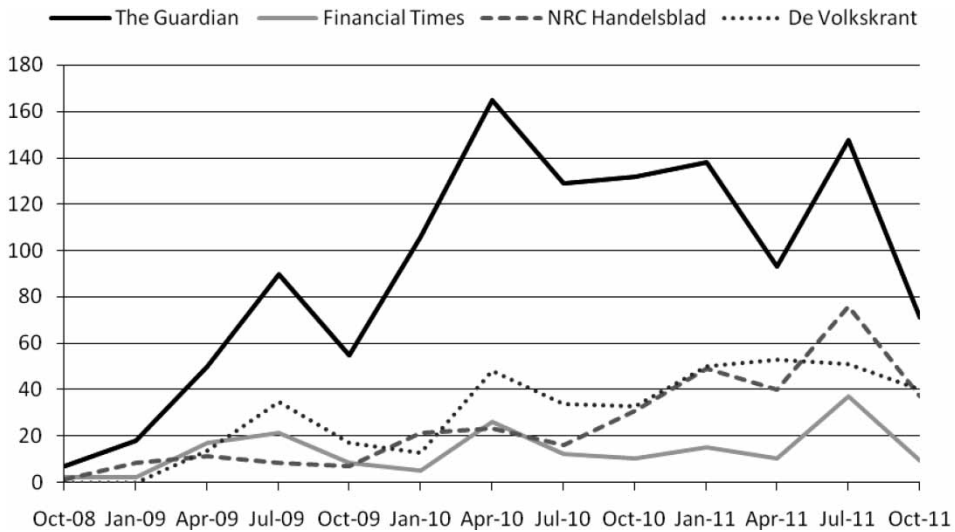
The eight dailies used 5813 tweets as quotes during the five-year sample period.<sup>3</sup> This textual convention first appeared on June 29, 2007 in *The Guardian*, a frontrunner in adopting Twitter. However, the first tweet it included was quite profane; it was about a perfume that "captures the two sides of Kate" Moss. The *Financial Times* quoted its first tweet in August 2008, but both broadsheets used tweets only sporadically until October 2008 when the first tweets appeared in our dataset. *De Volkskrant*, which was in the Netherlands the most progressive newspaper in terms of adopting social media, published its first tweet on November 28, 2008 about the attacks in Mumbai. It was only in 2009 that the practice became more common. As Figures 1 and 2 indicate, overall, there has been an increase in the use of tweets with a sharp rise starting in 2010, particularly among the popular press. Searching for quotes on Twitter has developed into an established journalistic routine, while the inclusion of tweets in news discourse has become an established textual convention.

The first striking finding is the difference between the two countries. British newspapers sourced tweets substantially more often than their Dutch counterparts, accounting for 76 per cent (4411 tweets) of the total tweets sourced. In the United Kingdom, only the *Financial Times* lagged behind, which might have to do with its focus on business news. Business people might be less inclined to post job-related messages on social media, especially when their companies are on the stock exchange and information might be influencing the share prices. In the Netherlands, the tabloid *De Telegraaf* hardly published any tweets; only 150 during our sample period, which consisted of 3 per cent of the total number.





**FIGURE 1**  
The frequency of tweets used as news sources in British and Dutch popular papers



**FIGURE 2**  
The frequency of tweets used as news sources in British and Dutch quality papers

The disproportional use of tweets is most likely linked to the difference between the two media systems. The United Kingdom has a more competitive newspaper market than the Dutch. This results in the tabloids, and the broadsheets in their slipstream, being more oriented towards conflict, celebrity news and personalized news stories. The ingredients for such coverage are widely available on Twitter. Moreover, the economic difficulties discussed above and loss of journalistic jobs are more severe in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands. These circumstances may have made Twitter a more appealing space to gather information and “cherry pick” sources for British journalists. There was also a

clear distinction between popular and quality newspapers. Overall, popular papers sourced tweets more often than quality papers did; the four popular newspapers were responsible for 64 per cent of all tweets sourced. As will be discussed below, tweets were mainly used in these papers as sources in soft news.

*Topic of Articles that Sourced Tweets*

What were the topics of the 3361 articles in which tweets were quoted? For analytical and practical reasons, we grouped the 19 coding categories discussed above into 11 topics.<sup>4</sup> As Table 1 reveals, the top four topics, which accounted for 84 per cent of

**TABLE 1**  
The topic of articles in which tweets were sourced by newspaper

Topic	Frequency of articles per newspaper										Total
	1	2	3	4	Popular	5	6	7	8	Quality	
Human interest											
N	436	469	60	22	987	102	13	10	45	170	1157
%	45.3	55.5	18.1	23.2	44.2	17.5	13.3	4.8	18.8	15.1	34.4
Sports											
N	157	158	168	27	510	152	3	39	46	240	750
%	16.3	18.7	50.6	28.4	22.8	26.1	3.1	18.8	19.2	21.3	22.3
Media											
N	215	96	13	7	331	79	14	28	33	154	485
%	22.3	11.4	3.9	7.4	14.8	13.6	14.3	13.5	13.8	13.7	14.4
Politics											
N	40	47	22	13	122	127	37	79	56	299	421
%	4.2	5.7	6.6	13.7	5.5	21.8	37.8	38.2	23.3	26.5	12.5
Crime											
N	55	30	24	16	125	22	6	9	18	55	180
%	5.7	3.6	7.2	16.8	5.6	3.8	6.1	4.3	7.5	4.9	5.4
Arts/culture											
N	9	6	17	3	35	29	2	10	15	56	91
%	0.9	0.7	5.1	3.2	1.6	5.0	2.0	4.8	6.3	5.0	2.7
Business											
N	10	9	6	2	27	13	17	11	9	50	77
%	1.0	1.1	1.8	2.1	1.2	2.2	17.3	5.3	3.8	4.4	2.3
Accidents											
N	8	15	7	4	34	15	2	2	4	23	57
%	0.8	1.8	2.1	4.2	1.5	2.6	2.0	1.0	1.7	2.0	1.7
Science											
N	4	1	1	0	6	22	1	4	3	30	36
%	0.4	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.3	3.8	1.0	1.9	1.3	2.7	1.1
Mixed											
N	24	11	12	0	47	14	1	15	11	41	88
%	2.5	1.3	3.6	0.0	2.1	2.4	1.0	7.2	4.6	3.6	2.6
Other											
N	4	3	2	1	10	7	2	0	0	9	19
%	0.4	0.4	0.6	1.1	0.4	1.2	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.6
Total											
N	962	845	332	95	2234	582	98	207	240	1127	3361
%	28.6	25.1	9.9	2.8	66.5	17.3	2.9	6.2	7.1	33.5	100

1, *The Sun*; 2, *Daily Mirror*; 3, *Algemeen Dagblad*; 4, *De Telegraaf*; 5, *The Guardian*; 6, *Financial Times*; 7, *NRC Handelsblad*; 8, *De Volkskrant*.

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all articles (86 and 76 per cent for the British and Dutch cases, respectively), were human interest, sports, media and politics. The main difference between the two cases was that for British newspapers, it was in human-interest stories (41 per cent) and sports reports (19 per cent) where tweets were sourced the most, while for Dutch newspapers, it was sports (32 per cent) and politics (20 per cent). In the broadsheets, news on media was quite stable; it measured between 13.5 and 14.3 per cent. Typically, these stories were either about Twitter as a company or its use by journalists, politicians and citizens. In these cases, tweets were used to illustrate these issues. *The Sun* also used many tweets in media coverage, but these were mostly comments of viewers on television shows like *X Factor*. It resulted in lists that aimed to capture the popular vote.

@NickVaughan: "What's that sound? It's Freddie Mercury spinning in his grave. Get her out!" (*The Sun*, 10 October 2011)

When comparing popular with quality newspapers, distinct differences emerge. For practical and analytical reasons, we have grouped the topics based on a hard/soft news division. Although we are aware of the limitations of such a distinction and the debates surrounding, for example, infotainment (Reinemann et al. 2012), in this case we find it to be less problematic because our coding focused on the dominant topic of news articles and not on the value or effects of such coverage. As becomes clear from Figure 3, this distinction illuminates different tweeting patterns.

Popular newspapers overwhelmingly used tweets in soft news coverage, accounting for nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of the 2234 articles. Particularly the *Daily Mirror* and *The Sun* quoted tweets to peep into the personal lives of celebrities. A typical example was a news item on television star Helen Flanagan who, as the *Mirror* (3 October 2011) stated, "has had another panic attack". The news was based upon two tweets from the actress in which she declared to have fled a coffee shop because everyone was "watching her" and "talking about her". The Dutch tabloids were less involved with celebrity culture and

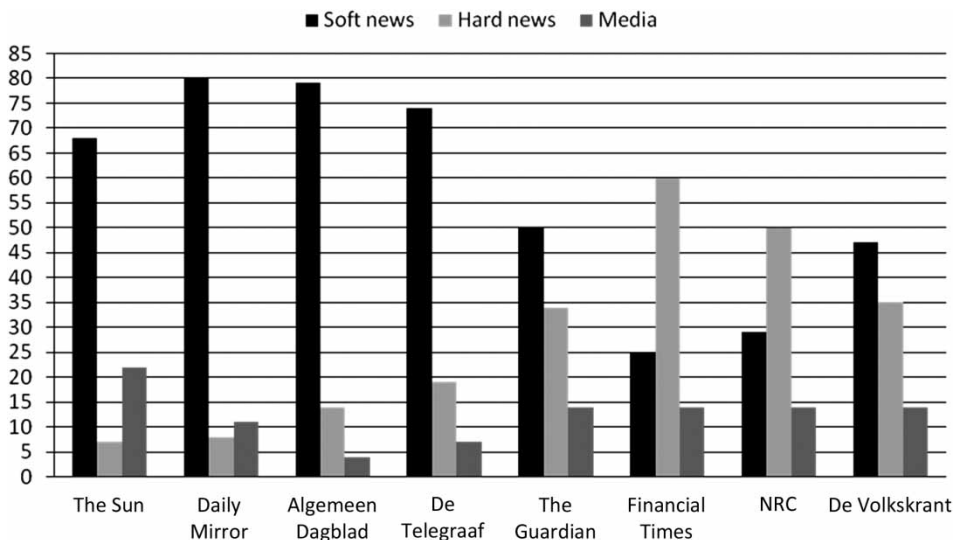


FIGURE 3

Percentage of soft and hard news articles in which tweets were sourced, by newspaper

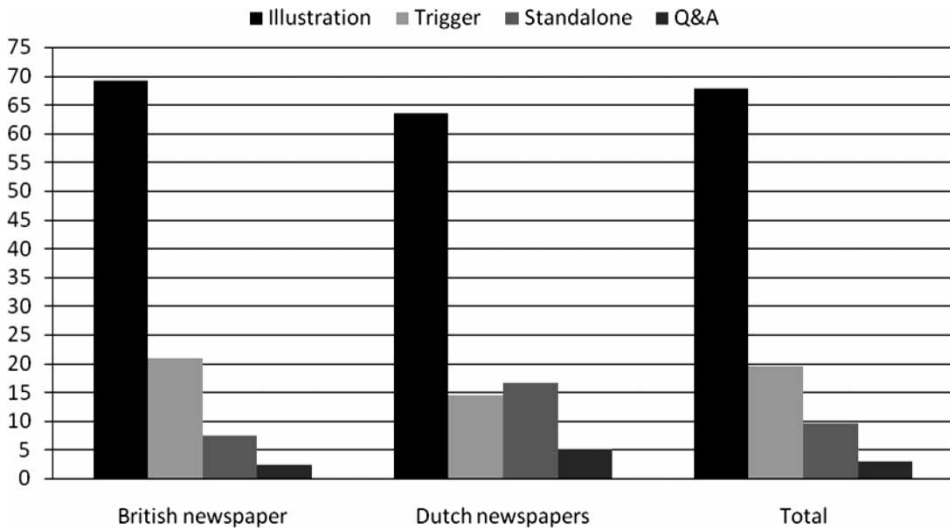
focused more on sports and crime. *Algemeen Dagblad* (6 and 8 July 2009), for example, reported about a visit from cycling legend Eddy Merckx to the hotel room of Lance Armstrong after a Tour de France stage. It also made a news item about the compliments Armstrong gave to his teammates on Twitter after a rough stage. In all cases, the tweets gave an intimate image of the private life of sources at moments that reporters did not have access to them.

However, for quality newspapers soft news was only 43 per cent of the 1127 articles. This consisted of mostly human-interest and sports topics, but also included crime, accidents and disasters, and weather. Within soft news coverage, we find that for quality newspapers, it was sports reports (particularly in Dutch newspapers) where most of the tweets were sourced, representing nearly half of these articles while, for popular newspapers (particularly in British newspapers), it was human-interest stories where most tweets appeared (987 of 1661 articles).

Figure 3 also reveals that quality newspapers used tweets as sources in hard news stories more often than popular papers did; this accounted for 39 per cent of their articles while, for popular papers, this was only 9 per cent. Hard news consisted of articles on politics, business and economy, arts and culture, science, religion and beliefs, health care, and the environment. However, it was political news reports where most of the tweets appeared in both popular and quality papers, representing two-thirds of these articles. Dutch newspapers tended to publish many stand-alone tweets of politicians, but also based news stories on tweets. *NRC Handelsblad* (26 August 2010), for example, published a news story ("Wilders Attacks CDA Fiercely") based on a tweet from right-wing politician Geert Wilders in which he threatened to cease his political support for the government. "Could this CDA chairman Bleker take a holiday or so? What a big sorehead! And to be clear: the PVV should not do anything!"

### *Quoting Patterns*

Journalists in both cases, regardless of newspaper type, primarily quoted tweets verbatim as opposed to paraphrasing them, accounting for 92 per cent of all tweets sourced. However, there was a slight difference between the two cases: Dutch journalists paraphrased tweets more often than British journalists did, representing 18 and 5 per cent, respectively. This finding might have something to do with the fact that Dutch journalists were more reluctant to use tweets as sources. Consequently, when they did use tweets, they were more likely to paraphrase tweets than British journalists were. Another reason is that Dutch journalists sometimes paraphrase tweets in foreign languages. However, this has only a minor influence on the results because in the large majority of cases utterance are translated into Dutch and quoted in full. A second explanation might be that British journalists, particularly the tabloids, have less time to craft their stories, which leads to copy and paste journalism. Moreover, tabloid journalists might have less ethical and professional concerns with this habit. Overall, however, the findings here imply that sources, to some extent, gain control over their public discourse: journalists simply copy statements from sources. The lack of personal contact seems to make journalists cautious; i.e. by not paraphrasing and interpreting tweets, but rather quoting them in full, they seem to downplay the responsibility for the information in them.



**FIGURE 4**  
Percentage of functions, by country

#### *Function of Tweets*

As Figure 4 shows, we identified four functions tweets had in news coverage. Overall, illustration was the most frequent function, accounting for 69 and 64 per cent of British and Dutch tweets, respectively. Tweets were used to add flavour to a story, usually by adding a personal note from someone involved. The *Financial Times* (16 April 2010), for example, quoted tweets from travellers who were trapped in Iceland in a story about the volcanic ashes that stopped air traffic. A story on a new television channel for children on Dutch cable started with comments from parents on Twitter: "Brilliant! I'm watching Nils Holgersson on Childrens' Net! Childhood memories!" (*De Volkskrant*, 5 April 2011). In another story on a lawsuit against filesharing site Pirate Bay, a tweet from one of the Swedish founders of the site was used. His comment on losing the lawsuit was quoted in *The Guardian* (18 April 2009): "This is just a theatre to the media".

One noticeable difference between the two cases was the publishing of standalone tweets; for Dutch newspapers, this represented 17 per cent of their tweets while, for British newspapers, this accounted for only 7 per cent. The *Algemeen Dagblad*, in particular, frequently published tweets in the form of "the tweet of the day", typically from athletes and celebrities.

When comparing popular with quality newspapers, several striking differences emerge. As Table 2 indicates, quality newspapers tended to use tweets as an illustration of news coverage more often than the popular press, accounting for three-quarters of their total tweets. This indicates that in these papers tweets were selected to add an extra layer to a story. Quality newspapers also made use of the Q&A format more often than popular newspapers did. *The Guardian*, for example, on several occasions posed questions to experts on specific issues via Twitter and subsequently published those the following day. *De Volkskrant* especially made use of the Twitter interview; journalists would interview a politician, for example, via Twitter and publish it shortly thereafter. Both papers too (along

**TABLE 2**  
Tweet functions by newspaper

Function	Frequency of functions per newspaper								Quality	Total	
	1	2	3	4	Popular	5	6	7			8
Illustration											
N	963	1027	275	117	2382	935	126	217	282	1560	3942
%	59.7	72.2	51.3	78.0	64.0	77.8	72.4	66.2	72.7	74.6	67.8
Trigger											
N	519	260	86	30	895	136	13	50	39	238	1133
%	32.2	18.3	16.0	20.0	24.1	11.3	7.5	15.2	10.1	11.4	19.5
Standalone											
N	83	121	175	0	379	89	35	41	18	183	562
%	5.1	8.5	32.6	0.0	10.2	7.4	20.1	12.5	4.6	8.7	9.7
Q&A											
N	47	15	0	3	65	42	0	20	49	111	176
%	2.9	1.1	0.0	2.0	1.7	3.5	0.0	6.1	12.6	5.3	3.0
Total											
N	1612	1423	536	150	3721	1202	174	328	388	2092	5813
%	27.7	24.5	9.2	2.6	64.0	20.7	3.0	5.6	6.7	36.0	100

1, *The Sun*; 2, *Daily Mirror*; 3, *Algemeen Dagblad*; 4, *De Telegraaf*; 5, *The Guardian*; 6, *Financial Times*; 7, *NRC Handelsblad*; 8, *De Volkskrant*.

with popular papers) used Twitter to pose questions to the public on particular issues from gathering their opinions on sporting events and reality television series to gauging their thoughts on more political and societal issues.

Finally, tweets triggered news stories substantially more often in popular papers than in the quality press, accounting for nearly a quarter of their total tweets. In particular, it was tweets from celebrities and athletes that triggered the most news coverage. A good example of this was the Twitter row that took place between Irish singer Brian McFadden and his ex-wife Kerry Katona, which triggered numerous human-interest stories in British popular papers, especially in *The Sun*. In the Dutch popular press, it was athletes' tweets that triggered the most news coverage. For example, tweets by cyclist Lance Armstrong regarding the doping scandal triggered numerous stories, particularly in the *Algemeen Dagblad*. Because Armstrong was not available to be questioned on this issue, reporters went to Twitter and wrote down the comments he was willing to publish himself. More than two-thirds of the stories in the popular press that were triggered by tweets were about sports or human interest. In the quality papers, politician's tweets triggered many articles, such as the news item on Geert Wilders mentioned above.

### *Whose Tweets Are Being Sourced?*

As Figure 5 and Table 3 reveal, celebrities, athletes, the public (*vox populi*) and politicians were the top four sources used by journalists, accounting for 79 per cent of all the tweets sourced. There are clear differences between the two cases. British journalists sourced celebrities' tweets (actors, comedians, models, musicians/singers) substantially more often than Dutch journalists did, representing 34 per cent of their tweets compared to only 12 per cent for the Dutch. Dutch journalists relied heavily on politicians (22 per cent) and athletes' (21 per cent) tweets. British journalists also drew from the public more

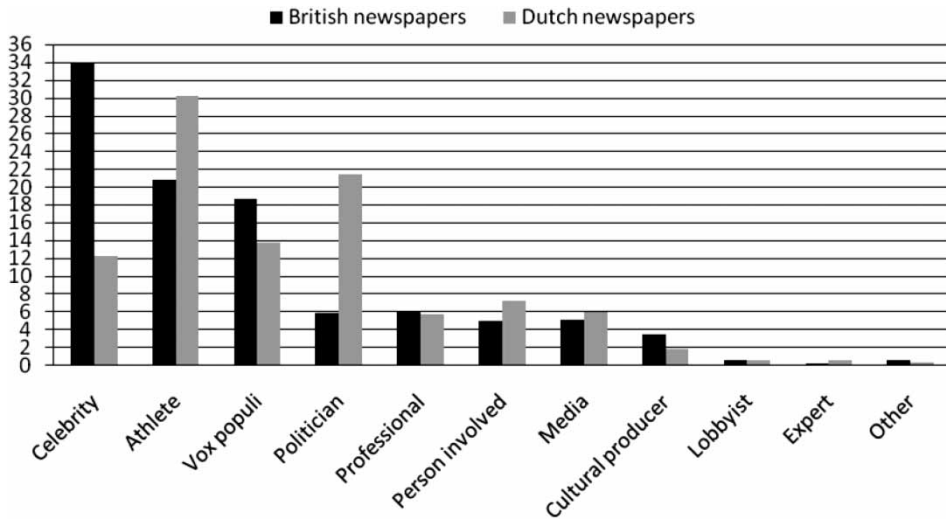


FIGURE 5

Percentage of tweets sourced, by authors' occupation and by country

often than Dutch journalists did, particularly the quality press; vox populi tweets account for nearly a fifth of the tweets sourced by British journalists. The content of these tweets ranged from, for example, popular comments on a soccer player ("You're a one-trick pony—a sh\*\* one at that"; *Daily Mirror*, 16 April 2011) to discussions on the reform of the British pension system ("I love hearing Tories talk about state pensions. It's like hearing the pope talk about sex"; *The Guardian*, 12 July 2010). The range of voices in the news thus multiplies because of the easy accessibility of citizen's opinions on Twitter.

When comparing popular with quality newspapers, several distinct differences emerge. As Table 3 indicates, popular papers drew heavily from celebrities and athletes, representing slightly more than two-thirds of the tweets sourced compared to only 25 per cent for the quality press. Celebrity tweets used by journalists mostly consisted of status updates, likes, dislikes and stories from their daily lives. In other words, journalists used Twitter as a window into the private lives of celebrities. Especially in the British popular press, much of this was scandalous and sensational in nature. For example, tweets that dealt with relationships like Brian McFadden's row with his ex-wife and the falling out between celebrities (e.g. Kelly Osborne's rants) were commonly used. However, tweets from celebrities were also used, to a lesser extent, for promotional purposes. For example, journalists would use tweets from an actor starting her own perfume or clothing line or for promoting a singer's new music video or album. Tweets sourced from athletes, on the other hand, were less sensational, focusing primarily on performance, particularly in the Dutch press. It was tweets from soccer players, golfers and cyclists that made it to the pages of the popular press (and quality press) the most. In addition to performance, tweets from athletes dealt with opinions on the decisions made by, for example, governing bodies and problems they were having with, for example, club management.

Quality newspapers sourced tweets from the vox populi and politicians more frequently, accounting for 42 per cent of the tweets sourced compared to 19 per cent for journalists from popular newspapers. *The Guardian*, in particular, made frequent use

**TABLE 3**  
Tweets sourced by authors' occupation and by newspaper

Occupation	Frequency of sources per newspaper								Quality	Total	
	1	2	3	4	Popular	5	6	7			8
Celebrity											
N	758	551	83	36	1428	185	2	17	37	241	1669
%	47.0	38.7	15.5	24.0	38.4	15.4	1.1	5.2	9.5	11.5	28.7
Athlete											
N	409	334	280	32	1055	171	2	61	50	284	1339
%	25.4	23.5	15.5	21.3	28.4	14.2	1.1	18.6	12.9	13.6	23.0
Vox populi											
N	177	278	36	20	511	316	55	48	89	508	1019
%	11.0	19.5	6.7	13.3	13.7	26.3	31.6	14.6	22.9	24.3	17.5
Politician											
N	63	50	54	19	186	107	34	119	109	369	555
%	3.9	3.5	10.1	12.7	5.0	8.9	19.5	36.3	28.1	17.6	9.5
Professional											
N	43	65	38	17	163	95	60	15	10	180	343
%	2.7	4.6	7.1	11.3	4.4	7.9	34.5	4.6	2.6	8.6	5.9
Involved											
N	57	38	29	13	137	123	3	36	23	185	322
%	3.5	2.7	5.4	8.7	3.7	10.2	1.7	11.0	5.9	8.8	5.5
Media											
N	72	62	10	5	149	81	9	20	49	159	308
%	4.5	4.4	1.9	3.3	4.0	6.7	5.2	6.1	12.6	7.6	5.3
Cultural producer											
N	29	38	3	7	77	82	5	5	10	102	179
%	1.8	2.7	0.6	4.7	2.1	6.8	2.9	1.5	2.6	4.9	3.1
Lobbyist											
N	1	2	2	1	6	21	3	4	2	30	36
%	0.1	0.1	0.4	0.7	0.2	1.7	1.7	1.2	0.5	1.4	0.6
Expert											
N	0	2	0	0	2	8	0	3	6	17	19
%	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.7	0.0	0.9	1.5	0.8	0.3
Other											
N	3	3	1	0	7	13	1	0	3	17	24
%	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.2	1.1	0.6	0.0	0.8	0.8	0.4
Total											
N	1612	1423	536	150	3721	1202	174	328	388	2092	5813
%	27.7	24.5	9.2	2.6	64.0	20.7	3.0	5.6	6.7	36.0	100

1, *The Sun*; 2, *Daily Mirror*; 3, *Algemeen Dagblad*; 4, *De Telegraaf*; 5, *The Guardian*; 6, *Financial Times*; 7, *NRC Handelsblad*; 8, *De Volkskrant*.

of vox populi tweets as a means of gauging public opinion on political and societal issues. These were also used in soft news coverage (particularly in the popular press) as a means of getting public feedback on popular TV series such as *The X Factor*, *Britain's Got Talent* and *The Voice of Holland*. Regarding politicians, it was the Dutch quality press that drew heavily from their tweets. Party leaders Geert Wilders, Femke Halsema (Groenlinks), Maxime Verhagen (CDA) and Diederik Samson (PvdA) were among the most frequently sourced tweeps. Geert Wilders, the leader of the PVV, for example, is a remarkable case because he made it a point not to talk to journalists. Consequently, his weekly tweet was often the subject of news coverage (cf. Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff 2013).



## Conclusion

Our results clearly show that Twitter has become a regularly used source for newspaper journalists. Since 2010, we found a steep rise in the number of tweets that were included in newspaper content. The public and interactive nature of Twitter makes it an appealing source for reporters. They can keep in touch with their beat, approach interesting persons for comments and information, follow specific users and discussions on certain topics or—and that is the main focus of this article—search for interesting quotes that they can integrate in news texts. Tweets are used for different purposes. First, they give reporters the opportunity to tap into the private sphere of well-known and newsworthy people, ranging from celebrities to politicians, and to peep at their thoughts, opinions and experiences. Furthermore, reporters can add quotes to their stories from people that are suitable as a source but not available other than on Twitter. Gans's (1979) remark that sources have to be both to get into the news thus gets a new dimension.

Secondly, tweets are used to flavour news stories with quotes that express the opinions or experiences of a range of sources. This function (illustration) dominates in all newspapers; more than two-third of the tweets were used to illustrate broader issues. On first sight, one may conclude that adding a simple quote that could be replaced by any other on the same topic might not be that important. However, we argue that this is a meaningful expression of a current trend towards personalization of news (Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2011). Ever more often, news stories get a human angle to make them more appealing and accessible. Personal observations such as those voiced in tweets make it possible to relate abstract topics quite naturally to the experiences of readers. Thirdly, tweets can trigger news stories because they are newsworthy themselves. This was the case in about 20 per cent of the stories in which tweets were quoted. It happens when someone either deliberately or accidentally tweets something that is picked up by the newspapers and becomes the subject of a story. Regarding the former, sources like politicians and celebrities use Twitter strategically to pitch their stories into the mainstream news.

There are clear differences between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands when it comes to the amount of tweets quoted and the topics and sources that were represented in newspaper coverage. First, British papers (with the exception of the *Financial Times*) quoted far more tweets than their Dutch counterparts did. Moreover, they included them mainly in human-interest and sports stories while, in the Netherlands, political news included many tweets as well. This finding is mirrored in who is quoted. In the United Kingdom, celebrities, but also ordinary citizens, get many tweets into newspaper pages. The competitive character of the UK market leads to more personalized, conflict-oriented and sensational news. Twitter, as a personal medium *par excellence*, provides a lot of information that is useful for exactly these kinds of stories.

We found clear differences between tabloids and broadsheets. Although the quality press discovered Twitter as a source first, nowadays tabloids are bulk consumers of tweets. Almost two-thirds of the tweets in our sample were cited by popular newspapers. We suggest that both the working conditions and the journalistic norms in tabloid newsrooms might promote this practice. In general, tweets are more often used in "soft" than in "hard" news, chiefly by the tabloids. This seems to be in line with the impression journalists themselves have on the use of social media. In a survey, 51 per cent of journalists agreed that social media in general encourages a focus on "soft" news while 30 per cent wholeheartedly disagreed with that statement (Cision 2011a, 2011b). Tabloids are

particularly keen on all kinds of celebrities who tweet about their daily experiences, get into online catfights or talk about relationship troubles. Athletes are popular victims when they tweet about matches or quarrels with clubs, co-players and opponents. Quality papers are also interested in “soft” news stories (although they usually phrase them in a more serious tone that fits their public), but are also on the watch for political tweets and other “hard” news issues that break on Twitter.

We argue that the relatively new practice of citing tweets has consequences for journalism in general and journalist–source relations in particular. Twitter provides reporters with a rich range of accessible sources and instant information. Whereas traditional journalist–source relations are to a large extent structured and formalized to guarantee a timely and efficient production of news, the world now opens up from behind a reporter’s desk. Journalists can harvest a rich vineyard filled with utterances of diverse voices. Although we do not want to suggest that this diminishes the influence of elite sources (that are traditionally part and parcel of the majority of news stories), this broadens the entrance to the news and makes news coverage more diverse. Alternative sources ranging from activists to professionals and the popular voice are close at hand on Twitter. Our results show that almost a quarter of all tweets contain vox populi (ranking third after celebrities and athletes) or people involved.

Moreover, Twitter, to some extent, levels the playing field. Where in the past some journalists and newspapers based on their reputation, experience and long-term relationships with influentials had better access to valuable sources and information, on social media all content is available to everyone. Media outlets that do not have correspondents in troubled areas or do not have special reporters to cover specific beats now still have access to information. There is a loss of exclusivity because of the open nature of social media but reporters aggregate and select utterances that are still news to readers who do not follow Twitter. In other words, in a world where information is omnipresent, journalism has to redefine its relevance. Newspapers can make a difference in contextualizing tweets.

Especially in the tabloids, tweets seem to be taken at face value. There are no signs that the source or other sources were contacted to verify information that was twittered. This might indicate “sloppy journalism” and erodes journalism as a practice of verification. The latter is central to its authority and its jurisdiction to provide a legitimate representation of social reality (Hermida 2012; Broersma 2013). Moreover, by quoting tweets without contacting the source, the power balance between journalists and sources shifts. Obviously tweets that were aimed at a “private” audience can appear in newspapers involuntarily or are quoted out of context. Non-elite sources who have limited media experience can be harmed by this in particular. However, although tweets seem to be spontaneous and natural, they are usually posted deliberately, aiming for a certain effect. Celebrities and politicians are increasingly developing PR techniques that take advantage of the interplay between Twitter and traditional news outlets. In some cases, sources do not even tweet themselves but have PR persons to do so. When tweets are included in newspapers they not only get a wider distribution but also become more credible because they are incorporated in authoritative news discourse.

Particularly, elite sources can obtain more control over public discourse due to Twitter. News is not the product of negotiation anymore, but a mere result of unidirectional communication. Being not available for journalists when famous or in the centre of a public storm, but dropping a tweet instead, like, for example, Dutch right-wing

politician Geert Wilders does, is an effective strategy to control and frame news discourse (cf. Broersma and Graham 2012). When *negotiation-through-conversation* is increasingly bypassed and replaced by simply copying and pasting from social media, not only is journalism's claim on meaning making and constructing social reality undermined, but also its function to critically investigate and question the powers that be. Journalism then simply becomes moving empty boxes.

## NOTES

1. A possible limitation of this study is that we only identified articles that *cited* tweets. Journalists might be using tweets without properly attributing them. However, based on an experiment in which we, by means of plagiarism detection software, compared tweets from politicians with newspapers' news coverage, we are quite confident that the effects of this limitation are limited. We found no (parts of) tweets that were not attributed.
2. This coding scheme draws from the codebook developed for the research project "Reporting at the Boundaries of the Public Sphere. Form, Style and Strategy of European Journalism, 1880–2005", directed by Broersma and supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).
3. Note that there were no tweets sourced during the sampling period for 2007 and most of 2008.
4. The categories *human interest*, *lifestyle* and *royalty* have been clustered under Human Interest; Politics includes *politics and government*, *international relations* and *social welfare*; Science includes *education* and *science and technology*; Other includes *nature and the environment*, *health care*, *religion and beliefs*, and *other*.

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**Marcel Broersma** (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: [m.j.broersma@rug.nl](mailto:m.j.broersma@rug.nl)

**Todd Graham**, Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: [t.s.graham@rug.nl](mailto:t.s.graham@rug.nl)