**Talking to the Broadcasters on Twitter**

Networked Gatekeeping in Twitter Conversations with Journalists

Abstract

Drawn upon the theory of networked gatekeeping, this study describes how citizens engage Twitter conversations with journalists and illustrates the power dynamic between traditional gatekeepers (journalists) and the gated (news audience). The power dynamic is discussed along four attributes of the gated – political power, information production ability, and relationship with gatekeepers and information alternatives. Results show that citizens interacted with gatekeepers by sharing information/opinion, social chats, and self-serving promotion of individual opinions and agenda. Politically active citizens interacted more often with journalists who share similar ideology. The citizens have varying degrees of political power, reflected by their different levels of involvement and influence in political discourse online. The implications for gatekeeping have been addressed too.

*Keywords*: Twitter, journalists, journalism, networked gatekeeping, social media

Digital technologies change the way in which average citizens interact with news media. Twitter, for an example, enables citizens to have direct conversations with journalists. The theory of networked gatekeeping has been applied to explore the power dynamics between gatekeepers (journalists and editors) and the gated (citizens) in the digital age (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Previous studies have examined one aspect of the networked gatekeeping that involves information selection: citizens, along with journalists, use the retweet feature of Twitter to make certain content more visible (Kwon, Oh, Agrawal, & Rao, 2012; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Yet, Shoemaker (1991) notes that gatekeeping includes not only selecting but also general shaping of media narratives to construct a social reality. Newsrooms traditionally exercise information control over the audience (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Such power dynamics has been shifted – digital technologies allow the audience to produce and broadcast their own messages, to interact with gatekeepers, and to choose various content. Hence, networked gatekeeping emphasizes the power relationship between gatekeepers and the gated (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The current study examines direct conversations on Twitter as a potential venue to build relationship with gatekeepers, to provide audience feedback, and to promote individual agenda, and eventually a way to transform the power dynamic.

Current study provides analyses of the gated with their political power in terms of potential opinion leadership in online narratives. The conversations with journalists are categorized by the themes and sentiments underlying potential relationship mechanism on the part of the gated. The study starts off by discussing how the gatekeeping concept has undergone changes in the digital age and the context of partisan journalism. It also examines how various Twitter communication modes, in particular direct conversations, connect to networked gatekeeping. Lastly, various elements in Twitter communications are addressed in relations to four attributes of the gated –political power, information production ability, relationship with gatekeepers, and alternatives.

**From Gatekeeping to Networked Gatekeeping**

Traditionally, gatekeeping involves the selection of information that journalists and editors decide which events and perspectives to cover (Shoemaker, 1991). With the advent of digital technology, two trends in news media have challenged this age-old concept. One is the emergence of partisan media, manifested in the political leaning of major networks and newspapers (Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch. 2012). Gatekeeping then consists of not only selecting, but also shaping and even manipulating of information, to construct social reality for target audience (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001). It also includes both deliberate and unintended behaviors that resulted in the shaping and changing of the preference, agenda, and viewpoints of newsrooms (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). The second trend is how the proliferation of digital media has shifted the power dynamics between newsmakers and news consumers: citizens are empowered by reporting and commenting via social media (Murthy, 2011). Newsrooms track citizens’ engagement in journalism to inform editorial decisions (Anderson, 2011). Amidst the changes, the theory of networked gatekeeping has been proposed to address the changing power dynamics (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

According to Barzilai-Nahon (2008), networked gatekeeping emphasizes two areas that have been overlooked in the traditional gatekeeping theories. First, gatekeeping has been considered to consist more than information selection, but any activities that influence media narratives. Second, gatekeeping has been described as the interplay between gatekeepers and *the gated* (upon whom gatekeeping is being exercised). The theory of networked gatekeeping illustrates a political process that involves gatekeepers and the gated sharing and competing for information control (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Traditional news audience is the gated, bounded up in the scope of events and perspectives presented in coverage. However, the gated is increasingly empowered in the digital age, as reflected in four attributes – their political power in relation to gatekeepers, information production ability, relationship with gatekeepers, and alternatives (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008).

Political power of the gated refers to the ability to achieve political and media goals - such as boycotting a newspaper to force editors to change editorial decision (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Digital media in general facilitate collective actions, and cases of political activism leading to regime changes have been examined (Shirky, 2011). The influence of such activism is predicted by an individual’s political and issue enthusiasm and online connectivity (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014). It can be argued that the political power of the gated is partly reflected in their opinion leadership in online narratives. The ability of information production is greatly expanded by digital media – average users are the *produsers* who contribute user-generated content to shape online information flow (Bruns, 2009). Information production can possibly produce persuasive influence (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Relationship with gatekeepers builds the path to gain political power through reciprocal, enduring, and direct interactions (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Digital media enable users to have direct conversations with journalists and editors. Despite the salience, the relationship component has been largely ignored in previous gatekeeping studies (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Alternatives suggest the autonomy in choosing diverse information, opinions, and outlets (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The Internet enables selective media experience with easy access to personalized content tailored to individual needs and preexisting belief (Sunstein, 2009).

**Networked Gatekeeping on Twitter**

 There is an emergent scholarship of networked gatekeeping enabled by social media such as Twitter (*see* Coddington & Holton, 2014; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Twitter is considered as the second most important social media platform, after Facebook (Bruns, 2011). A recent Pew study shows that 16% of American adults use Twitter; and among them, 52% get news from Twitter (Mitchell & Guskin, 2013). Its political impact ranges from general news consumption to political activism (Shirky, 2011). Twitter communication follows the typical mass-personal mode (O’Sullivan, 1999). It is a social networking tool to develop relationships, a media outlet for citizen to report news, and a public sphere to discuss public affairs (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Corresponding to the mass-personal nature, Twitter communication can be non-directed broadcasting, or direct conversations targeted at specific users. Direct conversations are interpersonal and dialogic – for persuasion, the directedness can solicit targeted recipients’ attention and feedback (Marwick, 2011); for relationship development, directed interactions can better achieve reciprocal acts, relational closeness, and trust (Jang & Stefanone, 2011).

Twitter messages are referred to as *tweets*. Twitter has three messaging features: *retweet*, *mention* and *reply*, all indicated by the symbol @, followed by user screen names. The three features underlie different communication motivations (boyd et al., 2010). Retweeting (including *modified tweets*) means to forward other users’ content with or without comments. Retweeting is aimed at spreading information, commenting, and endorsement (boyd et al., 2010). In gatekeeping, retweeting is a process of selection; the most retweeted messages are most visible to other Twitter users (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). Such selection process indicates the endorsement to the relevancy of content (boyd et al., 2010). It can be regarded as collaboratively networked gatekeeping in which both journalists and citizens serve as gatekeepers (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013).

Mention is used either to acknowledge other users or start conversations, whereas reply is used to follow up direct conversations (boyd et al., 2010). Direct conversations highlight the role of relationship between gatekeepers and the gated. It is also a means for citizens to shape gatekeepers’ media narratives. Marchionni (2013) describes journalism as a conversation between journalists and audience, and audience’s perception of news is contingent on the social presence and friendliness of journalists as well as the informal tone of conversations (Marchionni, 2013). Audience’s social behaviors are likely to exert influence into journalistic process— how journalists picture the image of audience (e.g. picturing audience as intolerant, indifferent, critical, or narrow-minded) influences newsroom decisions (Peiser, 2010).

Therefore, the current study conceptualizes direct conversations as a mechanism in networked gatekeeping. Findings regarding citizens’ online engagement with journalists are generally sporadic. A Pew study has shown that only a small number of journalists use Twitter to find citizen sources and give suggestions to the public (Pew, 2011). Larsson (2013) has documented cases in which TV hosts personally answered viewers’ comments on Twitter. In addition, Farrell & Drezner (2008) have shown that over half of journalists used political blogs to assist their journalistic work. Arguably, Twitter conversations can occur through retweeting when users attach comments. However, such commenting is directed at the retweeted content, but not necessarily the content sender. Hence, the current study exclusively examines directed conversations enabled by mention and reply.

**The Anatomy of Networked Gatekeeping by Twitter Direct Conversations**

Barzilai-Nahon (2008) has proposed that networked gatekeeping has two components, *identification* and *salience*. The former addresses the participants in the gatekeeping process; and the latter emphasizes on the dynamics between gatekeepers and the gated. The first step is to profile gatekeepers and the gated in Twitter direct conversations for both parties use Twitter and reveal identities through their profiles. The second step is to address the salience by exploring the four aforementioned attributes of the gated that hold power in relation to gatekeepers. Twitter is a level playing field when it comes to the ability of information production – all users are restricted by the 140-character limit per tweet. Yet, there is a disparity among the gated, in terms of using tweets to drive public and media attention and actions. Opinion leadership in producing viral content is one aspect of political power because the ideas shared affect political outcomes (Shirky, 2011; Nahon & Hemsley, 2013). Opinion leadership correlates with online social connectivity, focusing on the size of followers and the central positions in social networks (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014). Higher connectivity indicates broader audience reach. It also alludes to users’ offline celebrity status (Anger & Kittl, 2011). Traditional news outlets usually have large Twitter followings (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Therefore, the gated can build their grassroots audience base as well. Connectivity aside, politically active users reveal political belief and issue position through profile pages (Best & Krueger, 2005) and the use of hashtag to indicate issue involvement (Chen, & Pirolli, 2012). People who are involved in politics and specific issues are more likely to be opinion leaders in Twitter-based political activism (Xu, Sang, Blasiola, & Park, 2014). To address the political power of the gated, we ask:

**RQ1a:** What are the identity characteristics of the gatekeepers and the gated in networked gatekeeping by Twitter direct conversations?

**RQ1b:** What are the characteristics of the political power of the gated in terms of online connectivity?

**RQ1c:** What are the characteristics of the political power of the gated in terms of political and issue involvement?

For the second attribute, the relationship with gatekeepers, previous studies have dealt with both the structure and substance of relationship. The structure of relationship covers the reciprocity (i.e. whether conversations are replied by gatekeepers), tie strength (i.e. how many times the conversations occur between two parties), and immediacy in interactions (Jones, Hesterly, & Borgatti, 1997; Plickert, Wellman, & Cote, 2005; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). The substance includes sentiments and themes in conversations (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005). Conversations via digital media are of both socio-emotional and task-related nature (Lin & Peña, 2011; Walther, 1996). Conversations with gatekeepers can take place through self-disclosure and casual chats, aimed at nurturing interpersonal relationship. Building such relationship can be understood as an investment in social capital to achieve persuasion goals (Lin, 1999). Twitter is also a public sphere where tweets form public opinion (Himelboim, Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2012). Public Twitter messages fall in what Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) describe as *information-community-action* typology. Action tweets are messages that call for taking specific actions. The gated can use direct conversations to request gatekeepers’ attention to or action on certain messages. RQ2a through RQ2c are proposed to address these relationship components:

**RQ2a:** What are the structural characteristics of the conversations with gatekeepers in terms of tie strength and reciprocity?

**RQ2b:** What are the salient themes in conversations with gatekeepers?

**RQ2c:** To what extent does networked gatekeeping involve themes related to relationship-building?

 **RQ2d:** To what extent does networked gatekeeping involve themes related to call-to-actions messages aimed at promotion of individual opinion and agenda?

Lastly, the gated are presented with different alternatives in choosing sources and contacts. In the current media environment, people have access to a wide variety of media outlets. In traditional journalism realm, there are outlets tailored to audience who have different political orientations or ideologies. Given the prominent presence of journalists on social media, users have a diverse set of journalists to interact with. However, the idea of homophily, that people may naturally select information and relationships to reinforce their existing beliefs, may challenge the apparent autonomy in choices. In media consumption, it is manifested as selective media exposure (Kim, 2011); in relationship, it is exhibited as the tendency to interact with like-minded others (Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). In the partisan media environment, the gated are presented with various alternatives of gatekeepers who represent diverse political ideologies. Types of the interactions of gatekeepers and the gated and the course of the interactions can reflect the utilization of various alternatives. The following questions are proposed to address the attribute of alternatives:

**RQ3:** How do the gated interact with gatekeepers affiliated with media of similar or opposite political leaning?

**Methods**

Forty-eight journalists were selected from various U.S national media, including print, broadcasting, cable, radio, and business media. Table 1 presents a list of journalist screen-names and affiliated news outlets. The list is limited to correspondents only because correspondents are directly involved in sourcing, reporting and conveying individual perspectives. Based on the listing by *Muck Rack* (muckrack.com), top three correspondents with the most Twitter followers are selected from each outlet. The number of followers is a criterion for selection because large number of followers indicates that the journalists are potentially active and influential on Twitter. Therefore, interacting with these influential journalists has gatekeeping significance. The journalists in partisan news media are categorized, for analyzing how the gated interact with gatekeepers in various political camps. In the current study, journalists with FOX News were selected to represent conservative camp, and MSNBC journalists for liberal camp.

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 *Data collection*

Using Python scripts, researchers gathered all Twitter retweet/mentions/replies of the selected correspondents, generated between November 18, 2013 and December 18, 2013. The raw dataset has 91,015 unique tweets, sent by 46,279 users. Several iterations of data-cleaning procedures[[1]](#footnote-1) were applied to sort out direct conversations. Most conversational tweets are indicated by @USERNAME in the beginning of a tweet text. A few are indicated by @USERNAME placed in the end of tweet, without the markers of *RT*, *MT*, and *via*. Due to the size of the dataset, the first iteration of cleaning was automated using Excel sort-out and search functions, followed by manual screening. In the end, 30,897 tweets were identified as direct conversations. Tweets sent by users without identifiable profile were deleted because profile analysis is a critical part in current study. This step can remove Twitter spammers, but may also overlook users who desire anonymity (e.g. whistle blowers). In total, 3699 tweets (15%) were randomly sampled from the pool of 24,643 tweets sent by users with identifiable profile page.

*Identifying the gated*

Twitter users’ profile descriptions were crawled via Twitter API and loaded in AUTOMAP, a semantic analysis tool, to generate a list of frequent keywords. Guided by the keywords, researchers manually categorized user identity. Three salient user identities emerged as citizens, policy-makers, and media professionals. Citizen participants are identified based on users’ occupation, political affiliation, religious belief, and social identity. Policy-makers are government agencies, politicians, and former and current staffs working in administrations and legislation. Media professionals are identified as news organizations and people working for professional news outlets (excluding bloggers not affiliated with news organizations). The media professionals, due to their affiliation with traditional news media, are considered as gatekeepers. Their interactions with selected journalists are therefore viewed as among gatekeepers in the same professional circle. Users whose identities are ambiguous were categorized as unclassifiable.

*Categorizing the political power of the gated*

Political power has been addressed in terms of how the gated are involved in online political process. Twitter profiles reflect political involvement (Conover, Ratkiewicz, Francisco, Gonçalves, Menczer, & Flammini, 2011). AUTOMAP identifies popular political keywords on profiles. Some profiles have indicated liberal-leaning identity such as *liberal*, *Democrat*, *progressive*, *UniteBlue*, *pro-choice*, *marriage equality*, *pro-Union*, *equality*, *obama2012* and *#GOPFail*. Popular keywords suggesting conservative-leaning stances and conservative issues include *conservative*, *Tea Party*, *GOP*, *Republican*, *Israel*, *second amendment*, *constitution* and *#tcot* (Top Conservative on Twitter). Guided by the keywords, researchers manually screened each profile descriptions and grouped users into liberal-leaning, conservative-leaning, and independent. Those users who did not explicitly reveal political affiliation but general interest in politics and certain social issues were grouped as *generally interested in politics and current affairs*. Along with users who revealed political affiliation, they are considered as *politically active users*. In analyses, they will be compared to users who did not express political interest/affiliations (*non-politically active users*). Political power is also discussed along online connectivity that predicts online opinion leadership*.* Researchers calculated the percentage of high influetials with more than 10,000 followers. The qualification of 10,000 followers has been used in Vaccari and Valeriani’s (2013) work. In addition, the number of retweets received by each user is calculated to exhibit opinion leadership in networked gatekeeping context.

*Categorizing the relationship between gatekeepers and the gated*

Along the structural aspects of relationship, tie strength is measured as the number of tweets occurring between a given user and journalist. Reciprocity is determined based on the presence of a reply from a given journalist to a given user .The timelines of all included journalists were crawled as well. If a journalist replies a conversation, the content appears in the timeline. Database queries were performed to indicate whether a user received a reply by the selected journalists during the time period.

To reveal the themes and sentiments in conversation, the frameworks for coding were established based on a pilot coding of 400 tweets. Researchers have identified four salient themes. The first theme is labeled as *social engagement*. It incorporatescasual conversations with journalists, such as greeting, invitation, small talks, and showing appreciation and support. Social engagement tweets are presumably used to build or nurture relationship with the journalists. The second is labeled as *media engagement*. It includes tweets that provide opinion, information and questions regarding media coverage, especially coverage done by mentioned journalists and affiliated news organizations. Under this category, positive/negative sentiments are distinguished. The third theme is called *general opinion engagement*, which covers tweets that provide opinion, insights, and question regarding news events. Next, *promotional engagement* is the category of tweets in which senders explicitly request the targeted journalists to pay attention or to take actions. As its name suggests, promotional engagement tweets are aimed at promoting individual opinion, cause, and organizational agenda. Lastly, *conversational flow* tweets include non-content-bearing postings that are hard to interpret out of context. Although these tweets convey no substantial information, they still compose a part of conversation flows. In this way, we developed a refined coding framework after several rounds of pilot coding and discussion over the discrepancies during the process. In the end, two coders reached satisfactory inter-coder reliability and independently coded the sampled 3699 tweets. Inter-coder reliability for each category is presented in Table 2.

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**Results**

Among the selected gatekeepers, broadcasting and cable journalists were reached out by the gated more frequent than print media journalists. MSNBC’s Chuck Todd (@chucktodd) has been targeted by 560 unique users (19% of all users) in 697 tweets, followed by CBS’s Mark Knoller (@markknoller), targeted by 316 unique users (11%). The most targeted print media journalist is Jonathan Martin (@jmartNYT) with the New York Times, by 85 users (3%). Bottoming the rank are business media correspondents (see Table 1). Among the gated, the 3699 tweets coded are sent by 2994 unique users. Citizen participants (2910) represent 97% of the sample, and the citizen participants are 67 media participants and 15 policy-makers. In regards to RQ1a, the descriptive statistics show that Twitter direct conversations largely involved average citizens. Participation by policy-makers is the minority, but it is still worth noticing. The identified policy-makers include former government staff (e.g. former deputy White House Press Secretary and former National Safety Council spokesman), current staff (e.g. Communications Directors for Virginian Governor Bob McDonnell and for Ohio Democratic Party), currently serving politicians (e.g. Representative of 8th Congressional District in Georgia), and political candidate (candidate running for District 27 in the Texas House of Representatives). Among citizen participants, 8% of them (n=245) are self-identified liberal-leaning and 9% (n=271) are conservative-leaning; only 3 indicate themselves as independents. Additionally, 9% (n=273) do not reveal political affiliation yet indicate interests in politics and current affairs. In total, there are 795 politically active participants (27%). Therefore, to answer RQ1c, a considerate proportion of participants, who have expressed political interest, imply their important role in online political narratives. However, the majority of participants are non-politically active. RQ1b addresses the online connectivity of citizen participants. The number of followers ranges from 0 to 757,223 (*M*= 2059, *S.D*= 16311), suggesting the presence of both high-influentials and non-influential users. Only 71 citizen participants (2%) have more than 10,000 followers. Furthermore, 9% of all citizen participants (n=262) are retweeted at least one time.

RQ2a addresses the structural aspects of the relationship.Among all 3603 ties between citizen participants and journalists, 762 (21%) of them have occurred more than once. Citizen participants send 1.24 tweets on average. Only 80 citizen participants were retweeted by journalists. RQ2b addresses themes and sentiment in conversations. The most prominent two themes are providing opinion and information regarding public and media affairs (n=2486, 69%). Among them, 24% of the conversations (n=860) are citizen comments on media coverage. 369 tweets contain negative sentiment (10%) and 123 with positive sentiment (3%). 1626 conversations are categorized as providing opinion/insights regarding current affairs (45%). In addition, 21% of the conversations (n=746) are categorized as conversational flows. In regards to RQ2c and RQ2d, themes related to call-to-actions (124) and to relationship building (221) have been detected in only a small percentage of the conversations (See Figure 2). The distribution of themes does not indicate variations across groups of participants (See Figure 2).

RQ3 addresses the issue of homophily in direct conversations with gatekeepers of partisan media. In our sample, 1078 users and 1285 tweets targeting MSNBC correspondents, who are considered as liberal; 242 users and 288 tweets targeting Fox News correspondents, considered as conservative. Liberal participants (n=147, 14%) outnumber conservatives (n=50, 5%) when targeting MSNBC correspondents. Among the citizen participants targeting Fox News correspondents, conservatives (n=64, 26%) outnumber liberals (n=7, 3%). The statistics suggests that the sampled citizen participants are more likely to interact with news media in line with the participants’ political belief (See Figure 1).

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**Discussion**

The theory of networked gatekeeping is examined in the context of citizens’ Twitter conversations with journalists. The theory highlights the relationship between gatekeepers (journalists) and the gated (the publics). In the digital age, the general public including news audience has been empowered with more choices in news content, direct channels to speak to the press, and the ability to mobilize online crowd. The general public, therefore, is no longer passive audience who simply follow the agenda and opinion filtered through newsroom. Instead, they are engaged and expressive about individual preference and agenda. Several prominent findings emerged from the study and their implications for networked gatekeeping will be discussed.

Previous studies have shown that Twitter-based networked gatekeeping primarily involves average citizens (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). The same pattern has been found in this study. Citizen participants are likely news audience who are traditionally subject to the information control of newsroom (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Policy-makers and media workers compose the minority. These two groups are not necessarily the gated in the traditional sense; and they might be more powerful than citizens in shaping media narratives. The citizen group includes politically active users whose advocacy for political changes is evidently revealed on Twitter profiles. These people may use multiple digital media to express political opinions and spread individual viewpoints through offline conversations. It also implies that they may participate more often in political events. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung and Valenzuela (2012) have shown that active use of social media for political purposes correlates with active civil participation. As discussed earlier, such political enthusiasm is one dimension of political power. Despite the participation of the active ones, the majority in the citizen group did not reveal political viewpoints. The silent majority may be a consequence of the multi-purpose nature of Twitter. Twitter can be used for various purposes other than opinion expression. The silent majority may also reflect cynicism or a lack of interest in politics, regardless of the potential of digital media for political participation (Bennett, 2008).

The implications of the current study are twofold. First, it shows that networked gatekeeping is pluralist, including people of different levels of political involvement and backgrounds. However, citizens who are not politically active maybe limited or restricted in terms of political power. Few citizen participants have large number of followings on Twitter or have messages reweeted. As a result, the gated are at a disadvantage in competing for power or in the power relationship with gatekeepers.

The citizens interacted with the journalists mostly on political and media issues. Such phenomenon illustrates the salience of gatekeeping in which the gated are aimed to shape media narratives by providing feedbacks. However, some conversations are furious and used only to vent personal frustration and anger, as illustrated by one example:

*@chucktodd U R AN ASS REPUBLICAN.... FOX IS WAITING FOR YOU. BEEN HATING ON POTUS SINCE DAY ONE LIKE YOUR GOP ASS WIPES FRIENDS.*

It is still unclear whether such name-calling can exert any real influence on decision-making in the newsroom. Nevertheless, a fraction of citizens have tried to influence media agenda by explicitly promoting individual agenda. It has been done through sending call-to-action tweets to the journalists. The individual agenda range from getting media exposure for personal blogs or books, to specific request to investigate under-covered stories, and to participate in offline events. The call-to-action tweets are identified with keywords such as *please RT*, *please click*, *help us*, *support us*, *please share*, *please read*. See the following examples:

*@JohnKingCNN I'm a fan, raising funds for Movember charity, pls consider donating $5 / $10 / anything at http://t.co/Weva91DnzV*

*@AnnCurry could you help us get the word out on #ShutTaijiDown and the daily brutality happening in Japan? Thank you*

*@DanaBashCNN http://t.co/oP3hkf8tfk This is a link to my Blog on JFK's Death!*

Journalists tend to have a larger size of followers on Twitter, so citizens can utilize the bandwidth of journalists’ online influence to amplify individual voices to potentially wider audience. It implies a more collaborative relationship with gatekeepers. Yet, this explicit call-to-actions effort is not common thus it generates little impact. We observed that, among the 134 promotional tweets, only 16 have been retweeted by the journalists.

The conversations with the journalists have an interpersonal aspect. The interpersonal conversations include greeting the journalists by saying *hi*, *hello*, or *dear* and also the use of positive expressions such as congratulations, birthday wishes and thank-you notes. The participants who have engaged in such conservations tend to show rapport by encouraging and supporting the journalists. For citizens who do not have a social relationship with the journalist in real life, such interaction is a representation of para-social interaction (Lee & Jang, 2013). While articulating the original theory, Barzilai-Nahon (2008) stresses that building relationship with gatekeepers can provide a venue for citizens to negotiate and seek gatekeepers’ attention and create a *circulatory affect* through which gatekeepers can be affected or change stance.

Lastly, because the gated have alternatives to reach out to the journalists, the conversations with journalists demonstrate certain patterns of homophily. Scholars have argued that social media break down barriers of social backgrounds and increase the opportunities of encountering people with different viewpoints and crosscutting exposure of media content (Kim, 2011). On the other end, the Internet enables customized information and egocentric networking (Kim, 2009; Sunstein, 2009), which increases selective exposure in media consumption (Kim, 2011). In the context of networked gatekeeping, it appears that citizens are more likely to turn to news outlets that reinforce their political beliefs. However, citizens do not necessarily agree with journalists in the same ideological camp. For example, although liberal participants talked to MSNBC correspondents more frequently, they expressed more negative thoughts than positive feedback on the media coverage. Therefore, it is possible that citizens are glued to news outlets that speak to their political identity, but are not blindly following or supporting the opinions presented in the coverage.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study operates under two assumptions that require further testing. First, it is assumed that the gated are motivated to seek influence in order to shape media coverage. Majority of the conversations are related to express opinions, including explicit promotion of individual opinions and stories. However, occasional expression of opinions does not necessarily indicate a strategic and instrumental gatekeeping goal. Therefore, the study is limited for it has not captured users’ attitudes to support gatekeeping motivation. Second, it is assumed that online narratives can influence journalists to make decisions. It should be noted that how online discourse and relationship influence decisions in newsroom is a complex process with many forces at play. The current study does not attempt to make definite claim about the direct impact of Twitter conversations on newsroom. Rather, it can be argued that the conversations may open a new venue for citizens to weight in the information control of the newsroom.

In regards to the operationalization of the concepts used in the study, the political power of the gated is measured through the proxies of political involvement and online connectivity. There are two issues inherent in this approach. First, political power is a multi-facet concept (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). The measures in the study do not address the actual ability to make political decisions or changes in political beliefs. Second, profile disclosure is not an all-round measure for actual online political involvement; people who are actually involved in politics offline may choose not to disclose political profile on Twitter. Furthermore, with online connectivity, there is a debate on which indicators can best capture online influence. In this study, the number of followers is used. Yet, some other studies recommend using follower/following ratio or Klout score (Anger & Kittl, 2011). It should also be acknowledged that using FOX News and MSNBC to represent partisan media could be disputable. Media bias is still a topic of scholarly debates. A widely cited study by Groseclose and Milyo (2005) shows that major outlets demonstrate liberal leaning except *Fox News* and *Washington Times*. The New York Times (NYT) and CBS News are on the far end of the liberal spectrum. However, the findings were disputed by recent An, Cha, Gummadi, Crowcroft, and Quercia’s (2012) work. Despite the inconsistency, MSNBC and FOX News are consistently documented as liberal and conservative examples in both studies.

Lastly, this study is based on a sample of conversations and no inferential statistics are used for testing whether the findings are generalizable. The selection of journalists may also overlook local reporters and news anchors, including those less well-known in Twitter sphere. Last, but not least, the study identifies a considerable amount of tweets that falling in the conversational flow category. This suggests that there might be constant exchanges of ideas. Future studies can improve this area by tracking the actual information flow in networked gatekeeping.

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**Table 1.** A list of professional journalists and affiliated news organizations, and the amount of direct conversations received (journalists from partisan media outlets are highlighted)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Twitter screen names | Name | News outlets | # of direct conversations | # of unique users |
| **@chucktodd** | **Chuck Todd** | **MSNBC** | **697** | **560** |
| @markknoller | Mark Knoller | CBS News | 458 | 316 |
| **@LukeRussert** | **Luke Russert** | **MSNBC** | **313** | **264** |
| @BarbaraJWalters | Barbara Walters | ABC News | 229 | 204 |
| @JeffreyGoldberg | JeffreyGoldberg | Bloomberg | 204 | 169 |
| **@TheFix** | **Chris Cillizza** | **MSNBC** | **176** | **147** |
| **@JamesRosenFNC** | **James Rosen** | **Fox News** | **147** | **103** |
| @GeeDee215 | Gene Demby | NPR | 110 | 87 |
| **@AnnCurry** | **Ann Curry ‏** | **MSNBC** | **103** | **85** |
| @SharylAttkisson | Sharyl Attkisson | CBS News | 101 | 74 |
| @jmartNYT | Jonathan Martin | NYT | 101 | 85 |
| **@RichardEngel** | **Richard Engel** | **MSNBC** | **90** | **73** |
| @Soledad\_Obrien | Soledad O'Brien | CNN | 84 | 72 |
| **@tombrokaw** | **Tom Brokaw** | **MSNBC** | **82** | **70** |
| @MajorCBS | Major Garrett | CBS News | 77 | 64 |
| **@edhenryTV** | **Ed Henry** | **Fox News** | **76** | **64** |
| @jonkarl | Jonathan Karl | ABC News | 68 | 60 |
| @arishapiro | Ari Shapiro | NPR | 64 | 55 |
| @jdickerson | John Dickerson | CBS News | 51 | 45 |
| @crowleyCNN | Candy Crowley | CNN | 50 | 42 |
| @DanaBashCNN | Dana Bash | CNN | 44 | 38 |
| **@adamhousley** | **Adam Housley** | **Fox News** | **35** | **32** |
| @bobschieffer | Bob Schieffer | CBS News | 31 | 25 |
| @jeffzeleny | Jeff Zeleny | ABC News | 28 | 23 |
| @ktumulty | Karen Tumulty | Washington Post | 27 | 21 |
| @BCAppelbaum | Binyamin Appelbaum | NYT | 25 | 20 |
| @MarkLeibovich | Mark Leibovich | NYT | 22 | 19 |
| @kaylatausche | Kayla Tausche | CNBC | 21 | 16 |
| @JohnKingCNN | John King | CNN | 20 | 16 |
| @TerryMoran | Terry Moran | ABC News | 19 | 15 |
| @diana\_olick | Diana Olick | CNBC | 18 | 14 |
| **@RickLeventhal** | **RickLeventhal** | **Fox News** | **17** | **13** |
| @DonGonyea | Don Gonyea | NPR | 15 | 13 |
| @jimtankersley | Jim Tankersley | Washington Post | 15 | 13 |
| @Lebeaucarnews | Phil LeBeau | CNBC | 13 | 11 |
| **@JenGriffinFNC** | **Jennifer Griffin** | **Fox News** | **12** | **10** |
| @NickMiroff | Nick Miroff | Washington Post | 10 | 10 |
| @rajivwashpost | Rajiv Chandrasekaran | Washington Post | 10 | 10 |
| @berthacoombs | Bertha Coombs | CNBC | 9 | 9 |
| @comradewong | Edward Wong | NYT | 6 | 6 |
| @jodikantor | Jodi Kantor | NYT | 6 | 6 |
| @JohnDonvan | John Donvan | ABC News | 4 | 4 |
| @JessicaYellin | Jessica Yellin | CNN | 3 | 3 |
| @kellymcevers | Kelly McEvers | NPR | 3 | 3 |
| @JonErlichman | JonErlichman | Bloomberg | 2 | 2 |
| @scarletfu | Scarlet Fu | Bloomberg | 2 | 2 |
| @sangwonyoon | Sangwon Yoon | Bloomberg | 1 | 1 |
| @EytanBuchman | Eunice Yoon | CNBC | 0 | 0 |

**Table 2.** Inter-coder reliability for each coding category

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Social** | **media** | **sentiment** | **General opinion** | **Promotion** | **Conversation flow** |
| 0.91 | 0.86 | 0.9 | 0.965 | 0.94 | 0.9 |

**Figure 1.** Distribution of liberal/conservative participants in tweets targeting at MSNBC and Fox News

**Figure 2.** Distribution of conversation themes across groups of participants

1. Detailed description of data-cleaning procedure is omitted for parsimony, but is available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)