The Evolution and Diversification of Twitter as a Cultural Artefact in the British Press 2007–2014

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ABSTRACT
There are enduring inequalities in usage of social media, relating both to the demographic patterning of users and to differences in the kinds of use people make of these platforms. This paper presents a content analysis of representations of Twitter in three British newspapers from 2007 to 2014 aimed at exploring the potential contribution that differing journalistic practices make to sustaining the inequalities in uptake and use of social media platforms. The newspapers were selected for the contrasting composition of their readership, allowing for comparison of the portrayals of Twitter to distinct socio-demographic groups. The portrayal of Twitter was found to differ between the three newspapers analysed, with the readers of the tabloid and mid-range newspaper being presented a depiction of Twitter as a site for elite and celebrity voices and for fandom rather than a site for their own active participation or political content creation, to a greater extent than the readers of the quality paper. These results suggest that the journalistic practices distinctive to these diverse newspapers may have significant implications for the extent to which their readership are encouraged to see themselves as able to have a voice on social media: the tabloid style risks depoliticising Twitter.

KEYWORDS
Twitter; cultural artefact; content analysis; social class; newspaper; UK

Introduction
The uptake and usage of the internet is highly socially patterned (as witnessed, for example, by successive studies of the Pew Research Center’s internet and American Life Project (http://pewinternet.org/) and the Oxford Internet Institute’s biennial internet surveys (http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/oxis/)). Real-world social disadvantage in terms of money and education tends to be reflected and potentially exacerbated online (Robinson et al. 2015). Within that overall pattern of inequalities in internet usage, use of social media is also heavily socially patterned, with some social groups being more likely to use social media at all, and when they do use them, to be drawn to one form of social media more than another on the basis of age, gender, nationality, or ethnicity and to use them in different ways (see for example, Boyd 2008; Hargittai 2007; Blank and Lutz 2017). Use of
social media for political participation and production of political content is disproportionately associated with highly educated elite groups in UK data (Blank 2013). The tendency is for Twitter users to be younger, better educated and wealthier than other internet users and non-users of the internet (Blank 2017). A complex array of socio-economic factors play a role in fostering this pattern of differentiation. The mass media potentially play a role by ascribing meaning to social media for their audiences, and it is this aspect of the social segmentation of internet usage that the current study explores. More specifically, the study focuses on identifying the extent to which print journalism in the UK has portrayed Twitter in different ways for the segmented audiences of different newspaper brands, one of which has a readership that maps closely onto the Twitter demographic in terms of wealth and education and two others that have a less socio-economically privileged readership.

The aim of the paper is to explore whether the representation of Twitter that appears in the newspapers under comparison is consonant with the participation divide and specifically whether Twitter is disproportionately portrayed for the readers of the quality paper as a site for ordinary users to actively participate and to achieve a political voice. Where differences emerge between newspapers, it can be argued that the practices of journalism, through the generic conventions that shape journalistic representations in conjunction with the segmented readership of the newspapers concerned, are together contributing to continued inequalities in use of social media. This paper thus proposes that journalistic practices may constitute a contributory factor in sustaining social inequalities in use of social media for political participation.

**Twitter as a Cultural Artefact**

It is commonplace within the sociology of technology to argue that technologies are not simply functional objects, but are cultural artefacts laden with meaning and subject to diverse interpretations (Woolgar 1996) such that different relevant social groups might interpret the same technology in quite different ways (Bijker and Pinch 1987). To some extent these varying interpretations can be the outcome of direct contact between actual or potential users of the technology, observing one another’s actions and communicating about the technologies to adopt and the best means of using them. Bakardjieva (2005), for example, explores the “little behaviour genres” that internet users learn from one another to help them to make sense of how the internet might fit into their lives. The mass media have also been viewed as a significant part of the cultural circuit which shapes technologies and gives them social meaning (Du Gay et al. 1997). Journalistic portrayals of new technologies offer people models of use with which they may identify, as Du Gay et al. (1997) observe in the case of the Sony Walkman and also helped to shape the internet as a cultural artefact as Hine (2000) observes.

Technologies as cultural artefacts are shaped through the interplay of various influences: Sterne, for example, argues that the mp3 as a cultural artefact was the outcome of social and cultural processes “shaped by several electronics industries, the recording industry and actual and idealized practices of listening” (Sterne 2006, 826). Technologies as cultural artefacts also alter and stabilise over time: van Dijck (2011) argues that the early years of Twitter involved meaning being shaped by a variety of influences, including the design of the technology, the promotion of various modes of usage, and the emergence of business models to capitalise on the growing popularity of microblogging. The emergence
of stabilised meanings for a technology, whether locally or globally applicable, does not necessarily imply that meaning becomes fixed and it is possible for multiple cultural meanings to persist over time (De Laet and Mol 2000; Mol 2002).

This paper pursues the notion of internet applications as cultural artefacts, taking as a focus the specific case of Twitter as portrayed in British newspapers. The paper focuses on a comparison of the coverage of Twitter featured in three newspapers with highly contrasting readership demographics, exploring the possibility that, in selectively addressing their distinct audiences, the journalistic practices of these newspapers effectively constitute Twitter as a different cultural artefact. Taken in isolation the data analysed here cannot tell us whether, or how, people’s views of Twitter are indeed being shaped by the portrayals they read in newspapers. Textual analysis of media coverage is taken here as a useful end in its own right (Fürsich 2009) and in particular, the comparison of textual features provides for a systematic appreciation of the different material being made available to different audiences. To the extent that news discourse creates shared meanings (van Dijck 1988), the comparison between contrasting newspapers allows us to explore whether different sets of shared meanings are being created for their distinct readerships. Rather than claiming to have identified causality, the aim is more modestly to consider the extent to which different segments of the population are being offered different messages about what Twitter is and by doing so to promote reflection on whether journalistic practices may be implicated in sustaining social inequalities in usage of social media.

The next sections of the paper discuss first what is known about subscribers to Twitter and the diverse uses that they make of it and then what is known about usage of Twitter by mainstream media, leading to the formulation of the research questions. This leads to an explication of the choice of newspapers to sample and the variables used for the comparison, forming a backdrop for the presentation of results exploring the diverse and evolving portrayals of Twitter and its users in British newspapers. The conclusion evaluates how far the version of Twitter portrayed by newspapers for different audience segments constructs different cultural artefacts and explores the extent to which some portions of the population may consequently be directed towards a less active and less politicised notion of its use.

The History and Demographics of Twitter

Even in internet terms, the history of Twitter is short, yet it has also been eventful. The site was launched in June 2006, offering users the ability to send 140 character messages (tweets) which would be, by default, publicly available to other users who chose to follow them (Sagolla 2009). Subsequent developments on this basic service introduced the ability to group tweets on related topics by use of a “hashtag” and the ability to forward a received message to one’s own followers (retweeting), allowing Twitter to support viral spread of messages. Twitter has enjoyed a dramatic rise in prominence and popularity, claiming 140 million users by 2012 (Twitter 2012). Twitter has also featured prominently in high profile news stories such as the “Arab Spring” popular uprisings, the UK riots of summer 2011 and the anti-capitalist Occupy movement and has been held responsible for breaching of injunctions held by celebrity figures. In each of these cases, Twitter’s ability to spread messages rapidly appears to offer an opportunity for a democratised public communication which bypasses the control of conventional mass media.
The demographic spread of the Twitter population is difficult to assess accurately, in part because only a small percentage of users choose to publish demographic information. The most useful data on the Twitter-using population for the current paper comes from the representative sample of the UK population achieved by the Oxford Internet Survey. Based on this survey’s 2013 data, comparing Twitter users with users of other social media, with internet-using non-users of social media and with non-internet users, Blank (2017, 686) finds that “Twitter users are more likely to be younger, better educated, students or employed, single, and wealthier”. For the purposes of the current paper it is notable that the Twitter users are distinctive in comparison to users of other social media, since we could reasonably assume that if one were using other social media the reasons for not using Twitter are more likely to be socio-cultural than technical or financial in nature. The demographic skew of the US Twitter population shows similar biases to the UK population, with variations relating to ethnicity and urban/rural contrasts (Blank 2017).

Some provocative studies have explored the meanings that Twitter participation carries for users. Hargittai and Litt (2011, 2012) analysed a longitudinal study among students at one university in the US, looking for predictors of Twitter adoption. They found that beyond standard sociodemographic measures, such factors as levels of prior online experience and skill also affected the likelihood that these young adults would become Twitter users (Hargittai and Litt 2012). Young African Americans were disproportionately likely to sign up, and interest in entertainment and celebrity news was a strong predictor of adoption while interests in science and politics were not (Hargittai and Litt 2011). These results are suggestive that, for this group at least, at this time, the meaning of Twitter was framed around celebrity and entertainment, rather than with other dominant associations with democracy, citizen empowerment or education. It remains unclear, however, to what extent other cohorts or older adults signing up at the same time would have been motivated by the same meanings and for all cohorts whether signing up leads to active tweeting.

Overall, then, the Twitter population is difficult to characterise precisely, but is subject to some clear socio-demographic and cultural biases which make it not representative of the population as a whole. Within Twitter users, there are also widely reported differences in usage, and a small proportion of users are quite influential in shaping information flows. A “participation divide” (Hargittai and Jennrich 2016) means that the more educated and socially advantaged are more likely to see the online domain as a space to contribute, rather than simply consume, content. This applies across a wide range of online platforms (Schradie 2011), including Twitter. Blank argues that such studies of participation would do well to disaggregate different forms of content production. Using the 2011 British dataset from the Oxford Internet Survey and disaggregating content production into skilled content (such as blogs and websites), social and entertainment content and political content, Blank (2013, 606) argues that “political content is a different, distinctive form of content. The people who create it are a distinctive subset of the population; they are a relatively small but highly educated group; in Britain about 14 per cent of the population”. These political content creators are not only more highly educated but also more likely to be either students or users of the internet in a working context. In conventional social class analyses focused on occupation, this group would be expected to derive from the professional and managerial middle classes rather than the working class.
Studies of Twitter in a political context show that “politically vocal Twitter users tend not to be representative of a population as a whole” (Jungherr 2016, 77) and similarly suggest that, in general, political Twitter traffic portrays the views of a small subset of the population. Murthy, Gross, and Pensavalle (2016) find some evidence that traditionally marginalised groups are using Twitter to achieve a voice but this conclusion from the US is not necessarily mirrored in the UK, particularly because the pattern from the US of African American internet users being proportionately more likely to be Twitter users is not mirrored in the ethnic groups of the UK population. Clearly, the Twitter experience is very different for different user groups and among those who have access many do not see this as a space where they could have a political voice or, indeed, any voice at all.

The differences between Twitter users thus extend to more than quantitative measures of tweet frequency or influence and extend into details of practice and the meaning which user ascribe to it. It appears, in other words, that Twitter has become a different cultural artefact for different sectors of the population and that in the UK at least there are some correlations with traditional social class divides. It becomes interesting then to consider which constituencies are reflected in the mainstream media depictions of Twitter as active participants in the various forms of content. Is Twitter being depicted within mainstream journalism as a site where anyone can be an opinion leader, or is it portrayed as a source of information? Who, according to the various outlets of the mass media, is supposed to be tweeting, how, and why? Is Twitter depicted as a site for politics, or for entertainment? In the content analysis of newspaper representations of Twitter described in this paper, it was, therefore, important to explore both the themes of coverage and the extent to which ordinary users and public figures are portrayed as using Twitter for various purposes. The variables used to explore this are described in more detail in the section “Methods” below. First, however, a closer look at the relationship between Twitter and the mass media is required in order to add depth to a central assumption in this paper, that by depicting Twitter newspapers are constructing it as a cultural artefact, leading to a more precise statement of the research questions.

**Twitter in the Mass Media**

The growth of Twitter as a medium has been accompanied by a growth in attention to Twitter in the mass media. Some previous studies of coverage of social media by mainstream media provide a useful backdrop to the current study. Paulussen and Harder (2014) analysed the use of social media as sources by Flemish quality newspapers between 2006 and 2013. Paulussen and Harder’s (2014) data can only provide grounds for tentative speculation on the qualities of Twitter as represented across the press, since they aggregate figures for social media including Facebook and YouTube along with Twitter and consider only quality newspapers. However, for these newspapers they do suggest that there are signs of social media being used to portray a wider array of voices beyond public figures: in 44% of cases where social media was used as a source in their sample the actor cited was an ordinary citizen or a collective general public. Paulussen and Harder (2014) suggest, however, that the majority of direct quotes from social media users come from well-known figures. Along similar lines, according to Wallsten’s (2015) analysis of coverage of the 2012 US election, journalists have a tendency to cite tweets from elite sources. Broersma and Graham (2012) found that tweets were used as
news sources in different ways by quality papers and popular press, and in different ways by Dutch and UK newspapers, albeit across a relatively narrow time frame and only focused on election news. Thus, whilst Twitter itself may be awash with public sentiment and citizen journalism, the picture painted of Twitter within newspaper coverage may suggest instead that Twitter is a medium where the public watch the elite without actively contributing. The conflicting results from the various studies suggest that we may expect differences in this regard between newspapers and that outcomes may be nation-specific.

The focus in the current research is not, in itself, to investigate changing journalistic practices in relation to Twitter (as reviewed by Lecheler and Kruikemeier (2016) and Bane (2017)), although inevitably journalistic practice forms a part of the phenomenon under examination. The extent to which Twitter is used as a source will indeed be apparent in the dataset. However, for a robust study of the development of sources used by journalists a dataset that compared the use of Twitter as a source with the use of other sources would have been more appropriate (as conducted, for example, by Broersma and Graham (2013)). This could also entail study of journalistic practices relating to selection and verification of sources (for example, Hermida, Lewis, and Zamith 2014; English 2016) and the context in which Twitter is used within a news story (Moon and Hadley 2014; Broersma and Graham 2012; Vis 2013). In the current research, the focus of interest is how the various kinds of mention of Twitter in newspapers construct Twitter itself as a cultural artefact rather than an analysis of the processes of selection between various sources.

We may expect that representations of Twitter will vary across time as well as between newspapers. Arceneaux and Weiss (2010) studied the representation of Twitter in newspapers, newswires, magazines and blogs from 2006 to 2009, conducting a grounded study of the framing of Twitter. They found many articles explaining what Twitter was (as expected at this early stage of its development) and a predominance of positive aspects of the technology, albeit coupled with some clear negative themes. While their analysis does not distinguish between depictions of Twitter across different media outlets, it offers a useful backdrop for the current study, sharing the supposition that media coverage interprets the meaning of new media for users. The current study spans a longer timeframe and thus may include both the early time period when explicit explanation is the focus and a period when the technology has become banal (Graham 2004) and is deemed no longer in need of explicit explanation. This observation informs the decision to include a systematic appreciation of both explicit commentary on Twitter and of the routine use of material derived from Twitter within the comparison between different newspapers in the current study. Before proceeding to compare coverage across newspapers it is important to consider whether they have developed their coverage at the same rate or whether there is a lag between different newspapers titles in this regard.

With the starting assumption that the mass media play a role in shaping internet applications as cultural artefacts, the present study focuses on representations of Twitter in the British press and explores the differentiation of Twitter as a cultural artefact between three contrasting newspapers directed at distinctive socio-demographic groups of readers. Firstly, this paper first addresses the following question:

RQ1: How has the coverage of Twitter in three contrasting UK newspapers changed over time?

This appreciation of the development of coverage over time across the three newspapers is a necessary precursor to the main research questions, focused on the extent to which
the three newspapers differ in their presentation of Twitter as a cultural artefact along dimensions that may shape readers’ expectations of the significance of Twitter and of whether and how they should use Twitter themselves:

RQ2: How does the coverage of Twitter vary between three contrasting UK newspapers in terms of the significance of Twitter in the coverage?

RQ3: How does the coverage of Twitter vary between three contrasting UK newspapers in terms of the identity of the Twitter user featured?

RQ4: How does the coverage of Twitter vary between three contrasting UK newspapers in terms of the use of quotations from Twitter?

RQ5: How does the coverage of Twitter vary between three contrasting UK newspapers in terms of the themes of coverage?

Method

Sampling

The primary focus of this study being on the differentiation of Twitter as a cultural artefact across British newspapers, sampling decisions focused on choosing titles that spanned the diversity in this field, conceiving diversity primarily in terms of readership demographic, but also taking into account journalistic style and political affiliation (with these factors expected to be inter-related in complex fashion), with the sample confined to a choice of three newspapers due to availability of resources. The sample comprised one tabloid newspaper (The Sun), one mid-market paper (Daily Mail) and one quality title (The Guardian). Information on the readership profile was drawn from the National Readership Survey (http://www.nrs.co.uk/latest-results/nrs-print-results/newspapers-nrsprintresults/), which provides readership figures for print media brands broken down by age, gender and social class (using a social class distinction primarily based on occupational status). While the readership of all print brands declined across the sampling period, the relative patterning of the readership demographic remained fairly stable. Differing readerships are accompanied by highly contrasting styles of presentation and language and by differing substantive foci: a summary of these features was drawn from Harcup and O’Neill’s (2017) study of news values. Information on ideological affiliations, related in complex fashion to ownership, editorial priorities and market strategies, was drawn from Curran and Seaton (2018). Based on these resources, the three newspapers selected for analysis may be summarised as follows:

The Sun—the highest circulation national newspaper, tabloid-style emphasising celebrity stories for a predominantly male working-class readership. The paper has a shifting political affiliation across election cycles, but has been largely seen as right wing in recent years.

Daily Mail—the second highest circulation national newspaper, mid-market with a bias towards entertainment value and political conservatism and a mixed professional and working-class readership containing marginally more women than men. The readership are relatively old on average compared to the readership of the other newspapers.

The Guardian—the sixth highest circulation national newspaper with a bias towards stories about the power elite and an association with left wing political values, with a largely professional class readership with an even gender balance.
These titles hence provide a contrast in terms of audience demographics, politics and journalistic style and thus provide a test case for the proposition that coverage of Twitter in contrasting newspapers may be distinctive.

Having chosen the three newspapers to examine, a corpus of newspaper stories was generated using the Lexis-Nexis full-text database of newspaper content. All stories containing a mention of the word “twitter” were retrieved for each of the three newspapers, from the first appearance of mentions in 2007 to the end of 2014, sampling two months per year (January and July). The two months sampled were chosen to allow for a regularly spaced time-series to be achieved across the dataset and thus permit trends to be visually assessed. Alternative methods of sampling across time such as the constructed week or month would not have lent themselves so readily to the identification of trends, as required by RQ1. The sample focused only on Monday to Saturday for consistency across the three titles, since not all had a Sunday edition. The sample was cleaned of obvious duplicates, present due to coverage within the database of different editions of the same newspaper.

**Measures**

The full coding frame is given in the Appendix. RQ1 asked how the coverage of Twitter had changed over time. This question was operationalised in terms of the overall number of articles mentioning Twitter at each time point, applying the coding frame within the overall set of articles mentioning Twitter codes to record the significance of Twitter in the coverage, the extent of use of quotations and the extent to which Twitter is either contextualised for readers or used in routine fashion.

The variable SIGNIFICANCE captured the role played by Twitter in the story and was introduced in order to eliminate false positives and to capture the distinction between stories that focused partly or wholly on Twitter from those that mentioned it only in passing. The variable QUOTATION recorded whether Twitter was used as the source of quoted material. Together these two variables differentiate a variety of routinised ways in which Twitter features in the press, such as SIGNIFICANCE 3, QUOTATION 2 which might be a story about a development in the business model or features of Twitter or SIGNIFICANCE 1, QUOTATION 1 which might represent a story about an event in a celebrity’s life with a quotation from their Twitter feed used in illustration. Given the different demographic make-up of their readerships it was considered possible that journalists might assume different levels of prior knowledge of social media platforms. This comparison was captured by the variable CONTEXTUALISATION, allowing for a comparison across the newspapers of the banalisation of Twitter over time as expressed in RQ1 to determine whether each newspaper underwent this process at the same rate.

RQ2 focused on the comparison between the three newspapers using the full dataset aggregated across time periods and asking how the role played by Twitter in their coverage varied by the significance of Twitter using the variable SIGNIFICANCE.

RQ3 asked how the coverage of Twitter varied between newspapers in terms of the identity of the Twitter user in the story. The variable IDENTITY was introduced to allow exploration of whether readers of the newspapers were encouraged to see themselves as possible active users of Twitter or whether Twitter functions simply as a site to observe elite users. When coding IDENTITY a combined category of “public figure” was employed because it was not possible reliably to separate sports personalities, politicians and celebrities and
also their families and associates. Grouping these users together as “public figures” signified those who were already notable in public commentary in some way prior to the reported engagement with Twitter, as opposed to people who might become public figures or feature in the news as a result of an engagement with Twitter. Code 1 for IDENTITY denoted that only the public figure was depicted as using Twitter, while Code 2 was used where both a public figure and their fans, critics or supporters were depicted as using Twitter. This approach to coding distinguished constructions of Twitter as a space where public figures might be observed in a passive sense from Twitter as a space where interaction with or commentary upon public figures was possible for ordinary users.

RQ4 compared the three newspapers according to their use of quotations, using the variable QUOTATION as described above.

RQ5 asked how coverage of Twitter varies between newspapers in terms of the themes of coverage. An initial set of themes was arrived at through pre-analysis of a sub-sample of newspaper stories with the intention of arriving at an exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of themes. The coding aimed to capture salient aspects of the theme of coverage as reflected in the social media participation divide (Blank 2013) and hence differentiated political themes from other kinds of activity by public figures on Twitter.

Three coders were involved in the coding: the author (coder 1) and two research assistants (coders 2 and 3). Following initial coding, the dataset was cleaned for obvious errors including erroneous and missing codes. A sample (10%) of the records coded by the assistants were re-coded by the author to check for inter-coder reliability. A systematic inconsistency between coders in the coding for records where significance was coded 3 emerged and was addressed by a recode of the entire dataset as affected by the inconsistency. Cohen’s kappa was then calculated for each variable using SPSS, comparing coder 1 with coder 2 and coder 3 in turn. Across the entire sample a level of inter-coder reliability deemed at least substantial (Landis and Koch 1977) was achieved (see Table 1). The analysis was based on descriptive statistics, with significance tests conducted for comparison between the newspapers on frequencies tabulated for all years combined, variable by variable. As this is not a random sample across the year it is not safe to generalise to the other months of the year not sampled.

Findings: RQ1 Evolution of Twitter in Newspapers over Time

The final dataset comprised 5465 newspaper articles, distributed across time as shown in Figure 1. All three newspapers showed a slow initial growth in mentions of Twitter then a sharper rise from July 2009 and finally a flattening off in growth from January 2012. The Sun showed a particularly sharp rise from July 2011 to January 2012, probably relating to the emergence of a new journalistic practice focusing on celebrity gossip on Twitter.
Disaggregating according to the theme of the coverage shows some additional interesting trends within the overall picture of growth followed by flattening off. For theme 4, mentions of Twitter relating to politics and activism, *The Guardian* shows a peak of interest from January 2011 to January 2012 around the time of the Arab Spring and January 2014 in relation to British domestic politics but this is not as marked in the other two newspapers (see Figure 2). This difference in thematic interest across the three newspapers is explored further below in answering RQ5.

**Figure 1.** Chart showing number of articles mentioning Twitter by time period per newspaper.

**Figure 2.** Chart showing number of articles mentioning Twitter by time period per newspaper, for articles coded under THEME 4 (politics and activism).
There are signs that Twitter became increasingly banal across the time span covered by this study, along a similar trajectory for all three newspapers. As Figure 3 shows, the number of articles with CONTEXTUALISATION coded 2 or 3 reduced markedly after July 2012, suggesting that all three newspapers considered that their readership would understand what Twitter was by this point. Whilst becoming more banal, Twitter was also increasingly used by all three newspapers as source material. As Figure 4 shows, QUOTATIONS from Twitter appeared in the dataset from January 2009 and became a common feature although as the analysis below for RQ4 shows, The Guardian made proportionately less use of Twitter as a source for quotations. The data viewed as a time series therefore show a somewhat similar pattern in development across time of Twitter coverage, with initial low levels of commentary becoming a routinised use of Twitter as a source of content and topic of commentary across all three newspapers. Coverage of Twitter develops as new journalistic practices emerge in line with the existing thematic preoccupations and stylistic preferences of each newspaper. This similarity in trend promotes confidence in the meaningfulness of a straightforward comparison between the newspapers in terms of volume of coverage across the whole dataset as required by RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 and RQ5.

Findings: RQ2 Diversification of Twitter Across Newspapers by Significance of Twitter in Articles

A comparison was carried out between the newspapers by cross-tabulating the frequency of each category, variable by variable. Each variable showed a significant deviation from the expected values using a Chi-squared test at $p < 0.001$, indicating some provocative differences between the three newspapers, as outlined below. In the results that follow for RQ2, RQ3, RQ4 and RQ5, each table shows the absolute frequency for each category.
and also the articles within that category as a percentage of the total articles mentioning Twitter in that newspaper. Totals vary between tables because articles coded 0 for non-applicable variables are excluded (for example, where SIGNIFICANCE was coded 4 for a false positive, all other variables were coded 0).

The SIGNIFICANCE of Twitter within the story, as shown in Table 2, demonstrated a small proportion of false positives where Twitter was mentioned in a context other than the microblogging site, with Daily Mail and The Guardian highest at 0.6% each. In later years within the dataset the Twitter handle of the author of a piece was often included in The Guardian and Daily Mail, and The Sun regularly featured Twitter handles to follow for sporting or media updates. This practice is reflected within the use of Twitter as a minor part of a broader story (2) and was particularly apparent in the Daily Mail at 53.3%. All newspapers made use of Twitter as a source of material or site for further information (3), most notably The Guardian at 45.4%. All three newspapers featured some stories where Twitter was the main focus (1) with this most apparent in The Sun at 17.8%. Twitter, therefore, is used in a matter-of-fact way by all three newspapers to a much greater extent than being featured as significantly storyable in itself.

**Table 2.** Frequencies and percentage of total mentions of Twitter for *Daily Mail, The Guardian* and *The Sun*, according to the code for SIGNIFICANCE of Twitter in the article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIGNIFICANCE</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Sun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Major focus of story</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Minor part of story</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>1049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Only cited as a source</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>1015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 False positive</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1038</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>2515</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 128.0$, $p < 0.001$ with 6 df.
In summary, therefore, all three newspapers make substantial routine use of Twitter as a source and feature Twitter regularly as a minor part of a story. Analysis of further questions will reveal, however, that the apparent similarity of the three newspapers in this regard conceals some substantial differences in the form that this usage takes, particularly relating to the identity of the Twitter user, the usage of quotations from Twitter and the theme of the coverage, as explored in RQ, RQ4 and RQ5.

Findings: RQ3 Diversification of Twitter Across Newspapers by Identity of Twitter User

The IDENTITY of the Twitter user differentiated the depiction of Twitter as a site dominated by the voices of existing public figures from depictions of Twitter as a site where the readers of the newspaper might themselves expect to have a voice. The newspapers showed significant differences in the proportions of articles mentioning Twitter across the IDENTITY variable, as shown in Table 3. All three newspapers strongly featured public figures as users of Twitter (1), suggesting a depiction of Twitter as a domain of the elite or as a site for passive consumption of material produced by already prominent figures. This was proportionately less apparent in The Guardian at 40.8% with The Sun highest at 52.7%. The Sun depicted use of Twitter by public figures and their followers (2) proportionately more than the other two newspapers at 21.4% (compared to 15.2% for the Daily Mail and 12.6% for The Guardian), promoting a view of Twitter as a site to encounter celebrity. All three newspapers made a small number of references to named non-public figures as Twitter users (3), ranging from 9.2% for the Daily Mail to 6.5% for The Guardian. These articles often deployed Twitter as a means to depict the public response to an issue of concern. The Guardian featured proportionately more articles in which Twitter users in general (4) were mentioned, rather than any particular Twitter user, at 35.3% as compared to 22.2% in the Daily Mail and 15.2% in The Sun. This reflects The Guardian’s interest in reporting on Twitter as a social phenomenon, as also highlighted below in the discussion of the "theme" variable.

In summary, there are significant differences between the three newspapers in their depiction of the identity of Twitter users. The tendency of The Guardian to portray Twitter users in general is particularly notable in comparison to the tendency in The Sun and to a slightly lesser extent the Daily Mail to use Twitter to portray the viewpoint of public figures. Readers of The Guardian may, therefore, be positioned to view Twitter as a site of mass participation and hence a meaningful place to make their own contributions to a greater degree than readers of The Sun or the Daily Mail.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentage of total mentions of Twitter for Daily Mail, The Guardian and The Sun, according to the code for IDENTITY of Twitter user.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDENTITY of Twitter user</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Sun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Public figure</td>
<td>478</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>1179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Public figure and fans</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Named non-public figure</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Twitter users in general</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>472</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Named organisation</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>1338</td>
<td>2238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 223.0, p < 0.001$ with 8 df.
Findings: RQ4 Diversification of Twitter Across Newspapers by Use of Quotations from Twitter

As depicted by the QUOTATION variable, there were differences between newspapers in the extent to which Twitter was used as a direct source of material to be quoted in stories, as an alternative to material that might otherwise have been sourced from interviews or press releases. The Guardian made proportionately less use of quotations from Twitter at 33.2% than the other two newspapers at 46.1% each, as depicted in Table 4. This potentially reflects an interest in Twitter from The Guardian that includes exploring it as a social phenomenon as well as a site of specific events, while the Daily Mail and The Sun largely use quotations to present the voice of existing public figures and hence reinforce the sense that Twitter is not a site for mass participation.

Findings: RQ5 Diversification of Twitter Across Newspapers by Theme of Coverage

When the THEME variable is examined, the traditional difference in content between the three newspapers in terms of news values (Harcup and O’Neill 2017) emerges, as shown in Table 5. The Sun is biased towards coverage of Twitter that involves a depiction of an event involving a public figure (1) at 51.5% of articles, with only 32.0% of articles from The Guardian featuring Twitter being coded in this way. The Guardian showed a greater emphasis on covering Twitter in relation to political themes (4) at 11.8% as compared to 5.1% for the Daily Mail and 2.9% for The Sun. The Guardian also contained proportionately more reflection on Twitter as a business (2) at 5.8% as compared to 3.2% for the Daily Mail and 1.8% for The Sun. Twitter as a social phenomenon (3) featured more prominently in The Guardian at 23.0% as compared to 16.5% for the Daily Mail and 13.5% for The Sun. Whilst this is not surprising given the well-known thematic biases of these titles, it is provocative for our understanding of the differentiation of Twitter as a cultural artefact for different audiences.

Table 4. Frequencies and percentage of total mentions of Twitter for Daily Mail, The Guardian and The Sun, according to the code for use of QUOTATION from Twitter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUOTATION from Twitter?</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Sun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Yes)</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>1035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (No)</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>1209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>2244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(\chi^2 = 64.9, p < 0.001\) with 2 df.

Table 5. Frequencies and percentage of total mentions of Twitter for Daily Mail, The Guardian and The Sun, according to the THEME of the article’s use of Twitter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEME</th>
<th>Daily Mail</th>
<th>The Guardian</th>
<th>The Sun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Celebrity, sporting or media gossip</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Twitter as a business</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 General social phenomenon</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Political action or protest</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Fandom</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Promotional activity</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Illegal or inappropriate behaviour</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>1186</td>
<td>1759</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(\chi^2 = 253.0, p < 0.001\) with 12 df.
It suggests that the readers of the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* are being offered a vision of Twitter that focuses on celebrity, sport and entertainment and does not stress the potential for new forms of politics and sociality or the emergence of new business models.

**Conclusions**

From this content analysis a pattern emerges of a differentiation between the newspapers that largely operates along lines suggested by previous studies of the news values operated by these titles (Harcup and O’Neill 2017). While all three newspapers predominantly portray Twitter users who are already public figures, arguably the readers of *The Guardian* are also presented with a version of Twitter in which they might also have a significant voice and where other forms of activity such as politics and activism are possible, although this does not necessarily translate into their voice being featured in the newspaper itself as demonstrated by the relatively low use of quotations from Twitter in *The Guardian*. Although there is some evidence of Twitter being used to include alternative voices as Paulussen and Harder (2014) suggest, relatively little is made of Twitter as a site where a non-public figure may be heard: the numbers of articles where a quotation from a named non-public figure is featured are Daily Mail 58; The Guardian 37; and The Sun 93. As Wallsten (2015) found, elite voices tend to dominate. Where the public are portrayed within stories about Twitter within *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, they often feature as fans or followers of a public figure with a relatively passive role in terms of setting the agenda.

The findings of this content analysis suggest that while the newspaper coverage of Twitter emerges on a broadly similar timescale across the three newspapers, there are important differences in the portrayal of Twitter as a cultural artefact presented according to the different journalistic practices and editorial preferences of each newspaper. There are differences here that have the potential to reinforce the established participation divide that sees certain demographic groups less likely to have an active voice on social media (Hargittai and Jennrich 2016; Schradie 2011; Blank 2013). To the extent that the quality newspaper, *The Guardian*, made relatively less use of Twitter in contexts of entertainment and celebrity, featured more discussion of Twitter relating to politics and activism and relatively speaking tended to discuss Twitter users *en masse* more than elite Twitter users, its predominantly professional-class readers were being presented with Twitter as a site where they might have a meaningful voice. The focus on elite Twitter users, and on quoting tweets from those elite users in *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* reinforces a view of Twitter as a site where the elite are to be followed and are the agenda-setters and where ordinary users are passive. Twitter is strongly associated here with entertainment, sport and celebrity. The patterning of representations of Twitter offered by newspapers is, on the comparison conducted here, largely in line with the existing digital participation divide. The patterns of coverage align somewhat with Blank’s (2013) observations that the producers of political content in social media tend disproportionately to be an educated elite: possibly the newspapers that this population read have encouraged them to expect to use Twitter in this way. If this pattern were to be replicated across other quality and tabloid newspapers, with readerships that again tend to be patterned by social class and occupation, then this is concerning in that the predominantly working-class readership of the tabloids may be being consistently taught not to expect Twitter to be used for their active political expression.
This analysis focuses on journalistic practice as a component of the circuit of culture (Du Gay et al. 1997) for social media, with journalism playing a significant role in ascribing meaning to social media for readers. While there are some routinised ways of depicting social media that cut across newspaper titles, the practices of journalists in sustaining the distinct brands of their respective newspapers create social media as distinctive cultural artefacts for different audiences. Significantly, the tabloid style of reporting, as Sparks (1988) argues, has troubling ramifications for the way that readers may view the world and their role within it, depoliticising their perspective through focusing on entertainment and sport and by highlighting stories focused on spectacular acts of individuals rather than the operation of institutions. The results presented here suggest that Twitter has been substantially depoliticised as a cultural artefact for the tabloid audience.

These preliminary results leave much more to be done in terms of exploring whether social media are consistently represented in print journalism as a site to have a voice or a site for consumption of content and how this portrayal is differentiated between audiences. The concern that mass media may have acted in a way that undermines the democratic potential of social media, and may have done so disproportionately for some already marginalised audiences, prompts many potential research questions focused on the treatment of popular voice and social media within mainstream media. In particular, whether the association between a tabloid style and depoliticisation of social media plays out on a larger scale in the UK and also in the different media landscapes and class structures of other countries deserves to be studied. This broader project forms a continuation of a long-standing concern within journalism studies to explore the political consequences of stylistic features (Sparks 1988), as they are remade for a hybrid media age (Chadwick 2017) in which new and old media entwine in complex circulations of content and interpretation.

Beyond a focus on representations of social media within mass media, taken one medium at a time, there is another set of important questions relating to the consequences of these representations as they collide with one another. There is obviously a complex ecology of connections and cross-fertilisations between old and new media and between different constructions of media as cultural artefacts and much more to be explored in terms of how people assimilate these varied depictions of what Twitter is for and who uses it. It is important to do so, given that the ability to consider oneself as having a voice is a very important aspect of digital equality, and hence social equality more broadly.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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References


**Appendix. Coding Frame**

**TIME PERIOD**


**PUBLICATION**

Mail (M), Sun (S), Guardian (G)
**SIGNIFICANCE of Twitter**

Twitter is the main focus of the story (1)
Twitter is incidental to the main point of the story or a minor part of a broader story (2)
Twitter only mentioned as a source of further information or source of a quotation or as contact details for author (3)
False positive (birds twittering etc) (4) Code all other variables as 0

**QUOTATION from Twitter**

Article uses Twitter as source of a comment - yes (1) no (2)

**CONTEXTUALISATION**

No explanation—just the word Twitter as self-evident (1)
Word/phrase of context e.g., “the popular microblogging/social networking site” (1)
Lengthy explanation—what a tweet is, what followers are etc. (2)

**IDENTITY of Twitter Users**

Public figure(s) e.g., celebrity or sports person, politician and their named associates (1)
Public figures and also their fans/critics/supporters (2)
Named non-public figure(s) e.g., a named member of the public (3)
No specified individual mentioned—Twitter users in general (4)
A named organisation, institution or brand as Twitter user (5)

**THEME of Story**

If significance is 3 code theme as 0
Celebrity/sporting/media gossip (an event involving a public figure doing something that happens on or involves Twitter) (1)
Twitter as a business (2)
Twitter as a general social phenomenon (3)
Twitter as a site of political action/protest (either mainstream politics or grassroots politics/activism) (4)
Twitter as a site of fandom or reaction to media, celebrities etc (distinct from 1 in that here fans and general public are highlighted as active on Twitter rather than just public figures themselves) (5)
Twitter as a site of promotional activity e.g., stories relate to an author promoting a new book, an academic tweeting about a job post, businesses using Twitter to advertise (6)
Twitter as a site of illegal or inappropriate behaviour (e.g., death threats, bomb hoaxes) (7)