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Members of the Scottish Parliament on Twitter: good constituency men (and women)?

Abstract

Purpose – To explore the use of Twitter by Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) for the provision of constituency-related information, or in support of their constituency service work.

Design/methodology/approach – Content analysis of 10,411 tweets sent by the 105 MSPs on Twitter during four weeks in early 2014.

Findings – While there was some evidence of MSPs on Twitter acting as a promoter of local community interests and as a conduit for information on local policy issues and events, their tweets were dominated by the wider, national, political agenda and by the Scottish independence debate. Compared with their online behaviour as parliamentary candidates three years earlier, MSPs placed an even greater emphasis on the one-way broadcast of information to their followers. They were reluctant to respond to contentious local policy questions, or to enter into any visible, meaningful, political debate with their constituents.

Research limitations/implications – Although the research was conducted seven months before the Scottish independence referendum on 18 September 2014, the independence debate still dominated proceedings on Twitter. It might, therefore, be appropriate to revisit MSPs' use of Twitter at some point during a truer 'peacetime' period.

Originality/value – This is the first systematic content analysis of tweets sent by *all* MSPs on Twitter. It allows us to compare their actual Twitter use with that envisaged by the Scottish Parliament, as a way of MSPs communicating about their work and engaging with their constituents.

Keywords Constituency service, Information provision, Internet, Members of the Scottish Parliament, Social media, Twitter, Political communication

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Paper type Research paper

Introduction

When the Scottish Parliament [1] was being established in the late 1990s, an Expert

Panel on Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) recommended that

the parliament should focus upon the contribution that new technologies might make

in enabling greater openness and transparency and in assisting the democratic

process. The panel believed that the Scottish Parliament should "aspire to be an

example of best practice in parliamentary information systems, both in terms of

external communications and internal efficiency" (Consultative Steering Group on the

Scottish Parliament, 1998, section 3.6, para. 21). During the first two sessions of the

Scottish Parliament (i.e. 1999-2003 and 2003-2007), studies of Members of the

Scottish Parliament (MSPs) found that they were "intensive and competent users" of

ICTs (Smith and Webster, 2004), and that ICTs had "become a cultural norm of

contemporary parliamentary life", where MSPs and their assistants used them

constantly in order to fulfil their legislative, oversight and representative roles (Smith

and Webster, 2008). Smith and Webster's studies took place before the emergence

of Facebook and Twitter; but the potential value of these social media as information

provision and communication tools has since become recognised within the Scottish

Parliament, where it is acknowledged that they "can increase the accessibility of

MSPs and offer new ways in which to engage constituents, stakeholders and the

wider public" (Scottish Parliament Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments

Committee, 2012).

This paper presents the results of a study, conducted in 2014, which explored the

use of Twitter by MSPs, in order to establish if there was any evidence of the

accessible and truly engaging online parliamentarians envisaged by the Scottish

Parliament. The study sought, in particular, to determine the extent to which Twitter

was being used by MSPs for the provision of constituency-related information, or in

support of their day-to-day constituency work. It also aimed to establish if the

frequency and nature of Twitter use by these elected members differed from that

encountered when these individuals were prospective parliamentary candidates

during the 2011 Scottish Parliament election campaign.

The paper will firstly review the literature that underpins the study, focusing in

particular on: the constituency service role of the elected member in Britain; on the

information behaviour of British parliamentarians, particularly in relation to their

constituency service role; and on the impact that new technologies have had on the

communication and exchange of information between the parliamentarian and his/her

constituents. The paper will then discuss the study's methodological approach,

before presenting the main results of the research. The final section will present our

conclusions and identify significant areas for future research.

Literature Review

The constituency role of the parliamentarian in Britain

Historically, the constituency role of the UK Member of Parliament (MP) has its

origins in 13th century England, where knights, burgesses and other prominent

citizens would be sent to Parliament in order to redress the grievances of those

(largely the propertied classes) in their local communities. During the 18th and 19th

centuries the constituency role became dormant, due to the emergence of mass

political parties that demanded loyalty from their elected representatives in

Parliament in supporting national mandates, rather than just local, constituency-

related issues. In the 20th century, however, the MP's constituency service role re-

emerged, particularly after the Second World War when the phrase 'a good

constituency man' became common parlance in the political sphere. Several reasons

have been proffered for the revival of the constituency service role, including:

population growth and the introduction of universal suffrage, resulting in a

significantly larger electorate that places increased demands on its MPs; the

expansion of the public sector and a concomitant growth in constituents' need for

assistance, as they attempted to navigate the bureaucratic complexities of the new

welfare state; increased public awareness of political issues, leading to more people

attempting to challenge and influence the political process (what is termed 'cognitive

mobilisation'); and the differing characteristics of MPs, who are no longer drawn

exclusively from the professional classes, but increasingly have public sector

backgrounds and an intrinsic interest in the fair and effective delivery of local services

(see, for example, Norris, 1997; Gay, 2005; Norton, 2012).

In his seminal study of Westminster parliamentarians, Searing (1985) identified the

'constituency member' as one of four principal – and reasonably distinct – roles that

the backbench MP might adopt at various points throughout his/her political career;

the others being ministerial aspirant, parliament man, and policy advocate. At the

time of his research, in the 1970s, he estimated that 25% of Westminster

backbenchers were constituency members, who devoted themselves to issues

arising in their local communities. Searing observed two subtypes of the constituency

member, each with a differing outlook and behaviour: the 'welfare officer', who

focuses on making representations on behalf of individual constituents, perhaps

holding more regular constituency surgeries [2], making themselves available to

constituents at weekends, or undertaking visits to constituents' homes; and the 'local

promoter' who instead makes representations on behalf of their constituency's

collective concerns, perhaps being more likely to open local buildings, visit local

factories, schools and hospitals, or become involved in major local planning

decisions. In the 1970s, Searing estimated that 75.3% of constituency members were

welfare officers, 15.3% were local promoters, with the remainder (9.4%) giving equal

weight to both aspects of constituency service. Interestingly, Searing established that

Scotland had a higher proportion of constituency members (41%) than did the other

UK regions.

With regard to the post-devolution situation in Scotland, Bradbury and Russell (2005)

found that Scottish MPs continue to spend significant time on constituency work (on

average, 24.5 hours per week), as do MSPs (27.4 hours per week). However, public

understanding of the respective responsibilities of the UK and Scottish Parliaments

has been relatively poor, and members of each legislature receive constituents'

enquiries that would be more properly directed to the other.

The information needs and behaviour of the parliamentarian in Britain

The body of work on the information needs and behaviour of elected members in

Britain is rather small. What little literature has been published, however, is in broad

agreement that the parliamentarian's information needs are incessant, very complex,

varied, and unpredictable, being dependent on parliamentary, local, national, and

international events and agendas (Barker and Rush, 1970; Shepherd, 1991; Marcella

et al., 1999; Orton *et al.*, 1999; Serema, 1999). All of these authors highlight the

extent and variety of correspondence that members receive from constituents, and

the rising expectation amongst constituents that they receive a rapid and informed

response. As Shepherd (1991, p.25) warned:

> *Nothing can prepare the newly elected Member for the full blast of their*
>
> *constituents' expectation of what they believe their Member will know, will*
>
> *want to know and on what matters an opinion will be expected which is both*
>
> *authoritative and accurate… Such matters are personal and important, if not*
>
> *vital, to the individual and considerable disappointment can set in if a parallel*
>
> *degree of interest is not demonstrated by the Member.*

The impact of new technologies on member-constituent information communication

and exchange

Since Bill Clinton's 1992 US presidential election campaign, where position papers,

full texts of speeches and candidate biographies were posted online, the Internet has

increasingly been adopted as a communication and electoral campaign tool by

political actors worldwide. Consequently, a significant body of literature on the use of

ICTs by political parties and by individual politicians has emerged since the mid-

1990s. As Gibson and Ward (2009) observe, much of this literature has focused on

two spheres of activity: the use of ICTs for internal party operations, and their use

during election campaigns, with the latter having received the lion's share of scholarly

attention. In contrast, research has rarely concentrated on 'peacetime developments'

(i.e. in the years between elections), or on the 'long campaign' [3].

In the UK, much of the 'peacetime' research has focused on content analyses of

elected members' personal websites (e.g., Halstead, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Ward and

Lusoli, 2005; Vicente-Merino, 2007; Goodchild *et al.*, 2007). In these studies, whilst

the parliamentarians themselves have tended to believe that their website is a useful

tool for communicating with their constituents, the nature of this communication has

been largely one-way, with few opportunities for constituents to enter into two-way,

online dialogue with their representatives.

A small number of studies have explored British parliamentarians' use of email (e.g.,

Jackson, 2005; Williamson, 2009a). Here, email has been regarded by elected

members as a double-edged sword: while it is seen as a useful tool for engaging

with, and providing a better service to, their constituents, it can also create unrealistic

expectations about members' response times. Members also highlight the difficulties

they face in filtering out the many messages they receive from non-constituents.

Jackson (2006) has also explored the use of e-newsletters by MPs, establishing that,

while they are primarily designed to support the constituency service role by

providing local information, they are rarely used to develop dialogue or closer

relationships with constituents.

A lack of engagement, and an over-reliance on the top-down, one way

communication of information from members to their online followers, are also

recurring themes in the literature on British parliamentarians' use of potentially more

interactive Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs (e.g., Auty, 2005; Francoli and Ward,

2008), Facebook (Williamson, 2009b) and Twitter (Williamson and Phillips, 2009).

Most of these papers also recognise that a member's online following can bear little

or no resemblance to their geographical constituency; that the parliamentarian can

instead develop an online "constituency of interest" or "e-constituency" (Jackson,

2008). The one exception is a recent paper by Margarettan and Gaber (2014), who

appear to equate an MP's online following with his/her constituents. Margarettan and

Gaber paint a rather rose-tinted picture of Scottish MPs' Twitter use, which, they

argue, demonstrates the "engagement" and "authenticity" of the politicians. Focusing

on the three heaviest Twitter users - Tom Harris, Eric Joyce and Jo Swinson - they

conclude that their Twitter posts show the politicians to be, variously, "approachable

and naturally human", "engaging, playful and funny", and "down to earth and more

real" [4].

Internationally, a growing number of studies have specifically explored elected

representatives' use of Twitter. In some cases, these have simply quantified the

politicians' Twitter activity, in terms of adoption rates, number of posts and followers,

etc.; for example, in Australia (Missingham, 2010), Brazil (Marques, de Aquino and

Miola, 2014), Sweden and Norway (Larsson and Kalsnes, 2014). A small number

have adopted a more qualitative approach, using interviews to explore politicians'

motivations for using Twitter. For example, Ross and Bürger (2014) interviewed 17

New Zealand MPs, the majority of whom indicated that Facebook was a better

medium than Twitter for engaging with constituents. While Frame and Brachotte

(2015) conducted interviews with five French politicians, who viewed Twitter as a

useful tool to disseminate information quickly and widely to a range of publics,

including potential voters, constituents, other politicians, journalists, and other

stakeholders.

In Asia, Hsu and Park (2012) have mapped the social networks of South Korean

Assembly Members, concluding that they use Twitter to communicate more with

fellow politicians than with their own constituents (although they, too, appear to

assume that politicians' online followers will also be constituents). In Australia and

North America, some studies have used content analysis to explore the more precise

nature of politicians' Twitter use, although the specificity of the coding schemes used

has varied widely. Grant, Moon and Grant (2010) used four very broad categories –

broadcast, broadcast mention, reply and retweet – to explore the content of

Australian politicians' tweets. Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) created eight

coding categories in analysing over 6,000 tweets sent by US Congresspeople,

although constituency-specific posts were not identified and quantified. However, in

another study of US Congresspeople, Glassman, Straus and Shogan (2013)

established that 26% of Members' tweets related to issues and activities in their

home district or state.

Methodology

In order to enable a meaningful comparison, this research was conducted along

similar lines to those of the authors' previous analysis (Baxter and Marcella, 2013a)

of Scottish parliamentary candidates' Twitter use. The existence of MSPs' Twitter

accounts was established largely by examining the *Current MSPs* pages of the

Scottish Parliament website (http://www.scottish.parliament.uk), which generally provide links to members' personal websites and social media sites. To ensure comprehensiveness, searches were also conducted on Google and on Twitter's search engine. With these approaches, it was established that 105 (81.4%) of the 129 sitting MSPs [5] had an active Twitter account.

Using the Twitonomy software [6] all MSPs' tweets sent in the four weeks from 6 January to 2 February 2014 were captured, retrospectively, in April 2014. These four weeks would normally be described as occurring in a 'peacetime' period: indeed, the study took place almost midway between the previous Scottish Parliamentary election in May 2011 and the next contest in May 2016. Equally, though, the study took place at an exceptional moment, during what might be termed the 'long campaign' leading up to the Scottish independence referendum on 18 September 2014 [7].

The 105 MSPs with a Twitter account sent a combined total of 10,411 tweets during this four-week period. Each tweet was read systematically by the researchers and coded (based on the main thrust of its content) using a scheme devised and used previously by the current authors during parliamentary election campaigns. The coded content was then enumerated manually on coding sheets, and the resultant data input to, and analysed in, *SPSS for Windows*. This coding framework represents both the *nature* of the communication taking place (i.e. the one-way 'broadcast' of information by politicians to their online followers, or the two-way exchange of information with these followers), as well as the *broad subject matter* of the posts (e.g., national or local policy issues, media coverage of political events, criticisms of political opponents, etc.). The full coding scheme can be found in the Appendix to this paper, and is discussed in more detail in the Research Results section below. The coding was carried out in two stages, between April and December 2014. The

first stage, in which the tweets were coded against most of the categories listed in the

Appendix, was carried out by two researchers, with a sample being tested for inter-

coder consistency by the lead author. The second stage of coding, in which the

retweets and those tweets containing hyperlinks were examined for constituency-

specific content, was conducted solely by the lead author. Whilst we acknowledge

that the method adopted is relatively labour-intensive and time-consuming, we would

argue that this 'human' element is essential if we are to obtain a true picture of MSPs'

Twitter use, for it can identify aspects of online communication, such as the use of

sarcasm, irony or humour, that might escape automated, sentiment analysis

approaches. Given the study's focus on constituency-related content, we would also

argue that the analysis process requires human coders with at least a basic

awareness of Scottish geography.

While our coding framework has developed independently over a number of years,

this particular study was, to a certain extent, also influenced theoretically by work

conducted by Jackson and Lilleker (2011), when they examined UK MPs' Twitter

use. Jackson and Lilleker drew on two interrelated theories. Firstly, that of

'impression management', which was based on a social psychology taxonomy by

Jones and Pittman (1982), who presented five classes of self-presentational

strategies or behaviours – 'ingratiation', 'intimidation', 'self-promotion',

'exemplification' and 'supplication'. In their paper, Jackson and Lilleker categorised

and measured the ways in which MPs deliberately sought to manage the public

perception of themselves via Twitter, observing that they engaged primarily in 'self-

promotion', in order to portray themselves as dedicated, hard-working individuals, yet

also as 'ordinary' human beings with everyday interests. Secondly, Jackson and

Lilleker drew on Searing's (1985) 'constituency service' theory, and the two

'subtypes' of constituency members ('welfare officer' and 'local promoter') discussed

above. In their study, Jackson and Lilleker concluded that MPs used Twitter

predominantly as an impression management tool, and that constituency service was very much a secondary function of their Twitter use.

In this current paper, the authors also consider an alternative model of constituency service to that utilised by Jackson and Lilleker. Here, we also take into account the model posited by Norton (1994). Norton identified seven key constituency roles of a UK parliamentarian: 'safety valve'; 'local dignitary'; 'advocate'; 'benefactor'; 'powerful friend'; 'promoter of constituency interests'; and, crucially for this study, 'information provider'. Here, Norton suggested, the MP may provide his constituents with advice on who to approach with a specific problem, or may provide them with information on, for example, the MP's role, activities or political views, or on government or party policy on a particular issue. Jackson and Lilleker (2011, p. 91) dismissed Norton's model for use in their own research, arguing mistakenly that Norton had claimed that the role of information provider had "largely disappeared over recent decades". Norton (1994, p. 713) had, in fact, written: "Anecdotal evidence from MPs suggests that, if anything, requests for information are more numerous now than in previous years". Indeed, more recently, Norton (2013, p. 220) has observed that the MP increasingly acts as an information provider to constituents *collectively*, through newsletters, newspaper articles, websites, blogs and tweets. We would therefore argue that constituency information provision remains a key role of the elected member, and thus forms the focus of this paper.

Research results

Extent of MSPs' Twitter use

As noted earlier, 105 of the 129 Scottish MSPs were found to have a Twitter account. More precisely, 58 (79.4%) of the 73 constituency MSPs were on Twitter, as were 47 (83.9%) of the 56 regional MSPs. Table 1 provides a breakdown by political party affiliation, and as can be seen all parties were generally well-represented on Twitter.

Of the 105 MSPs, just 42 (40%) had used Twitter when they had been parliamentary candidates three years earlier; thus the majority had adopted the service since becoming an elected member.

Take in Table 1

Table 2, meanwhile, provides a quantitative overview of the MSPs' activity on Twitter during the four-week period studied, as well as an indication of their number of followers at 30 April 2014. As can be seen, there was considerable variation in the extent of Twitter activity: 11 MSPs from across the parties made no posts whatsoever during the four weeks; whilst one independent MSP, John Finnie, sent 795 in the period studied. This resulted in an overall average of 99 Twitter posts per MSP over the four weeks, with a median of 60 posts. With regard to the number of followers, these also varied widely, ranging from the 106 people following the Labour MSP, Patricia Ferguson, to the 58,186 following Alex Salmond, the then SNP leader and Scotland's First Minister. This meant that the MSPs had an average Twitter following of 3,833, with a median of 2,350. The extent to which these followers were also the MSPs' constituents remains unclear. As Leetaru *et al.* (2013) established, only around 2% of tweets sent globally include geographic metadata; therefore, unless a tweet's contents contained explicit reference to its sender's location, it was difficult to confirm whether or not an MSP's Twitter follower lived in the constituency or region represented by that MSP. We would also make no great claims that, in demographic terms, the combined Twitter followings of the 105 MSPs discussed here would be truly representative of the Scottish population as a whole. Indeed, no reliable data on Twitter use in Scotland can be found. It is worthwhile noting, however, that Sloan *et al.* (2013) found that, in the UK as a whole, the gender demographic of Twitter users mirrors that of the 2011 UK census within 0.1%, and that their geographic distribution is also in proportion to the UK's population density. It might, therefore, be argued that

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MSPs' Twitter followers form a relatively representative cross-section of the wider

Scottish public.

Take in Table 2

On looking more closely at the 42 MSPs who had also been Twitter users during their

2011 candidacies, they had generally become more frequent users of Twitter since

gaining parliamentary office. During the 2011 election campaign, they each sent an

average of 79 tweets over a four-week period (median = 40), but this had increased

to an average of 123 (median = 64) during the four weeks studied here. Meanwhile,

the number of Twitter followers these 42 individuals had attracted had increased by

around tenfold in the intervening three years. In May 2011, they each had an average

of 629 followers on Twitter (median = 364), but by April 2014 this had increased to an

average of 6,614 followers (median = 3,453).

Broad nature of MSPs' Twitter use

With regard to the broad nature of the information flow and exchange between the

105 MSPs and their Twitter followers, 1,536 (14.8%) of the 10,411 tweets consisted

of what the current authors term ***Primary Broadcast*** posts, where the MSPs

provided their followers with their personal thoughts, opinions and commentaries on

a range of political or non-political issues. Just under two-thirds (6,865; 65.9%) of the

MSPs' tweets were what we term ***Secondary Broadcast*** posts, where the politicians

simply provided direct links to other online sites, or where they retweeted others'

comments and links. Two-way ***Engagement and Dialogue*** between MSPs and their

Twitter followers – where the politicians answered questions, or responded to

criticisms or messages of support – accounted for 1,323 (12.7%) of the total tweets.

While 680 (6.5%) of the MSPs' tweets were what we term ***Unreciprocated***

Engagement posts, where the politicians had attempted to initiate a dialogue with

other Twitter users, usually in vain. These efforts were most frequently aimed at well-known journalists, political commentators, satirical comedians, sports men and women, and other 'celebrities'; although occasionally also at 'ordinary' members of the public who had perhaps commented on political or current affairs issues.

When compared with the information exchange encountered during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election campaign (Baxter and Marcella, 2013a), some significant changes had taken place. In 2011, 142 (18.8%) of the 756 candidates standing for election had Twitter accounts, sending 13,900 tweets over the four weeks preceding polling day. Of these tweets, 31.6% were Primary Broadcast posts; 30.8% were Secondary Broadcast in nature; 17.2% were in response to questions, criticisms or supportive messages; and 20.2% were of the Unreciprocated Engagement type. This general pattern of behavioural change is mirrored when we look only at the 42 MSPs who had also used Twitter when parliamentary candidates during the 2011 election. As Figure 1 illustrates, these individuals had become far less inclined to post their own thoughts and opinions on issues, political or otherwise. While exactly one-third of their tweets were Primary Broadcast posts in 2011, this had dropped to just 13% of their posts, as MSPs, in 2014. Instead, these individuals had now placed greater reliance on Secondary Broadcast posts: in 2014 these comprised 66.4% of their tweets, compared with 35.3% of their overall Twitter posts in 2011. Why there had been such a sea-change in the nature of their Twitter use is unclear. Perhaps, because they were now accountable, elected representatives, they felt that they had to adopt a more cautious approach in offering their personal views on political and policy issues. Or perhaps because of their parliamentary (and, for some, Ministerial or Cabinet Secretary) commitments, they no longer had the time to compose their own tweets; instead relying on simply clicking the Retweet button on others' posts that were deemed of potential interest or relevance to their own followers. Without discussing their rationales with the politicians themselves, this

must remain a matter of conjecture. These individuals' levels of two-way engagement

and dialogue had also declined since becoming MSPs, dropping from 18.2% of their

posts in 2011, to 14.1% in 2014. And perhaps influenced by their lack of success in

initiating online conversations with celebrity Twitter users, the proportion of

Unreciprocated Engagement posts had halved, from 13.1% in 2011, to 6.5% in 2014.

Take in Figure 1

Overall, then, when compared with their Twitter use during the 2011 Scottish

Parliamentary election campaign, the picture in 2014 was even more one of the one-

way flow of information from politicians to their followers, with MSPs demonstrating

an even greater reluctance to enter into any kind of visible, online dialogue. As such,

there was little evidence of the accessible and truly engaging online parliamentarians

envisaged by the Scottish Parliament's Standards, Procedures and Public

Appointments Committee (2012). The extent to which the MSPs' information

provision and engagement related specifically to events and issues affecting their

constituencies will be explored in more detail throughout the remainder of this paper.

Content analysis of MSPs' tweets

During the coding process, when considering what might be regarded as a

constituency-related tweet, one type of post was excluded from our analysis. This

was where the MSPs' tweets related to independence referendum or by-election

campaigning taking place in their constituency. As was noted earlier, our research

took place during the 'long campaign' leading up to the Scottish independence

referendum on 18 September 2014, and several campaign events, such as public

meetings and door-to-door canvassing, were held across Scotland throughout the

four-week period studied. In addition, one Scottish Parliamentary by-election (in the

Cowdenbeath constituency) and two local council by-elections (for seats in the Moray

and North Lanarkshire councils) occurred during these four weeks. With this in mind,

tweets relating to referendum or by-election campaigning were instead coded under

the categories 'Scottish independence referendum debate/issues' and 'Personal,

official activities/events', respectively (see Appendix). In any case, these posts

invariably followed the pattern of those encountered by the current authors during

past, national election campaigns, where the content of the politicians' tweets was

rather superficial, focusing on the weather conditions rather than on any salient local

policy issues being discussed by potential voters:

Knocking doors in Lochgelly till the sun went down #cowdenbeath @scottishlabour

(Jayne Baxter, Labour, Mid Scotland and Fife)

Amazing turnout @YesAberdeen get together on a wet and windy Sunday. (Kevin

Stewart, SNP, Aberdeen Central)

Indeed, amongst the Primary Broadcast tweets, the types of posts that were most

frequently encountered were those relating to the MSPs' official activities, *beyond*

their day-to-day constituency work (366 tweets; 23.8% of Primary Broadcast posts,

3.5% of overall posts), such as their parliamentary committee membership, or their

duties as Cabinet Secretaries or Ministers of the Scottish Government.

In contrast, the 105 MSPs sent a combined total of just 122 Primary Broadcast

tweets (7.9% of Primary Broadcast posts, 1.2% of overall posts) relating specifically

to their day-to-day constituency work. These could be divided into two broad types.

There were those that announced and promoted the MSPs' forthcoming constituency

surgeries; and there were those which provided information about specific, local

constituency issues with which the MSPs had become involved:

I have written to Glasgow Life this week to ask them to reconsider plans to cut all

our local library hours. (John Mason, SNP, Glasgow Shettleston)

Busy day today meeting SPT [Strathclyde Partnership for Transport] re bus routes

in constituency very informative then surgeries tonight (Sandra White, SNP,

Glasgow Kelvin)

Great to see real progress on sewage issues @ Morningside,Wishaw. Grateful to

@betthomes,@SmilneHomes& @scottish_Water for working together! (John

Pentland, Labour, Motherwell & Wishaw)

Overall, the MSPs were just as likely, if not more likely, to post comments on non-

political events, such as sport or popular culture (7.9% of Primary Broadcast posts;

1.2% of overall posts), or on their personal lives (9.2% of Primary Broadcast posts;

1.4% of overall posts). For example, the SNP MSP, Angela Constance, posted a

number of photographs of a family holiday in New York (the four-week period studied

here immediately followed the Scottish Parliament's Christmas recess), while others

were keen to provide critiques of various films or TV series, or to share details of their

domestic circumstances:

Two minutes in to #sherlock and already I'm irritated. I dislike the written on screen

commentary (Roseanna Cunningham, SNP, Perthshire South & Kinross-shire)

Grandchildren sleeping over then at film Frozen with grandaughter. Enjoyed the

variations on the traditional story but music pretty awful! (Malcolm Chisholm,

Labour, Edinburgh Northern & Leith)

> Had a bowl of soup and Haggis next. Still cold from the St Mirren game. In the
> house with heating on and 4 layers still on. #gettinauld (George Adam, SNP,
> Paisley)

In terms of the Primary Broadcast posts, then, the MSPs' Twitter use was similar to
that of UK MPs, identified by Jackson and Lilleker (2011). Constituency service was
less prominent than the MSPs' efforts at self-promotion. Indeed, the MSPs appeared
more anxious to use Twitter to portray themselves publicly as ordinary, likeable and
humorous individuals with 'normal' family lives, than to provide information about, or
evidence of, their local representative work.

The MSPs' Secondary Broadcast posts, however, did contain more posts with
constituency-specific content. Over the four weeks, the 105 MSPs sent a total of 741
tweets (10.8% of Secondary Broadcast posts, 7.1% of total posts) that related
specifically to issues and events occurring in their local communities. More precisely,
they posted: 205 links to other websites or social media sites; 304 retweets of others'
online links; and 232 retweets of others' comments on constituency issues. These
posts could be grouped into a number of broad themes. Firstly, there were those that
consisted of *travel and weather news bulletins and warnings*, for example of local
road closures, high winds, and flooding risks, with the original posts usually
emanating from the police, local councils, or other public agencies:

> High winds, heavy rain & temperature dropping – watch how you go – take care
> when out & about #StaySafe (Originally sent by North Ayrshire Police; retweeted
> by Margaret Burgess, SNP, Cunninghame South)

A number of posts related to *crime warnings and appeals*, generally originating
from the police or from local newspapers. These tended to consist of appeals for

witnesses to specific crimes that had taken place in the constituency, or the

dissemination of crime prevention advice:

> The public are urged to be cautious after a card skimming device was found on an
>
> ATM at @Tesco on Blackfriars Road: http://t.co/Dofau1Rrvt (Originally sent by
>
> Moray Police; retweeted by John Finnie, Independent, Highlands & Islands)

The MSPs also retweeted a number of posts relating to local ***public services***,

usually when new services were being launched, or where existing services were

under threat. We were told, for instance, of the opening of a social housing complex

for older people in North Ayrshire; and of the launch of a new, free, ebook service

from East Dunbartonshire Libraries. With regard to threatened services, several

posts, from MSPs from across Scotland, referred to the closure of local police and

fire control rooms, following controversial decisions by the Scottish Government to

centralise the Scottish police and fire services:

> SFRS set to protect future of Edinburgh fire service control centre.
>
> Recommendations just published. http://t.co/BIuXm7lWXg (Link to Scottish Fire
>
> and Rescue Service website, sent by Marco Biagi, SNP, Edinburgh Central)

Local ***third sector and voluntary organisations*** were also the subject of several

posts retweeted by the MSPs. These tended to either highlight these organisations'

good work, or consisted of appeals for assistance, be that in the form of financial

assistance, other kinds of donations, or in terms of volunteers. So we learned, for

example, of a forthcoming foodbank in Inverkeithing, Fife; of sign language courses

in Inverclyde; and of a Glasgow dog charity's need for old towels and bedding to

keep the dogs in its care "cosy" during the winter months.

A number of retweets related to local ***business and economic development***. These ranged from a small crafts shop in South Lanarkshire offering discount on its unsold Christmas stock, to wider plans to develop the Scotch whisky industry in Speyside. The MSPs also retweeted posts relating to local ***employment opportunities***, in the private, public and third sectors. These jobs ranged from a pastry chef in a Fife hotel, to a welfare rights adviser in a Citizens Advice Bureau in the Northern Isles. And a number of the retweets related to controversial local ***planning applications***, where the proposed developments were to be built on greenbelt land and other environmentally sensitive areas, or where developments might result in the demolition of old or historically significant buildings. These included the Caltongate scheme – a mixed development of hotels, office blocks, shops and housing to be built in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town:

> Green Cllr @nigelbagshaw opposed but #Caltongate APPROVED. Big split in the
> decision of the committee, with 8 for and 6 against." (Originally sent by Edinburgh
> Greens; retweeted by Alison Johnstone, Greens, Lothian)

Finally, with regard to the Secondary Broadcast posts, the MSPs retweeted what might broadly be termed ***human interest stories***, usually from local newspapers. These appeared to be designed to instil a 'feelgood factor' amongst their readers. For example, we learned of a 15 year old Dundee schoolboy who had just published his first novel; and of a Port Glasgow teenager, who had been born prematurely, but who was now making her way in the British Army. Such stories often appeared to have something of a subtext, which involved the promotion of local public services; in the cases above, these were local public libraries and hospitals, respectively.

Overall, then, the 741 constituency-related Secondary Broadcast posts saw the MSPs acting as both a promoter of local community interests and as a conduit for

information on local policy issues and events. Yet, these paled into insignificance

when considering the other Secondary Broadcast posts (*n* = 6,124) sent by the

MSPs during the course of the four weeks. As this study's focus was on constituency

interests, the specific content of these posts has not been quantified. What can be

said, however, is that the vast majority related to the forthcoming independence

referendum, with MSPs retweeting posts from both sides of the Yes/No debate; or to

national policy issues, such as health, education, or the wider, Scottish economic

situation.

When considering engagement and dialogue on the MSPs' Twitter accounts, two-

way exchanges, relating specifically to local constituency issues and clearly involving

local constituents, were rare, consisting of only a handful of cases. For example,

Margaret McCulloch, a Labour SNP for Central Scotland, had an eight-post

exchange with a constituent concerning the proposed rollout of fibre broadband in his

neighbourhood; while Malcolm Chisholm, the Labour MSP for Edinburgh Northern &

Leith, entered into a four-way discussion, involving two constituents and a local

councillor, over local refuse collections. There was also some evidence, albeit

minimal, of constituents being invited by their MSP to submit a fuller request for

information or assistance by email. For example, Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP MSP for

Glasgow Southside (and now Scotland's First Minister) invited two constituents to

follow this course of action in response to their queries about dog fouling and

business water charges, respectively.

This apparent reluctance amongst MSPs to publicly respond online to questions from

constituents was reinforced when we conducted a small enquiry responsiveness test

as part of the study, using an element of covert research. Whilst unobtrusive, covert

research has occasionally been used by others in their studies of political actors'

online communication (e.g. Stromer-Galley, 2000; Bowers-Brown and Gunter, 2002;

Vaccari, 2012), it has formed a staple element of the current authors' previous work

in this field, where political parties and candidates have been sent questions on key

campaign and policy issues in order to measure the speed and the extent of their

responses (see Baxter and Marcella (2013b) for an overview of this previous

research). With this approach, the researchers, although using their real names,

have created special email and social media accounts, to disguise the fact that they

are academics; and have given no indication of their geographic location, to conceal

the fact that they may not be based in the politicians' potential parliamentary

constituencies. Such an approach, we would argue, is essential in order to ensure

that the political actors' behaviour, in terms of responding to enquiries from the

electorate, remains normal and consistent. The use of covert research does, of

course, raise some interesting ethical questions, particularly in relation to the need to

obtain informed consent from participants. It should be emphasised here that

approval has been obtained from our host university's research ethics committee

before undertaking such work; and, in so doing, we have cited the ethical guidelines

of international research bodies that question the need for informed consent when

studying elected public officials or those seeking election to public office (e.g. United

States Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

The enquiry responsiveness element of the present study was small, focusing on a

single issue: controversial plans to broadcast the demolition of five blocks of flats (the

Red Road flats) in Glasgow, as part of the opening ceremony of the 2014

Commonwealth Games. This, it was claimed, would act as a "bold and dramatic

statement of intent from a city focused on regeneration and a positive future for its

people" (Ferguson, 2014). Following considerable public outrage at these plans,

which were regarded as undignified and insensitive to the former residents of the

flats (and to a group of asylum seekers being housed in the one block of flats that

was to remain standing), the organisers decided against the ceremonial demolition,

citing "safety and security" concerns (Brown, 2014). Two days after this U-turn, the

current authors, posing as a Glasgow resident, sent the following question directly to

the seven Glasgow MSPs who were on Twitter: 'Was safety the real reason for the

Red Road u-turn?'. Not a single acknowledgement or response was received to this

question. This was broadly in line with our previous studies of parliamentary

candidates' responsiveness on Twitter, which has left something to be desired.

As was noted earlier, the reasons for elected representatives being so reluctant to

publicly address 'difficult' questions online are unclear. However, one clue may lie in

a sequence of tweets sent in January 2014 by Kezia Dugdale, a Labour MSP for

Lothian. As a parliamentary candidate in 2011, Dugdale was not a particularly prolific

Twitter user, sending just 75 tweets over four weeks. She did, however, appear keen

to reply to any direct questions or criticisms from her 1,600 Twitter followers at the

time. By the beginning of 2014, she had become a relatively high-profile figure in the

Scottish political scene, with over 6,000 Twitter followers [8], and she continued to

engage in two-way dialogue online. On 6 January 2014, though, Dugdale sent a

tweet suggesting that she was struggling to manage the volume of direct tweets she

was receiving:

'Went on a phone call and came off to 40+ twitter notifications. Sorry folks cant

keep up tonight - other stuff to do. Geniune [sic] qs? Email me'

Then, on 25 January 2014, she posted an image of an article from the *Daily Mail*

newspaper, concerning the identities of a number of 'Cybernats', a term now

commonly used to describe those Scottish nationalists whose online behaviour is

perceived as aggressive and abusive:

> 'Interesting feature in Daily Mail on cybernats - i've blocked at least 4 of those
>
> featured for relentless abuse'

The next day, 26 January, Dugdale announced that she was no longer in a position

to respond individually to tweets, adding that she felt sorry for those with genuine

questions to ask:

> 'Due to a barrage of twitter notifications, 600 + in the last few days, I can no longer
>
> read & respond. Feel sorry for folk with genuine Qs'

From that point onwards, any two-way engagement between Dugdale and her Twitter

followers effectively ended. It would appear, then, that for some of the more high-

profile MSPs at least, the sheer volume, or the abusiveness, of the posts received

deters them from entering into public, online dialogue.

Conclusions and further research

This paper has examined the use of Twitter by MSPs during a four-week period in

early 2014: a period that might normally be regarded as 'peacetime', but which also

occurred during the Scottish independence referendum 'long campaign'. The study

discussed here sought to explore MSPs' Twitter use from a constituency service

perspective, and to establish if the nature and extent of their Twitter use differed from

that identified when they were parliamentary candidates in 2011.

Whilst MSPs had become more frequent users of Twitter since taking office, they

now placed an even greater emphasis on the one-way broadcast of information to

their online followers. Genuine, two-way engagement was less common than when

they were vying for votes three years earlier.

There was some evidence of the MSPs using Twitter to promote their constituency

surgeries and to respond to constituents' questions and concerns about local public

services, thereby partly fulfilling Searing's (1985) role of 'welfare officer'. There was

also evidence of MSPs acting as a conduit for information on local issues and events,

in line with Searing's (1985) role of 'local promoter' and Norton's (1994) 'promoter of

constituency interests'. However, such constituency-related posts formed only a

small minority (less than 9%) of the MSPs' overall Twitter traffic. Instead, their tweets

were dominated by the Scottish independence debate and by the wider, national,

political agenda. If, as Bradbury and Russell (2005) suggest, parliamentarians in

Scotland are more oriented to constituency work than those from other parts of the

UK, then this is not immediately evident from MSPs' Twitter feeds. It can also be said

that the use of Twitter envisaged by the Scottish Parliament's Standards, Procedures

and Public Appointments Committee (2012), as a way of MSPs communicating about

their work and engaging with their constituents, has not yet materialised, at least not

to any great extent.

While examples of relatively intelligible constituency-related tweets are provided

throughout this paper, we do have to acknowledge the constraints of the character

limit of Twitter posts. Although Williamson and Phillips (2009, p. 4) advise politicians

that "abbreviating your message does not have to mean losing the meaning", there

are clear difficulties associated with providing meaningful local policy information and

commentary, or responding fully to constituency-related questions, in just 140

characters. With this in mind, the researchers are currently studying MSPs' use of

Facebook during the same four-week period in early 2014, in order to establish if its

greater freedom, in terms of word length, allowed them to discuss local constituency

issues more frequently and more fully.

We also have to acknowledge the impact of the Scottish independence referendum on the results presented here. Although the data was collected some seven months before the referendum took place, the independence debate dominated proceedings on Twitter. That the four weeks studied here fell within a proper 'peacetime' period might, therefore, be open to question. With this in mind, the researchers aim to revisit MSPs' use of Twitter for constituency-related purposes at some point after the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections, during a 'truer' peacetime period (although recent developments (e.g., Peterkin, 2015) suggest that the independence discourse will be prominent for the foreseeable future).

The current authors also wish to undertake qualitative research with MSPs, and with MPs in Scottish constituencies. This proposed research would: explore more fully elected members' motivations for using Twitter and other social media; examine their strategies for dealing with abusive online behaviour; and investigate if, how, and why, their use of social media changes over time, particularly when moving from an electoral campaign to a 'peacetime' situation. Crucially, in terms of this current paper, the proposed research would also aim to establish if the elected members themselves believe that social media are appropriate tools for providing some form of constituency service.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the current authors aim to explore the need for online constituency-related information amongst Scottish constituents. Our analysis of the social media posts of candidates during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary campaign has already been discussed above (Baxter and Marcella, 2013a). It should also be noted, though, that a complementary voter information behaviour study, conducted during the same campaign (Baxter *et al.*, 2013c), revealed a clear dichotomy between the candidates' online information provision and the information needs of their potential constituents. One of the key issues raised by participants was

of a need for information relating specifically to local constituency issues. Yet such information tended to be lacking, or proved difficult to find, amongst the candidates' online offerings. With these points in mind, we aim to conduct a similar study, but in a 'peacetime' period, with a view to establishing if members of the public express a similar need for constituency-specific online information from their elected representatives; and if they believe Twitter and other social media to be suitable channels for the dissemination of such information.

Notes

1. For readers unfamiliar with the legislative situation in the United Kingdom, dramatic constitutional changes in the late 1990s saw the devolution of some legislative powers from the UK Parliament in Westminster, London, to three new devolved bodies: the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The devolved matters on which the Scottish Parliament can pass laws include: health; education; justice; police and fire services; housing; local government; the environment; sport and the arts; social work; agriculture; and many aspects of transport, including roads and buses.

2. In British politics, elected members frequently hold 'surgeries' in their constituency offices, or in other public buildings, where local people can come along to discuss any issues or problems that concern them.

3. Norris (2005) defines the long campaign in established democracies as "the year or so before polling day". However, in the UK, the Electoral Commission (an independent body which regulates elections and political party finances) has recently introduced a formal 'long campaign' period in order to control candidate spending. This tends to begin around three months before the date on which a current parliament will be dissolved. For example, for the UK General Election held

on 7 May 2015, the long campaign officially began on 18 December 2014, while

the dissolution of the previous UK Parliament took place on 30 March 2015

(Electoral Commission, 2013). In this paper, we follow Norris's definition.

4. The parliamentary careers of all three are now over. Swinson and Harris lost their

seats in the 2015 election; Joyce did not seek re-election in 2015. Harris and

Joyce had caused considerable controversy in recent years, for their online and

offline behaviour, respectively (e.g., Johnson, 2012; Holehouse, 2012).

5. The Scottish Parliament consists of 73 constituency MSPs, elected through a first-

past-the-post system, and a further 56 regional MSPs, selected using a form of

proportional representation.

6. Twitonomy (at http://www.twitonomy.com) is a commercial, subscription-based

software package which allows the user to capture all tweets sent by individual

Twitter users (up to Twitter's maximum of the last 3,200 tweets sent by each user),

or to search for, and capture, all tweets containing specific keywords or hashtags.

The captured tweets are presented in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Twitonomy

also includes an analytics feature which calculates, for example, average posts per

day, users most retweeted or replied to, hashtags most used, tweets most

retweeted or favourited, etc. This study did not use the analytics feature: the

Twitonomy package was used simply as a data capture device, to allow us to

conduct our own analyses of the MSPs' tweets.

7. On 18 September 2014 the people of Scotland were asked the dichotomous Yes

or No question, "Should Scotland be an independent country?". The majority

(55.3%) voted against Scotland becoming independent.

8. Dugdale has since become the Leader of the Scottish Labour Party, and, at

January 2016, had 24,100 Twitter followers.

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Table 1: MSPs on Twitter at April 2014, by political party affiliation.			
Political Party	**No. of MSPs**	**No. on Twitter**	**% on Twitter**
Scottish National Party (SNP)	65	55	85
Labour	38	33	87
Conservatives	15	9	60
Liberal Democrats	5	3	60
Scottish Greens	2	2	100
Independent or no affiliation	4	3	75
Totals	129	105	81

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Table 2:. MSPs' Twitter activity, 6 January to 2 February 2014 (n = 10,411), and number of followers at 30 April 2014.						
Political party (and number of MSPs on Twitter)	**No. of tweets sent, 6 January to 2 February 2014**			**No. of followers on Twitter at 30 April 2014**		
	Min.	**Max.**	**Ave.**	**Min.**	**Max.**	**Ave.**
Scottish National Party (55)	0	564	110	264	58,186	5,214
Labour (33)	0	540	78	106	6,858	1,965
Conservatives (9)	0	184	59	169	6,694	1,898
Liberal Democrats (3)	0	61	28	1,381	4,360	3,009
Scottish Greens (2)	76	249	163	3,320	13,672	8,496
Independent and unaffiliated (3)	0	795	282	2,195	4,001	3,051
All parties (105)	0	795	99	106	58,186	3,833
	Median = 60			Median = 2,350		

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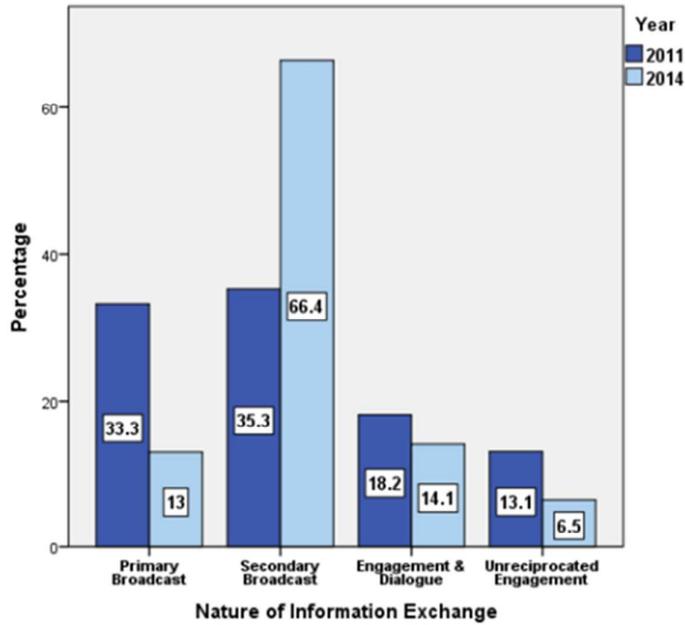
Figure 1: Nature of MSPs' information exchange on Twitter: comparison with

2011 candidacies (n = 42).

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5   **Appendix**
6
7 | *Content analysis of MSPs' tweets, 6 January to 2 February 2014* | | |
8 |---|---|---|
9 | **Type of Tweet** | **No.** | **%** |
10
11 | **Primary Broadcast: comment and opinion** | | |
12 | On parliamentary business/procedures | 121 | 1.2 |
13
14 | On personal, official activities/events | 366 | 3.5 |
15
16 | On local constituency business and policy issues | 122 | 1.2 |
17
18 | On national policy issues | 110 | 1.1 |
19
20 | On Scottish independence referendum debate/issues | 179 | 1.7 |
21
22 | On local political opponents | 3 | 0.1 |
23
24 | On national political opponents | 133 | 1.3 |
25
26 | On own party leaders/figures | 101 | 1.0 |
27
28 | On press/media coverage of political issues | 33 | 0.3 |
29
30 | On other political/current affairs issues | 99 | 1.0 |
31
32 | On non-political events (sport, popular culture, etc.) | 128 | 1.2 |
33
34 | On personal/domestic/family activities | 141 | 1.4 |
35
36 | **Total Primary Broadcast** | **1,536** | **14.8** |
37
38 | **Secondary Broadcast: links and feeds** | | |
39 | To MSP's other sites | 348 | 3.3 |
40
41 | From MSP's other sites | 215 | 2.1 |
42
43 | To party sites | 90 | 0.9 |
44
45 | To 'official' Yes/No campaign sites (i.e. Yes Scotland and Better Together) | 19 | 0.2 |
46
47 | To other political/news sites – constituency related | 199 | 1.9 |
48
49 | To other political/news sites – other | 741 | 7.1 |
50
51 | To non-political/news sites – constituency related | 6 | 0.1 |

To non-political/news sites – other	62	0.6
Secondary Broadcast: retweets		
Of others' comments – constituency related	232	2.2
Of others' comments – other	2,112	20.3
Of others' links – constituency related	304	2.9
Of others' links – other	2,537	24.4
Total Secondary Broadcast	**6,865**	**65.9**
Engagement and Dialogue: responses and replies		
To personal attacks	73	0.7
To attacks on party	60	0.6
To general political/policy comments	323	3.1
To personally supportive comments and pleasantries	440	4.2
To direct questions	427	4.1
Total Engagement and Dialogue	**1,323**	**12.7**
Unreciprocated Engagement: responses to 'non-personal' tweets	680	6.5
Total Unreciprocated Engagement	**680**	**6.5**
Others (Tests, errors, etc.)	7	0.1
Total number of tweets	**10,411**	**100**