# Keeping the Gates on Twitter: Interactivity and Sourcing Habits

# of Lebanese Traditional Media

**Abstract**

Using gatekeeping and sourcing frameworks, this study content analyzes a sample of 1300 tweets from 13 Lebanese newspapers and television stations in order to examine the relationship between the use of sources and tweet popularity in a Lebanese media scene marked by political parallelism and high diversity. The study revealed the media’s tendency to rely almost exclusively on officials, the majority of whom were political elites in the government or a political party. Official and governmental sources also dominated tweets discussing news more so than other types. Tweets quoting officials, however, were not related to more favorites, retweets or comments. Newspapers exhibited an increased tendency to lean on officials compared to television stations. Newspapers also seemed to be keener on keeping their own information flowing throughout, by linking to their own outlets. The analysis points to traditional gatekeeping practices, evident in the use of the platform as a marketing tool to promote outlets’ own content, to source governmental and party officials and journalists, and to discuss the news.

*Keywords*: Lebanon; news media; gatekeeping; sourcing; Twitter; television; newspapers

In a highly connected social world where liking, sharing, and commenting have become part of people’s daily routines, the monopoly of traditional media as the sole disseminators of news has eroded (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). The unraveling of the hierarchies between mass media and media consumers (Hermida et al., 2012) brought with it changes in the media ecology, thus challenging the power of traditional news outlets to make and deliver news (Ahmed, Cho, & Jaidka, 2018). Nowadays, stories can gain popularity and become viral for various reasons, some of which might not be related to mainstream media. At a time where a dress could capture world attention due to people’s perceptions of its colors (Holderness, 2015) or an image of an egg could become the most liked photo on Instagram (Rosenblatt, 2019), the news media have found themselves competing with an infinite number of digital users who are adept at creating, recommending, and disseminating content (García-Perdomo, Salaverría, Kilgo, & Harlow, 2018). The introduction of these new media entrepreneurs has been linked to the erosion of gatekeeping roles as part of the transformation in storytelling techniques the media scene has recently witnessed (Bucy, 2003). Riding the wave of these changes, Twitter has presented itself as a useful tool for both the news industry and the public (Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, & Holton, 2014).

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

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

**Literature Review**

**Sourcing the News**

Sourcing studies have a rich tradition in journalism research, starting with Sigal’s (1973) seminal study on reporters and sources and continuing with Bennett’s (1990) indexing hypothesis. Extant literature has yielded consistent findings about government officials being the main sources the media turn to when they report on various types of news, including political issues, public affairs, and business crises, among others (Author, 2013; Bullock, 2008; Powell & Self, 2003). Journalists depend on officials because they see them as legitimate sources who have the authority to speak about their institutions (Bennett, 1996; Cook, 1989; Schudson, 2010). Sources not only influence reporters’ understanding of an issue (Gans, 2004), but also the public’s perceptions and judgments (Freedman, Fico, & Durisin, 2010). Lack of source diversity in news coverage contributes to the maintenance of the status quo, legitimizing the current social, economic and political structure (Gans, 2004).

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

With the major role legacy media play in the intersection of politics and the new media environment in Lebanon (El-Richani, 2016), it is important to investigate the sourcing patterns of local media on Twitter. The Lebanese media belong to one of the most liberal and progressive media systems in the Arab world (Melki & Mallat, 2013). Although they are characterized by high diversity, the absence of a strong state has given rise to non-state actors who divided the media among themselves, reflecting the deep political divisions that have dominated the country since the start of the Civil War in 1975 (El-Richani, 2016). These divisions were particularly evident in broadcast media, where the partitioning of television channels in post-war Lebanon mirrored the sectarian ideologies these stations defended, making them mouthpieces of the parties they supported (Kraidy, 1998). With the exception of state broadcaster *Télé Liban*, all existing television stations, supported the dominant sects in Lebanon: Shi’te, Sunni, Maronite, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox (Kraidy, 1998). Although print media are also politicized, low circulation and advertising rates have gradually weakened local newspapers (El-Richani, 2016), diminishing daily readership to a mere 5% of Lebanese respondents in a 2019 survey (“Media use,” 2019), even when 32% listed newspapers as an important source for news in 2017 (“Media use,” 2017). Only recently has the country witnessed a partial break from these long-held sectarian beliefs. The October 2019 revolutionary episodes that spread across Lebanon received extensive airtime on three television channels, *Al-Jadeed*, *LBC*, and *MTV*, who played an anti-governmental role during the uprisings, as opposed to pro-government channels, *Al-Manar*, *NBN*, and *OTV* who downplayed the protests (“Spinning, downplaying, ignoring,” 2019). The political parallelism that colors Lebanese media in sectarian hues – both internally in the staff and externally in audiences (El-Richani, 2016) – is also evident in public opinion, where a third of Lebanese citizens believed the country’s media report the news independently and without interference from officials (“Media use,” 2017). Nötzold’s (2008) analysis of Lebanese TV stations revealed a sectarian bias toward the faction or party they represent, with a clear dominance of religious figures as sources in TV news reports. Although this finding may seem at odds with literature on sourcing, the unique situation that characterizes the Lebanese media – mainly the fact that many clerics have political roles due to their direct involvement with politics – clarifies these findings, thus putting them in line with extant sourcing research. Empirical research on the use of sources in the Arab region as well has indicated the media favor official governmental sources in their news stories (Author, 2018). Based on the previously mentioned studies, the following hypothesis emerges:

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

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

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

# Gatekeeping on Twitter

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

Journalists’ gatekeeping roles, however, have been challenged in the new media environment due to the restructuring of the traditional sender-receiver relationship (Ahmed et al., 2018; Bucy, 2003; Hermida et al., 2012). Interactivity in digital media have offered the public the choice to act as both senders and receivers of information, allowing users to serve as sources, gatekeepers, and creators of content (Sundar et al., 2012). Citizens’ ability to generate content in online channels has empowered the latter “as an alternative platform for political discussions, which bypasses the official gatekeeping of traditional media” (Ahmed et al., 2018, p. 21). On the other hand, individuals can amplify the reach of established media, among other sources of information on Twitter, by sharing their content through retweets that could be picked up by the users’ followers and subsequently shared to their wider networks (Lotan et al., 2011; Shi et al., 2018). This was supported in an experiment of social endorsements on Facebook, where participants were more likely to select socially endorsed stories than those based on partisan sources (Messing & Westwood, 2013). At the same time, platforms such as Twitter facilitate unmediated communication (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), allowing individuals to proactively change the media frames by adding their own or engage in citizen journalism and generate new content. Dubbing this phenomenon as audience gatekeeping, Shoemaker, Johnson, Seo, and Wang (2010) contended that while the audience may extend the media’s gatekeeping process, its choices of what to share and what not to share does not necessarily reflect the original journalistic news values that prompted the stories (Shoemaker et al., 2010).

The mixed findings in research underline some basic observations: the interactive online world is complex and cannot be stripped down to simple questions of who sends and who receives. The non-linear nature of the web means there exists a cyclical process of creating and sharing that cannot always be tracked to one powerful group. Klinger and Svensson (2015) argue that due to inherent differences between the way social media platforms and traditional mass media operate, we cannot apply media logic to them. In their study, they rely on Altheide’s (2004) definition of media logic as “the assumptions and processes for constructing messages within a particular medium” (p. 294). Theorizing a concept of network media logic, they outline the three dimensions where the two entities diverge: content production, information distribution, and media use (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Taking these differences into consideration, it is evident that power in the online world is not restricted to the usual big players of mass media, but rather moves constantly between them and other members of the public. The former, however, still hold some of the cards, as “the majority of relevant information still comes from journalistic content production, is distributed via established mass media and is used by individuals with routinized media menus” (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1251).

One such case is that of crises, disasters, and emergencies, where research has revealed the ability of both the public and established media organizations to act as disseminators of information (e.g. Muralidharan, Rasmussen, Patterson, & Shin, 2011; Takahashi et al., 2015; Vis, 2013). Other situations have also revealed various struggles over power. For instance, Bodrunova, Litvinenko, and Blekanov’s (2018) examination of media strategies on Twitter has pointed to a more or less uniform approach – a top-down hierarchical approach – where they play the traditional role of disseminator of information. Similarly, applying gatekeeping theory on 26 news organizations in the United States, Russell (2019) found these media primarily used Twitter to link to articles on their websites, in addition to including photographs in their tweets. Through these interactive features, they tended to promote their content more than any other function, thus using “Twitter for the gatekeeping purpose of directing audience members to online news content” (Russell, 2019, p. 96). Yet another study of Twitter revealed journalists practice gatekeeping on Twitter through linking to their own organization’s content or to other mainstream media (Russell et al., 2015). Digital content creation, then, adds more items to consider in the gatekeeping process. Social media affordances, such as hyperlinks, hashtags, and mentions, play a central role in the gatekeeping cycle. Specifically, they mediate the process of selecting information through posts themselves, positioning it through mentions, hashtags, and hyperlinks, and repeating it through retweets, all of which make up the revised form of the basic elements of gatekeeping, as defined by Shoemaker et al. (2009). These theoretical linkages are also based on Singer (2005) and Lasorsa et al.’s (2012) studies that underlined the “normalization” of digital media, where journalists, broadly speaking, cling to normative practices and norms, while allowing blogging and microblogging to change some existing routines (Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer 2005).

Whereas in specific events and contentious issues, such as the Egypt’s uprisings or Ferguson’s protests, citizens could play the role of gatekeepers (Groshek & Tandoc, 2017) and contribute to the framing of news (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), their roles are limited outside these events. This could be partly due to the journalistic practices of constant news production, something members of the public do not have to engage in on a regular basis. In the same manner individuals have made use of the connectivity and broad access of computer-mediated platforms to connect with others in various social groups so have the media taken advantage of the affordances of these social networking sites, normalizing Twitter use and embedding it in their news routines (Tandoc, Jr., Cabañes, & Cayabyab, 2018; Tandoc & Vos, 2016), mainly through the promotion of their own content (Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2017; Russell, 2019) that continuously pushes messages to users.

To conclude, although non-elites and ordinary people are able to reframe chatter on Twitter and determine what is newsworthy, thus shifting the traditional gatekeeping exclusivity to include individuals outside the media and elite crowds (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), traditional media still play a major role in information dissemination, and thus studying them is crucial to understanding how they perform in the highly interactive and amplifying age of social media. In addition to assessing Lebanese media as one group, we were also curious about differences between print and broadcast media. Similar to world trends that highlight dwindling print readership vis-à-vis television (e.g. Matsa, Silver, Shearer, & Walker, 2018), Lebanese audiences as well gravitate toward television as a primary source of news, with 77% of participants in a survey saying they get their news from TV in 2017 and 52% in 2019, as opposed to newspapers that registered a low 5% among respondents (“Media use,” 2019). Based on these figures, we were motivated to explore these differences to find out whether audience trends, diminishing resources, and media type are also evident in the way these media use Twitter. Extant research has rarely measured the differences between newspapers and televisions’ uses of Twitter, usually focusing on one type of medium (e.g. Al-Rawi, 2017; Bodrunova et al., 2018; Broersma & Graham, 2012) or not distinguishing between the types (e.g. Russell, 2019). The current study follows Russell’s (2019) conceptualization of traditional gatekeeping and technical interactivity through the presence of hyperlinks, mentions, hashtags, and retweets to examine the gatekeeping role of Lebanese print and broadcast media during an uneventful period in 2017 through the following research questions:

*RQ1a: How do Lebanese media use hyperlinks?*

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

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

*RQ2a: How often do Lebanese media tweets include visuals?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Method

For this study, a total of 1300 tweets were content analyzed from a sample of 13 Lebanese broadcast and print media outlets that had a Twitter account. The print outlets consisted of the only five newspapers on Twitter: *Aliwaa*, *Al Joumhouria*, *Al Mustaqbal*, *Ad-*Diyar, and An-Nahar. The broadcast outlets consisted of eight of the nine local television stations with the exception of *Tele* *Lumière* that was excluded since it is a religious and not a news channel. These channels are: *Al-Jadeed*, *Al-Manar*, *Future TV*, Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (*LBC*), Murr Television (*MTV*), *NBN*, *OTV*, and *Télé Liban*. With the exception of state broadcaster *Télé Liban,* all media in this sample are privately owned, either by individuals or by parties.

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

# Variables and Measures

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

# Intercoder reliability

Four native speakers of the Arabic language from a Lebanese university majoring in communication coded the content of this study. Several training and pilot coding sessions were completed on a sample outside this study, after which the four coders worked on the intercoder reliability sample independently. The sample also followed a systematic random sampling procedure where the first tweet and subsequent tenth tweet of each outlet were included until the count reached 10, making the sample 130 tweets. The intercoder reliability tests for 15 variables had a mean of 0.92 measured with Krippendorff’s alpha, where the lowest alpha coefficient was 0.79 and the highest was 1.0[[1]](#footnote-1). In the case where the alpha could not be computed due to no variance, Holsti’s percentage was accepted, as with four sourcing variables – non-officials, experts, blogs, and other – which were at 100%. Holsti’s percentage was also accepted at 99%, albeit with caution, for the citizen source, since the four coders disagreed only on one case out of the 130 in the sample (all other cases had a value of 0, corresponding to no citizen source).

# Results

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

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

H1, which posited official sources are the most frequently used sources in the Lebanese media tweets, was supported (Table 1). Prior to running the tests, six source categories were collapsed due to very low frequencies (only 1 case out of 1300, for instance, for the citizen and blog variables, and only 2 cases had an athlete source). The final sourcing variable consisted of five categories: governmental officials; organizational officials; non-officials; journalists; and professionals and citizens (experts, entertainers, athletes, citizens, blogs, and other). Descriptive statistics indicated the most used sources per story were officials, almost three times more than all other sources combined. Among these, governmental officials were sourced more frequently than any other type of source. To produce inferential statistics, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted where the independent variable was media type and the dependent variables were two: officials and all others. The MANOVA model was significant, based on Pillai’s trace, *F* (2, 1296) = 3.55, *p*<.05, which is robust against violations to variances and co-variances (Olsen, 1974). The univariate tests indicated that only official sources varied significantly between the media types, *F* (1, 1297) = 5.35, *p*<.05, where newspapers used them (*M* = 0.45, *SD* = 0.49) more than television (*M* = 0.39, *SD* = 0.49).

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics for the source categories*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Median | *M* | *SD* | Max |
| Sources | 1 | 0.60 | 0.50 | 2 |
| Institutional sources |
| Officials | 0 | 0.42 | 0.49 | 1 |
| Governmental off | 0 | 0.35 | 0.48 | 1 |
| Organizational off | 0 | 0.06 | 0.25 | 1 |
| Non-officials | 0 | 0.05 | 0.23 | 1 |
| Individual sources | 0 | 0.06 | 0.24 | 1 |
| Journalists/Media | 0 | 0.06 | 0.24 | 1 |

*Note.* N = 1300

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

RQ1 examined the use of hyperlinks in tweets from newspapers and TV stations as well as the differences between them. One third of the tweets did not include any hyperlinks, while 70% (N=915) linked to their own site, and only two tweets linked to an outside source. As for the differences between newspapers and television stations, Table 2 indicates newspapers linked to their own site (75.4%) more than television channels did (67.3%), *x2* (2, N=1300) = 10.08, *p*<.01. Because the test violates the crosstabulations assumption of a minimum of a count of 5 per cell, we merged the two linking variables into one to obtain a dichotomous hyperlinks variable of yes or no. The new chi-square test was also significant, *x2* (1, N=1300) = 10.02, *p*<.01.

Table 2.

*Use of hyperlinks and visuals between newspapers and television stations*

Media Type Total

TV Newspaper *x*2

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Hyperlinks Own site | 538 (67.3%) | 377 (75.4%) | 915 (70.4%) | 10.08\* |
| Others | 1 (0.1%) | 1 (0.2%) | 2 (0.2%) |  |
| No link | 261 (32.6%) | 122 (24.4%) | 383 (29.5%) |  |
| VisualsYes | 419 (52.4%) | 317 (63.5%) | 736 (56.7%) | 15.56\*\* |
| No | 381 (47.6%) | 182 (36.5%) | 563 (43.3%) |  |

*Note.* \**p*<.01 and \*\**p*<.001

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

Beyond descriptives, the study tested whether or not visuals attracted more retweets, comments, mentions, and hashtags (RQ3). For retweets, comments, mentions, the Mann-Whitney U test was used, since the dependent variables did not meet the assumptions of a normal distribution, due to the presence of a large number of outliers (Table 3). Mann-Whitney U ranks the scores of the dependent variable, and then compares the mean ranks for the groups. The use of visuals was significantly related to only retweets *x2* (1, N=1299) = 194131.5, *p<.*05. Tweets containing visuals were retweeted more than those without visuals. As for hashtags, a *t*-test indicated a significant difference between the tweets, where those including visuals were related to a higher number of hashtags (*M* = 0.8, *SD* = 1.2) than tweets devoid of a photo or video (*M* = 0.4, *SD* = 0.7), *t* (1267.167) = -7.79, *p*<.001.

Table 3.

*Mann-Whitney U test for differences in the use of visuals across interactivity features*

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

*Note. \*\*p*<.001 and \**p*<.05

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

Finally, RQ5 explored the relationship between dominant sources and interactivity features. Use of retweets and mentions did not correlate with type of source. Hashtags, however, were negatively correlated with government officials, *r* (1298) = -.06, *p*<.05.

# Discussion

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

**Sourcing habits on Twitter**

As they reveal the near absolute dominance of officials in media news, and the presence of fellow media personnel, results of the current study conform to previous research on sourcing, particularly the prevalence of elites, such as officials (Al-Rawi, 2017; Deprez and Van Leuven, 2017; Van Leuven et al., 2015) and mainstream journalists (Hermida et al., 2014). The majority of the quoted officials in this study were political elites who hold a position in the government or in a political party. Official sources, in general, and governmental sources, in particular, also dominated tweets discussing news more so than other types. Absent from the tweets were individuals, whether experts or regular citizens. This could be due to the uneventful nature of the period under scrutiny, as research has shown that legacy media will cite ordinary citizens mainly during the first stages of crises and uprisings, before they have a chance to deploy their own reporters to the scene (Hermida et al., 2014). Journalists and traditional media outlets also garnered some attention as sources, pointing to the fact that the media kept it in-house, which indicates rigid gatekeeping practices. Adding to previous studies, results from the current research reveal newspapers’ tendency to lean heavily on officials (e.g. Bane, 2017; Lecheler & Kruikemeier, 2016) more than television stations.

**Gatekeeping through interactivity features**

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

As part of the gatekeeping process, digital content creation lends the media more control as gatekeepers through social media affordances, such as hyperlinks, hashtags, and mentions, in alongside audiovisual material, as they dictate the process of information selection and positioning, similar to traditional gatekeeping practices (Shoemaker et al., 2009). Concerning multimedia usage, Lebanese media included photos and videos in more than half of their tweets. The presence of visuals was related to more retweets, but it didn’t get the tweets more likes. These visuals, thus, failed to attract the attention they might have been vying for, considering the long-standing appeal of visuals to audiences, based primarily on their ability to arouse emotions (Joffe, 2008). Scholars contend that in a digitized online environment, news has become “visually enriched” (Caple & Bednarek, 2015, p. 1474), where video and audio make a story highly shareable on social media (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). This practice could be mimicking journalistic newswriting and reporting norms, where photos and videos are typically part of a news item, while serving as evidence for journalists’ preference for established institutional practices over innovations (Lowrey, 2011; Russell, 2019). Similar to journalists, institutional accounts on Twitter may be using digital platforms more so as a technologically advanced option than as a means to change existing news creation practices (Singer, 2005). Coordinating their Twitter skills, Lebanese media tended to include more hashtags when they used visuals – most likely relating them to the content of the imagery – perhaps in an effort to create specific frames that are bolstered by visual material. Hashtags, which act as frames bringing individuals together around issues (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), have been shown to increase retweetability of content (Suh, Hong, Pirolli, & Chi, 2010). Our findings, thus, suggest Lebanese media could have been trying to increase the likelihood of tweet shareability by harnessing the combined power of images in arousing emotions alongside the ability of hashtags to create attention through frames. Beside their affective power, audiovisuals form one of the contemporary news values that Harcup and O’Neill (2017) devised for online media. Their use, then, could be another way in which traditional media cling to their normative practices.

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

**Networked gatekeeping and sourcing**

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

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

# Conclusion

Scholars seeking to understand how people communicate in the social media environment have been busy restructuring the sender-receiver relationship that dominated mediated communication since Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) message transmission model. Researchers studying Western media have come to accept that in the non-linear world of Web 2.0 information flow follows a complex route of sending and receiving where message sources are constantly changing. What this has done is challenge the traditional gatekeeping role of established media. In Lebanon, however, that is not the case. This study has revealed that Lebanese media on Twitter mirror their original formats and draw distinct lines between the outlet and its audiences. While they continue to play the role of gatekeeper in controlling the information flow, they exert little effort in mobilizing their followers to widen their reach. In the absence of social recommendations from the Twittersphere, Lebanese media tweets stagnate, rarely reaching users on the platform. These problems are further exacerbated by the continuous drop of Twitter usage by individuals who have mainly flocked to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to socialize as well as receive news (Kleis Nielsen, Newman, Fletcher, & Kalogeropoulos, 2019). It is also plausible that Lebanese journalists might behave more organically on Twitter and might attract the required interactivity compared to the official accounts of the media stations that are treated as automated newsfeeds with the sole purpose of making announcements and breaking news. Research on journalists’ behavior of Twitter has indeed revealed its use as a personalized and flexible tool that reflects their own unique style (Canter & Brookes, 2016).

The practical implications of the findings point to the need for traditional media to allocate resources that treat digital media as a unique media ecology, one that requires revisiting the established journalistic practices of sourcing and gatekeeping, in order to attract large audiences that increasingly expect to be included in online news discourse. The authors also recommend these media devise news plans to expand their influence on social media as part of a business model that is more suitable to the evolving technologies that dictate the success of news organizations in the digital world. Considering the myriad of political and economic issues Lebanon has been experiencing since 2019, however, it is unlikely the media are able to focus their attention on advancing their technical savviness, opting instead to switch to simple survival mode, just like the rest of the country. From a theoretical standpoint, the study builds on research on gatekeeping and sourcing in the social media environment to offer yet another evidence of the dominance of officials as sources in a diverse media system that is characterized by a weak state, a poor media market, and high political parallelism (El-Richani, 2016). The combined influence of these factors further saturates the media, segregating them into individual units that give preferential treatment to political elites and rarely address potential audiences. Consequently, this study is significant for the field of media systems research as well, as it adds an important element to take into consideration in theorizations of media systems in the digital environment.

In summary, the current study illustrates the practices of digital journalism in Lebanon by highlighting traditional media’s reliance on a top-down information flow approach to disseminate news as they continue to fall back on their role as gatekeepers that safeguard established institutional and organizational journalistic routines. Beyond the empirical evidence of the above findings, this study contributes to extant literature on this topic by expanding research on sourcing and gatekeeping to include media behavior on Twitter in a small country not considered in existing journalism studies research. By doing so, it has addressed a consensus to focus more on countries outside the Western world, which was voiced by leading scholars, such as David Weaver and Stephen Reese, at a 2019 AEJMC annual conference panel session about current issues in international communication research (Hellmueller, 2019). The findings, thus, point to the importance of reflecting on the state of affairs in a country, including media structure, political unrest, journalistic habits, and political alliances, among others, when analyzing media outside the West. These considerations have the ability to bolster research and potentially build theory by adding dimensions that have been previously ignored due to the lack of relevance to media in the Western hemisphere.

As in any scientific research, limitations exist in this study as well. The time period the sample covered two months, and might therefore, not present a generalizable picture of how Lebanese media behave. This limitation notwithstanding, the probability sampling procedure ensured the data are unbiased and reflect weeks of regular news cycles. Also, Twitter’s character limitation may interplay with the use of official sources in tweets. It’s possible that these outlets cite a diverse pool of sources on their legacy platforms. It is telling of their gatekeeping practices, however, that they choose to mention so many official sources in the little space provided by Twitter, further legitimizing them and amplifying their voices. The significance in this type of sample lies in its potential to provide a different picture of what extant research has done, which is study a specific event, restricting analysis to the event itself. Still, any interpretation of the findings should be careful about generalizing these results to represent all media. Another limitation is not analyzing the content of comments. Future research could include qualitative analysis of the comments to offer more in-depth information about how the audiences engage with the tweets.

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