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

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is 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 the authors 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 Internet, Social media, Twitter, Constituency service, Information provision, Members of the Scottish Parliament

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

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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 first 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 thirteenth 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 eighteenth and nineteenth 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 twentieth 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, e.g. 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 per cent 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 per cent of constituency members were welfare officers, 15.3 per cent were local promoters, with the remainder (9.4 per cent) giving equal weight to both aspects of constituency service. Interestingly, Searing established that Scotland had a higher proportion of constituency members (41 per cent) 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 e-mail (e.g. Jackson, 2005; Williamson, 2009a). Here, e-mail 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 Margaretten and Gaber (2014), who appear to equate an MP's online following with his/her constituents. Margaretten 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 *et al.*, 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 *et al.* (2010) used four very broad categories – broadcast, broadcast mention, reply and retweet – to explore the content of Australian politicians' tweets. Golbeck *et al.* (2010) created eight coding categories in analysing over 6,000 tweets sent by US Congress people, although constituency-specific posts were not identified and quantified. However, in another study of US Congress people, Glassman *et al.* (2013) established that 26 per cent 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 (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 per cent) 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 Table AI 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 Table AI, 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. First, 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. Second, 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 per cent) of the 73 constituency MSPs were on Twitter, as were 47 (83.9 per cent) of the 56 regional MSPs. Table I 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 per cent) had used Twitter when they had been parliamentary candidates three years earlier; thus the majority had adopted the service since becoming an elected member.

Table II, 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 per cent 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 per cent, and

Table I.
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

Table II.
MSPs' Twitter activity, 6 January-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-2 February 2014			No. of followers on Twitter at 30 April 2014		
	Min.	Max.	Avg.	Min.	Max.	Avg.
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	

that their geographic distribution is also in proportion to the UK's population density. It might, therefore, be argued that MSPs' Twitter followers form a relatively representative cross-section of the wider Scottish public.

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 per cent) 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 per cent) 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 per cent) of the total tweets. While 680 (6.5 per cent) 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 per cent) 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 per cent were Primary Broadcast posts; 30.8 per cent were Secondary Broadcast in nature; 17.2 per cent were in response to questions, criticisms or supportive messages; and 20.2 per cent 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 per cent 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 per cent of their tweets, compared with 35.3 per cent 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.

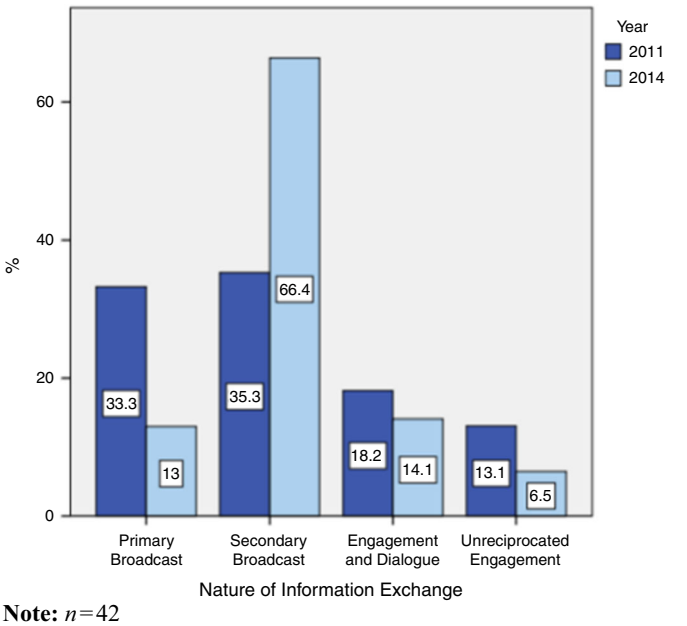

Figure 1.
Nature of MSPs' information exchange on Twitter: comparison with 2011 candidacies

Note: $n=42$

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 per cent of their posts in 2011, to 14.1 per cent 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 per cent in 2011, to 6.5 per cent in 2014.

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 Table AI). 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 per cent of Primary Broadcast posts, 3.5 per cent 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 per cent of Primary Broadcast posts, 1.2 per cent 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 per cent of Primary Broadcast posts; 1.2 per cent of overall posts), or on their personal lives (9.2 per cent of Primary Broadcast posts; 1.4 per cent 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 per cent of Secondary Broadcast posts, 7.1 per cent 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. First, 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 and 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 e-mail. 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, 2014), 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 e-mail 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 per cent) 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 were 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.*, 2013), 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 UK, 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 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 per cent) 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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Appendix

Type of tweet	No.	%
Primary broadcast: comment and opinion		
On parliamentary business/procedures	121	1.2
On personal, official activities/events	366	3.5
On local constituency business and policy issues	122	1.2
On national policy issues	110	1.1
On Scottish independence referendum debate/issues	179	1.7
On local political opponents	3	0.1
On national political opponents	133	1.3
On own party leaders/figures	101	1.0
On press/media coverage of political issues	33	0.3
On other political/current affairs issues	99	1.0
On non-political events (sport, popular culture, etc.)	128	1.2
On personal/domestic/family activities	141	1.4
Total primary broadcast	1,536	14.8
Secondary broadcast: links and feeds		
To MSP's other sites	348	3.3
From MSP's other sites	215	2.1
To party sites	90	0.9
To "official" Yes/No campaign sites (i.e. Yes Scotland and Better Together)	19	0.2
To other political/news sites – constituency related	199	1.9
To other political/news sites – other	741	7.1
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

Table AI.
Content analysis of MSPs' tweets, 6 January-2 February 2014

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