

أخبار الصراعات السياسية في موقع تويتر: تحديد الأجندة نموذجاً

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ملخص:

هدف الدراسة: تسعى الدراسة إلى قياس تحديد الأجندة الإعلامية بين مواقع الأخبار في تويتر خلال الصراعات السياسية للكشف عن مدى وجود أجندة إعلامية مشتركة بين المواقع الإخبارية ومدى انعكاس هذه الأجندة على أجندات القراء. باستخدام مواقع الأخبار الكويتية في تويتر، تقوم الدراسة بالمقارنة بين الأجندات الإعلامية من خلال موقع المجلس الإخباري عبر تويتر وموقع خبر عاجل على موقع تويتر. وتوسع الدراسة أيضاً إلى الكشف عن مدى تطابق أجندات كلا الموقعين مع أجندات القراء من خلال استخدام التعليقات كمؤشر لقياس اهتماماتهم. **المنهجية:** بلغ عدد المقالات الإخبارية التي تم تحليلها مقالات، وقد تم اعتماد منهجية تحليل المضمون لقياس وتحليل مضمون الأجندات الإعلامية. كما تم استخدام تحليل المضمون لقياس عدد التعليقات على الأخبار كمؤشر لأجندة القراء. **النتائج:** وجدت الدراسة أن مواقع تويتر الإخبارية متطابقة من حيث المواضيع الأساسية التي يتم تغطيتها؛ مما يشير إلى تأثير الأجندة الإعلامية على مواقع تويتر الإخبارية. كما كشفت الدراسة وجود تطابق كبير بين أجندات المواقع الإخبارية وأجندات القراء؛ مما يشير إلى أن هذه المواقع تقدم أخباراً تتناسب مع اهتمامات القراء بشكل كبير. **الخلاصة:** استطاعت المواقع الإخبارية على تويتر الوصول إلى أجندة القراء من خلال عرض الأخبار والمواضيع التي تتناسب وتتطابق مع اهتماماتهم. كما بينت الدراسة أنه على الرغم من اختلاف المواقع الإخبارية في تغطياتها الإعلامية وأساليبها الصحفية فإنها تبقى متشابهة إلى حد كبير بعضها مع بعض من حيث المواضيع والأجندة السياسية. وقد قدمت هذه الدراسة أسلوباً جديداً في قياس أجندات القراء من خلال استخدام أسلوب تحليل المضمون لتعليقاتهم على مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي.

المصطلحات الأساسية: مواقع التواصل الاجتماعي، الأجندة الإعلامية، تويتر، صحافة إلكترونية، صحافة، الكويت.

Political Conflict News on Twitter: An Agenda-Setting Perspective

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Abstract:

Objectives: The main purpose of this article is to determine whether there is a common intermedia agenda-setting among Kuwaiti Twitter news accounts during a series of political developments. Using Kuwait as a case study, this article compared the topics that were covered by two media platforms on Twitter, namely Almajles news (@almajles) and Khabar Ajel news (@breakingkw). In addition, the study investigated how these accounts reflected on the public agenda-setting by examining the users' comments as a measurement of the public agenda. **Method:** A total of 604 news stories were analyzed using a content analysis methodology. **Results:** The study found that Twitter news accounts were highly consistent regarding issue salience, thus suggesting a high intermedia agenda-setting effect (inter-account agenda setting in this case as reference to Twitter news providers). Moreover, the analysis showed that the agenda-setting effect is present to a high degree between Twitter news providers and the public agendas that were measured by the number of comments.

Keywords: Social Media, Intermedia Agenda-Setting, Agenda-Setting, Twitter, Online News, Journalism, Kuwait

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Introduction

Amidst the 2019 activism movements in Kuwait, local opposition leaders called for a public protest in Alirada Square on November 6, 2019 in reaction to the ongoing fraud allegations and as an expression of their discontent with the government's unwillingness to fight corruption (Kuwait Times, 2019). Although the country witnessed such political activism movements before, especially in 2011 when activists stormed the parliament building, the 2019 movement had been considered the first since 2016 in which the new parliament was elected. Shortly after the public protest stand in Alirada Square, the government resigned immediately after facing two no-confidence motions: one against the then Interior Minister Sheikh Khaled Al-Jarrah and the other one against the Minister of Public Works and State Minister for Housing Affairs Jinan Ramadan, who were both subjected to other parliament members' interpellations (Arab Times, 2019). However, political conflict continued despite the government's resignation. The Amir of Kuwait then removed both the defense and the interior ministers for their alleged mishandling of military funds in illegal trading accusations (Kuwait Times, 2019). Although the Amir appointed a new prime minister, the impacts of both of the government's resignation and the corruption allegations that were exchanged between the two senior ministers led to a heated debate on social media and in the mainstream media.

The first days following a crisis such as the political unrest in Kuwait are the most challenging for both daily newspaper and social media journalists. Citizens turn to the media, thus triggering an "information marathon" of ongoing breaking news (Valenzuela, Puente & Flores, 2017). However, traditional media in Kuwait, such as daily newspapers and television, are very cautious when it comes to covering political movements and news that involve the ruling family. A Reuters' report stated that, due to this caution, news about the feud and the Amir's removal of the two ministers spilled very publicly onto social media (Reuters, 2019). It is therefore worthwhile to examine social media news agendas during political crises. Some researchers compared the news agendas of traditional media such as television with Twitter by examining the journalists' Twitter accounts (Valenzuela et al., 2017). Other authors described trending topics on Twitter by analyzing hashtags and trending keywords and comparing these with newspapers (Bakan & Melek, 2016).

Nonetheless, a growing number of independent news providers in Kuwait use Twitter as their main news platform; therefore, an examination of their news agendas is significant.

There is hardly any research that has focused on news providers on Twitter and their news agendas and the journalistic norms and practices. Given that the purpose of this article is to fill that gap, this study will examine the following two agenda-setting effects of online media in Kuwait. Firstly, there will be a comparative examination of the agenda-setting effect in the context of the issues to which Twitter news accounts give prominence and the public's assessment of key issues using the number of comments as an indicator of public agendas. Secondly, we will look at intermedia agenda-setting among Kuwaiti online news media by examining the relationship between two Twitter news accounts. The main reason for this examination is that online news providers such as Twitter news accounts have gained a lot of popularity in Kuwait recently; they have gained a lot of attention and influence due to the greater freedom they enjoy in terms of news coverage. Kuwaitis turn to digital newspapers and Twitter to get the latest political news about issues that are banned in local print newspapers (Dashti, 2009).

Online news providers have more freedom to write, discuss, and cover controversial issues with less fear of the government's censorship and intervention. As such, digital media has changed the way news is covered in Kuwait, especially with taboo topics (Dashti, 2009).

In the past few years, local print newspapers have failed to objectively cover the political turmoil in Kuwait including the constitutional conflict of 2011 and the political movement called *irhal* (Leave) that led to the storming of the parliament. All this activity in the political sphere stoked Kuwaitis' appetite for news (Dashti, 2009) and fueled much public political debate in the online forum. Traditional newspapers in Kuwait could not compete with online news providers despite their realization of the online news boom and their prompt creation of digital versions of their newspapers as well as increasing their online presence on social media. Many traditional newspapers struggled with the shift as they faced resistance due to the practice of breaking news on Twitter which replaced their next day's print copy (Dashti, 2008). In contrast, online news providers do not abide by the government's restrictions nor do they follow traditional news values and norms, which make them

more independent. It is therefore significant to compare the agendas of Twitter news providers and examine their agenda-setting effect.

Based on data from a content analysis of professional Twitter news accounts, the study examined the intermedia agenda-setting effect regarding the way each account was used to cover the political unrest that broke out in Kuwait in November 2019. The study focused on the political conflict during the month of November because Twitter was highly valued for covering news about political conflicts and disasters (Valenzuela et al., 2017). Finally, this article has sought to contribute to agenda-setting analysis by employing user comments as an indicator of the public agenda.

Literature Review

Journalism in Kuwait

With its thriving democratic society and its democratic government, Kuwait is viewed as the most democratic country in the Gulf region. Despite its late establishment in 1928, Kuwaiti press emerged in different circumstances than its Arab world counterparts, especially when compared to the emergence of the first Arab newspaper in Egypt in 1828. The most striking difference between the two is that Arab newspapers were established as vehicles for government-driven religious and intellectual enlightenment reform, while Kuwaiti press began independently (Dashti, 2008); since the beginning in 1920s, and through their expansion in 1960s, Kuwaiti newspapers have been individually owned, thus allowing for a wider range of freedom of expression and opinion (Press reference, 2002). “Individually owned” means that newspapers are owned by the public usually through the sole proprietorship of influential individuals in the Kuwaiti society, family partnerships, or joint stock organizations (Abu Shanab, 1987). Although making a profit was the main objective for establishing a newspaper in Kuwait, newspaper ownership has been proven to offer other benefits such as considerable sociopolitical influence (Abu Shanab, 1987). Kuwaiti press was classified as a “diverse press” according to William Rugh’s Arab media classifications study, which was published in 1970s (Pintak & Ginges 2011); the term refers to a press system that is relatively free and reflects a diversity of views but is still subject to subtle pressures (Pintak & Ginges 2011). Newspapers in Kuwait face pressure that

emanates from their owners' economic interests and personal relationships with government officials. Many newspaper editors-in-chief take these personal relationships into consideration, especially when reporting news that involves criticism of the government. Therefore, it is safe to say that although journalism in Kuwait is independently owned, it is significantly augmented by social pressure.

In recent years, Kuwait has experienced many changes and political reforms including a review of the 1961 press and publication law, which resulted in its prioritization. A new press and publication law emerged in 2006, triggering several reforms including one in which the government agreed to allow the publication of new daily newspapers after a three-decade ban (Anhri, 2006). Although the 2006 press and publication law allows new newspapers to publish, it requires publishers to obtain an operating license from the Ministry of Information. The 2006 law enabled the establishment of the first Kuwaiti digital newspaper, *Alaan Newspaper* (Dashti, 2008). Moreover, the development of the Internet and the emergence of social media motivated many news providers and journalists to publish their news stories on their social media platforms. Independent news providers started using Twitter as a news platform for publishing news stories without contending with government licenses and regulations. Online news providers and digital newspapers do not necessarily follow journalism norms since they can publish stories without taking consideration of any political or economic obligations. In the Arab region, digital journalism is viewed as a credible, powerful source of information because it can resist strict government press control (Dashti, 2008). This credibility and ability to bypass government regulations has not only attracted regional readers but has also influenced journalism norms, methodologies, and journalistic practices (Dashti, 2008).

Nevertheless, in July 2016, the government of Kuwait issued an Electronic Media Law to regulate, issue licenses to, and ultimately control online news providers. The new law requires journalistic websites and Twitter news accounts to register for the Ministry of Information to obtain a license to practice this work. Although the new law has many benefits, including conferring credentials on journalists and correspondents working for digital news sites that allow them to attend official events and enter government buildings, it is seen as an attempt to control

these sites and shut down the ones that the government deems unfavorable (Bakanov, 2016). Since the law's issuance, the Ministry of Information has licensed 242 news websites out of the 534 that applied for the license (Alqabas, 2018). However, because it is difficult for the government to regulate all online media content, there are still many digital news providers that operate through websites and social media without obtaining licenses. In addition, many digital news sites and news providers on Twitter have international addresses and operate under anonymous names to conceal their owners' true identities.

A survey conducted by Pew Research Center (Pew Research, 2010) found that 68% of Americans get their news from social media accounts. People depend on social media news providers due to convenience and ease of use; scholars (Bergstr&Belfrage, 2018) argued that people frequently consumed news from social media. This growth in social media news consumption helps people quickly understand social and political situations around the world (Bergstr& Belfrage, 2018).

Although empirical data on social media news consumption in Kuwait is lacking, its influence could not have been foreseen. The aforementioned Pew survey (Pew Research, 2010) also found that more than 64.5% of people receive their breaking news from social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting theory focuses on the amount of coverage an issue gets, suggesting that the media decides what issues to bring to public awareness (Wu & Coleman, 2009). Scholars have considered agenda-setting research in three main areas, namely media, public, and policy agenda. Since McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal agenda-setting study, many scholars have examined the relationship between media agendas and public agendas. The present study has extended that investigation of the relationship between media agendas and public agendas by researching the relationship among online media agendas and looking at their relationship to public agendas.

Graber (2005) suggested that agenda-setting theory is one of the most influential theories about the media's political influence. One of the theory's most important propositions is that the public uses news media to determine which issues are important (McCombs, 2004). McCombs

and Shaw's (1972) seminal study found strong evidence of the media's agenda-setting power, providing a theoretical basis for a diverse myriad of communication studies (Ku, Lee & Pfau, 2003). Although early agenda-setting studies focused on who set the public's agenda, recent studies have paid more attention to who sets the media's agenda. The focal development of agenda-setting research from who sets the public agenda to who sets the media and policy agendas has resulted in three main study areas, namely media agenda-setting, public agenda-setting, and policy agenda-setting (Rogers, Dearing & Bregman, 1993). Lim (2006) argued that media agenda-setting included studies of intermedia agenda-setting and its examination of the relationship among different media. Intermedia agenda-setting is widely used to explain how content is transferred between news media (Harder, Sevenas & Aelst, 2017).

Intermedia Agenda-Setting

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) original research comparing campaign agreement on issue salience among several media was one of the first agenda-setting studies to compare agendas across media (Reese & Danielian, 1991). The study's results showed a high degree of agreement on issue salience among different media, and the reasons offered included similar world events, standardized organizational structures, and similar journalist socialization experiences (Reese & Danielian, 1991). Although McCombs and Shaw's study focused on the relationship between the public and specific media and not between media themselves, the findings imply that each medium is uniquely involved in the "agenda-building" process (Ku et al., 2003). Ku et al. (2003) argued that most agenda-setting studies that came after McCombs and Shaw's (1972) studies used several media outlets to identify issue agendas. Moreover, Lim (2006) argued that the influence news media exerted on each other in agenda-setting studies indicated that there was an intermedia agenda-setting process.

Valenzuela et al. (2017) suggested that the emergence of the Internet and social media increased the practical and theoretical implications of agenda-setting research (Lim, 2006). The development of social media has spurred journalists, reporters, and editors to express their opinions and share content more frequently and transparently than they did via traditional media, which may produce different agendas (Valenzuela et

al., 2017). This opened a new field for intermedia agenda-setting research, and studies in the field have proliferated. As Sayre et al. (2010) pointed out, online media's agenda-setting process has recently been considered in academia. There are two schools of thought when it comes to social media agenda-setting; while some researchers argue that social media strongly affects other news media (Harder et al., 2017), other scholars see that traditional media sets the news agendas for social and online media. Nevertheless, some other scholars argue that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between traditional and online media agendas with no clear direction or dominance.

Despite findings from prior research, there is a lack of studies that compare the agendas of online news providers such as Twitter news accounts, especially in Kuwait. The current study has taken a step in that direction as it is less concerned with who sets the agenda and how and is more concerned with how the news agenda differs among Twitter news accounts. The decision to compare the news agendas of two Twitter news accounts was taken because they practice journalism norms although Twitter news providers operate differently in Kuwait due to their different agendas. Previous research examining different media such as newspapers and television produced mixed results regarding agenda-setting effects (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, Weaver, 1977). Therefore, this study deemed it necessary to examine the similarities and differences among Twitter news agendas.

Given the above, this study sought to investigate the intermedia agenda-setting relationship between Almajles and Khabar Ajel Twitter news accounts in Kuwait, and the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: The prominent issue agenda of Almajles and Khabar Ajel news accounts will be consistent, and the two Twitter news providers will have similar issue salience rankings.

Twitter News Readers' Comments as an Agenda-Setting Variable

The founding fathers of agenda-setting theory emphasized that the amount of importance the media attached to certain issues indicated to the readers how much importance they should place on those issues based on the issue's position and the volume of related information that was provided in relation to it (McCombs & Shaw, 1993). Moreover, scholars have found that the media's attention distribution shapes issues

by prioritizing some issues over others (Tan & Weaver, 2007). Issue salience in the media suggests to viewers which issues they should think about, and thus the public agenda is formed (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Wu and Coleman (2009) suggested that the numerous studies that had been conducted on first-level agenda-setting confirmed the effects of the media's agenda over the public agenda, leading us to assume that the media decides what issues will enter the public's awareness. This begs the question of whether we can assume the same media agenda effects in other media systems like Kuwait's. Can we assume that online news providers set their readers' agendas?

Unlike traditional agenda-setting research in which the public agenda is usually measured by Gallup public opinion surveys (Tan & Weaver, 2007), this study used a new indicator of the public agenda, namely the number of comments on Twitter. With the use of new technologies and the Internet, online news providers such as Twitter news accounts and online newspapers strive to maintain a high degree of interactivity with their audiences by creating social media accounts and posting their news stories as well as making use of the polling and commentary features (Abdulmajeed, 2008). User commentary on Twitter (i.e., replies) has been viewed as an objective information source that constitutes an inclusive range of viewpoints. Moreover, the diverse viewpoints, facts, and information that are presented in Twitter commentary facilitate the formation of public opinion (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). Twitter reader comments have the potential to promote public deliberation because some readers may provide insights on certain aspects of issues that journalists have not yet considered. Comments may also contain solutions based on users' personal experiences, and these experiences along with user testimonials may lead to multiple perspectives on the issues that the media has presented (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009).

News-based reader interaction has transformed news audiences from passive receivers of the news to active contributors to political issues (Campbell, 2000). According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey (Pew Research, 2019), more Americans are relying on social media as their news source than print newspapers. In Kuwait, Alobaidi (2003) argued that Kuwaitis are prone to social communication and that social media had provided more space for interaction and communication.

Alfuzai (2019) asserted that Twitter is a powerful tool in Kuwait because it reflects the people's thoughts.

Therefore, reader comments on Twitter are important useful measures of the public's interest in various topics since people are likely to engage by leaving a comment on stories that they find interesting. People tend to participate in Twitter's discussions by leaving insightful comments on news stories, thus adding valuable information that may indicate interest and issue importance. Hamilton (2016) asserted that the readers' comments on news articles triggered important public debates and reflected the direction of public opinion. Through constructive debates via news comments, readers can utilize their knowledge and expertise to help news providers expand journalistic stories by taking the readers' ideas and opinions into account (Hamilton, 2016). In addition, the readers' comments have become an integral part of digital journalism in which a two-way relationship has been established with the readers.

Since Twitter comments can indicate public interest in news and represent public issue salience, this study used the number of comments on the two aforementioned Twitter news accounts to highlight the readers' public agenda. This is consistent with the argument of scholars like Shaw, Stevenson, and Hamm (2001) that agenda-setting theory must incorporate contemporary social behavior. Moreover, Williams, Rice, and Rogers (1988) asserted that new media research should develop conventional research methods and theoretical frameworks and explore alternative methods to those that have been assumed as standard.

Although researchers have argued that the agenda-setting process may be facing pressures from digital media, Coleman and McCombs (2007) found that differential media use among generations had no effect on the media's agenda-setting power. Furthermore, scholars argued that digital media was following the cues of traditional media, meaning that agenda-setting power merely gained a new channel (Sayre et al., 2010).

Based on these findings in combination with the previous discussion of the online landscape in Kuwait, it is expected that Twitter news accounts will be shown to set their readers' public agendas. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: The prominent issues that are portrayed in the Almajles Twitter news account are positively correlated with the issues that readers

consider most important as represented by the number of reader comments.

H3: The prominent issues that are portrayed in the Khabar Ajel Twitter news account are positively correlated with the issues that readers consider most important as represented by the number of reader comments.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine the intermedia agenda-setting effect among social media news providers. In addition, the study sought to investigate the social media's agenda-setting effect as represented by Twitter news providers. Given that focus, the study aimed to answer the following question:

RQ1: Which issues do Twitter news accounts emphasize?

Materials and Methods

Overview

The time period analyzed in this study was from November 5 to November 21, 2019, which marks the date of the first announcement of the call for protest in Kuwait immediately after the new prime minister had sworn in before the Amir of Kuwait. This time period was chosen because it covered the aforementioned political conflict that included the government's resignation and the alleged public corruption against the ministers. In this context, a content analysis was conducted to determine the intermedia agenda-setting effect of Twitter news accounts. Agendas of the two Twitter accounts were ranked and compared in terms of the number of comments each news story generated with these numbers being used as a measurement of public issue salience. The main purpose of this study was to investigate Twitter news accounts within the theoretical framework of intermedia agenda-setting. The study aimed to examine the agenda-setting effect of Twitter news accounts.

Sampling

During the analysis period, data were collected from Twitter news. The two aforementioned Twitter news accounts were selected because they had the most followers, thus making them the most popular news accounts in the Kuwaiti Twitter sphere. Only original tweets that

appeared in the original news accounts were selected and coded. This excluded two types of tweets from the analysis: (1) retweets, which were excluded to avoid content duplication, and (2) likes, which were excluded to avoid non-journalistic tweets. The researcher analyzed and manually coded the included tweets.

Independent Variable: Issue Salience

Primary data was collected through the content analysis of two Twitter news accounts with an interest in the issue salience of Almajles news @almajles and Khabar Ajel news @breakingkw for the study's time period. These two Twitter accounts were chosen for their prominence since they had the most followers among all such accounts in Kuwait. With regard to their news agendas, the content analysis focused on fifteen issues that were adapted from Bakan and Melek's (2016) study and modified to suit the Kuwaiti context. Those fifteen issues are politics and parliament, economy, culture and arts, social issues, crime and violence, environment, technology, healthcare, education, military and defense, foreign affairs, corruption, sports, the Bidoun (the stateless), and other.

Original tweets that appeared on the Twitter accounts of Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news were probed to determine issue agendas. In addition, each news tweet served as a unit of analysis. In order to determine issue salience, each unit was coded for the presence (1) or absence (0) of the fifteen issues listed above.

Dependent Variable: Online Newspapers' Reader Comments

This study used the frequency of readers' comments on Twitter news accounts as an indicator of the public agenda. Weeks and Southwell (2010) argued that public opinion polls had been the most prevalent method for measuring public salience. However, in situations where the traditional measures of public opinion were either unavailable or unsuitable for examining specific topics' public salience, scholars used alternative methods to measure agenda-setting effects (Weeks & Southwell, 2010)

Following those scholars' lead, this study used Twitter comments as an alternative measure of public salience. There were several reasons for this: Firstly, the comments constituted a measure of the individual's interest in certain topics; if someone is not interested in a given topic, that

person is unlikely to read a related news story and leave a comment. Secondly, the use of comments precluded survey-based data given that researchers had argued that traditional measures of public salience could prime responses and were therefore prone to measurement problems (Weeks & Southwell, 2010). Lastly, using Twitter comments as a measurement of public salience can be an alternative way of measuring public opinion or the public's interest in certain news topics in countries where regular public opinion polls do not exist.

Twitter comments were coded by counting the number of comments each tweet generated. The comments on each tweet were then counted for both Twitter accounts during the research period.

Inter-Coder Reliability

A randomly selected subsample of news stories (20% of the total across the sample) was analyzed by a second trained coder to assess issue coding reliability across the two newspapers and the two Twitter news accounts. Intercoder reliability for issue salience was .91 using Holsti's (1969) formula.

Results

A total of 604 news stories were collected and analyzed to determine news media agendas. In addition, records were made to reflect the number of comments that were generated by each Twitter news story in order to provide an overview of the public agenda. Among the 604 news stories that were analyzed, Almajles news had 271 while Khabar Ajel news had 333.

The sample period for the study ran from November 5 to November 20, 2019. This two-week period was particularly chosen because it witnessed the political unrest that broke between the parliament and the government. During that time, the parliament called for no confidence votes against two government ministers, precipitating the government's resignation, and the Amir removed two senior ministers due to corruption allegations against them. Given this series of events, the selected two weeks were politically intense and therefore well suited for an agenda-setting examination.

Media Agendas

For both Twitter news sources (Almajles news and Khabar Ajel

news), issue frequencies and ranks were analyzed in order to answer Research Question 1 regarding Twitter’s media agendas. Table 1 shows the major issues that were addressed by Kuwaiti online news media. The top three were “*politics and parliament*”, “*crime and violence*”, and “*social news*”, all of which received the most media attention. In fact, these three issues accounted for more than 50% of Twitter’s total issue salience in the Kuwaiti context. In contrast, the least salient issues among Kuwaiti Twitter news providers were *military*, *technology*, and *environment news*.

Table 1.

Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) Among Twitter News Accounts (Almajles News and Khabar Ajel)

	Khabar Ajel	Almajles	Total	Rank
Politics and Parliament	114	91	205	1
Economy	6	15	21	8
Culture and Arts	10	19	29	7
Social News	28	38	66	3
Crime and Violence	68	39	107	2
Environment	9	2	11	12
Technology	2	2	4	13
Health	8	9	17	10
Education	6	9	15	11
Military	2	1	3	14
Foreign Affairs	24	11	35	5
Corruption	14	5	19	9
Sports	33	8	41	4
Bidoun	8	22	30	6
Other	1	0	1	15

Turning to specific agendas, Table 2 shows that “*politics and parliament*” received the most attention on both Twitter news accounts followed by “*crime and violence*” While “*sports*” was the third top issue on Khabar Ajel news, and “*social news*” was the third top issue on Almajles news. It is also interesting to note that news about the “Bidoun”

(the stateless) ranked fourth on Almajles news’ agenda and ninth on Khabar Ajel news’ agenda, which suggests that news providers have different priorities.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Twitter news accounts’ prominent issue agendas would be consistent and that news providers would have similar issue salience rankings. This hypothesis was strongly supported. A Spearsman’s Rho examination was conducted to determine the intermedia agenda-setting effect between Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news. The results have shown that there is a strong correlation between both Twitter news accounts (Spearsman’s Rho = .85), which suggests a high intermedia agenda-setting effect.

The Agenda-Setting Effect on the Public Agenda

This study also examined Twitter news accounts’ agenda-setting effect on the public agenda as indicated by the number of reader comments on news stories. Table 2 displays Twitter news issue frequencies (and ranks) and readers’ issue salience (and ranks).

Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive correlation between the prominent issues portrayed in Twitter news accounts and the issues that readers consider most important as represented by the number of reader comments. This hypothesis is supported by the data shown in Table 2. Based on the Spearsman’s Rho value, Twitter issue agendas (Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news combined) had a high correlation with readers’ comments (.85), suggesting that Twitter news providers exert a strong public agenda-setting effect.

Table 2.

Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) Among Twitter News Accounts

	Khabara-jil	Almajlis	Total	Rank	User com-ments Almajlis	User com-ments Khabarajil	Total number of com-ments	Rank
Politics and Par-liament	114	91	205	1	1172	3786	4958	2
Economy	6	15	21	8	74	909	983	6

Cont. Table 2.

Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) Among Twitter News Accounts

	Khabara-jil	Almajlis	Total	Rank	User com-ments Almajlis	User com-ments Khabarajil	Total num-ber of com-ments	Rank
Culture and Arts	10	19	29	7	155	739	894	7
Social News	28	38	66	3	629	3948	4577	3
Crime and Violence	68	39	107	2	1722	3437	5159	1
Environment	9	2	11	12	93	41	134	11
Technology	2	2	4	13	21	68	89	12
Health	8	9	17	10	21	41	62	13
Education	6	9	15	11	88	1308	1396	5
Military	2	1	3	14	10	17	27	14
Foreign Af-fairs	24	11	35	5	229	303	532	9
Corruption	14	5	19	9	168	137	305	10
Sports	33	8	41	4	373	509	882	8
Bidoun	8	22	30	6	192	1687	1879	4
Other	1	0	1	15	23	0	23	15

Moreover, given their respective Spearsman’s Rho values (.95 and .92), the data shows that each Twitter news accounts had a high correlation with reader comments. (See Table 3 below).

Discussion

The results of this study’s analysis may shed some light on Kuwaiti online media’s public agenda-setting effect and the intermedia agenda-setting relationship among digital media. The picture is as expected: Twitter news providers exert a strong intermedia agenda-setting effect. This study has proven that Twitter news providers do follow journalism norms and practices when it comes to news coverage.

Table 3.

Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) and Reader Comment Frequencies (and Ranks)

Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) of Khabarjil and Reader Comment Frequencies (Ranks)					Issue Frequencies (and Ranks) of Al-majlis and Reader Comment Frequencies (Ranks)			
	Issues	Rank	Reader comment means	Comment ranks	Issues	Rank	Reader comment-means	Rank
Politics and Parliament	114	1	1172	2	91	1	3786	2
Economy	6	11	74	10	15	6	909	6
Culture and Arts	10	7	155	7	19	5	739	7
Social News	28	4	629	3	38	3	3948	1
Crime and Violence	68	2	1722	1	39	2	3437	3
Environment	9	8	93	8	2	13	41	11
Technology	2	13	21	12	2	14	68	10
Health	8	10	21	12	9	8	41	11
Education	6	12	88	9	9	8	1308	5
Military	2	14	10	13	1	11	17	12
Foreign Affairs	24	5	229	5	11	7	303	9
Corruption	14	6	168	7	5	10	137	10
Sports	33	3	373	4	8	9	509	8
Bidoun	8	9	192	6	22	4	1687	4
Other	1	15	23	11	0	12	0	13

There are several reasons for the issue agenda consistency among Twitter news accounts that was briefly mentioned in the literature. Firstly, Weeks and Southwell (2010) asserted that despite arguments

regarding the changing media environment and the agenda-setting effect's dwindling power, online news media continue to have similar agendas. Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news are the first of their kind in Kuwait, which places them in good repute as online news providers. They publish news and practice journalism using Twitter as their main platform, and they are expected to meet certain expectations such as covering political and parliamentary news.

Secondly, Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news are published in Kuwait and their publication licenses were issued by the Ministry of Information in the State of Kuwait. Obtaining such a license requires that publications and news accounts abide by the rules set out in Kuwait's 2016 Electronic Media Law. Although the law may not require Twitter news accounts to publish stories that address certain issues or topics, it forces them to follow the same national norms as traditional newspapers.

Thirdly, Almajles news and Khabar Ajel news accounts are obligated to follow journalistic norms and news values because the Kuwaiti culture respects the Amir, parliament members, and other Arab leaders and would expect to see any news about them covering the headlines. Almerri (2005) argued that Kuwaiti journalists' values take local news into consideration. He also argued that journalists in Kuwait take into consideration the readers' expected reactions to new stories, thus they avoid any news that could shake public opinion (Almerri, 2005).

Lastly, Twitter news accounts practice formal journalism, use news stories from wire services, and have news correspondents. Therefore, Charles (1982) suggested that wire service editors may set news agendas for newspaper editors by suggesting news categorizations and news mixes. He also suggested that the high correspondence in news choices between wire service editors and news editors can be explained by pointing to the fact that they share the same news values, which influence their judgments. Gans (1979) asserted that journalists who worked in the same geographical area demonstrated a common set of news values and information sources across media outlets. In summary, Kuwaiti news culture, norms, and media law, and the country's political sphere may have led to similar news coverage.

The data have provided evidence of the public agenda-setting effects of online news media. High positive correlations were found between Almajles news' and Khabar Ajel news' issue agendas and the issues that were the most important to readers. This finding is highly interesting because it suggests that social media news providers exert a high public agenda-setting effect. This finding is especially important for traditional news providers and those who argue that online news providers do not constitute “*real journalism*” and fail to meet the public agenda.

With regard to Twitter news accounts' highest issue salience, the study revealed that “*politics and parliament*” topped both accounts' agendas. This finding was expected during the research period because of the political crisis that faced the country, specifically the government-parliament conflict. During that time, social media users turned to Twitter to get the latest information, and journalists were expected to provide the latest news and updates about the conflict. Prior research (Valenzuela et al., 2017) found that, in the midst of disasters and emergencies, social media are valued as news sources.

Social media news readers expect light, sensational news such as crime, entertainment, and sports. Al Salem (2019) showed that the main motivations driving social media use in Kuwait were entertainment and pastime. Consequently, social media users are interested in dramatic, sensational news with a high entertainment value. As the data showed, this is consistent with “*crime and violence*”, “*social news*”, and “*sports*” being ranked among the top issues.

Given all of the above, the study's data is useful for addressing the principle questions of interest as to whether, in the context of the agenda-setting theory, a closed media system like the one in Kuwait would exhibit a public agenda-setting effect. Weaver et al. (2004) argued that public agenda-setting studies revealed mixed scores that nevertheless tended to support a positive correlation between media agendas and public agendas. However, other scholars argued that most agenda-setting studies had been conducted in the United States with only a few exceptions, such as Germany (Weaver et al., 2004), Sudan (Idid & Elawad, 2015), and Chile (Valenzuela et al., 2017), whereas this study managed to prove that there was a public agenda-setting effect among the Kuwaiti online news media.

By counting reader comments on news stories, this study introduced an original way of measuring the public agenda. Although the results were based on a rather simple case study, they showed that reader comments were a potential tool for studying public agendas online. In their study of measuring the public agenda using search engine queries, Scharkow and Vogelgesang (2015) used search engine queries to measure the public agenda, and they argued that the availability of data from Google Insights For Search (GIFS) in addition to the fact that it is both cost-free and easy to understand inspired their confidence in it as a promising tool for studying agenda-setting processes.

Similarly, reader comments have many advantages and can be used to measure public agendas, especially in countries where public opinion polls are scarce. Firstly, reader comment data collection is cost-free and available online to all users. Secondly, counting reader comments to measure the public agenda is quick and easy. Thirdly, reader comments can not only be analyzed as a measure of first-level public agenda-setting studies, but can also be examined to determine whether certain attributes exist. In addition, they can be used for second-level agenda-setting studies.

However, there are some challenges and open-ended questions that need to be addressed. Firstly, we do not know the exact number of responses nor do we know the exact number of comment writers since it is possible for one writer to post multiple comments. In addition, with regard to comment sources, we do not know whether the selected comments were written by the members of the general public or came from other sources. This remains unclear since many comments are posted by anonymous writers. Secondly, since the comment writers are most certainly from different populations, it is yet unclear whether the observed correlation can be easily generalized; hence, it is unclear whether we can generalize Twitter users to the general public and claim that Kuwaiti online news providers have a public agenda-setting effect.

Nonetheless, since reader comments are available, cost-free, and easy to use for many countries, it would be wise to make beneficial use of them with some further theoretical elaboration and empirical examination.

Overall, this study made several noteworthy theoretical contribu-

tions. Firstly, it built on the previous intermedia agenda-setting scholarship that focused on online media while trying to shed light on a new region that was under-represented in research. Secondly, this study successfully built on the small body of previous agenda-setting research that used new tools for public agenda measurement (Valenzuela et al., 2017, Weeks & Southwell, 2010, Idid & Elawad, 2015).

Conclusion

In summary, the study focused on Twitter news accounts and their intermedia agenda setting effect (inter-account agenda setting) and introduced a new methodology to measure the agenda setting effect of news providers on Twitter by counting the number of comments. The study results revealed that Twitter news accounts were highly consistent with regard to issue salience, thus suggesting a high intermedia agenda-setting effect. Moreover, the analysis showed that the agenda-setting effect was highly present among Twitter news providers and the public agendas which means that Twitter news accounts set the agendas of the public and had a great political and social influence. This study made several noteworthy theoretical contributions: First, it built on the previous intermedia agenda-setting scholarship that focused on online media while trying to shed light on a new region that is under-represented in research; Second, it successfully built on the small body of previous agenda-setting research that used new tools for public agenda measurement.

Limitations and Future Studies

In terms of limitations, this study explored Kuwaiti intermedia agenda-setting relationships among social media, but the direction of influence could not be determined by the present investigation. Therefore, future research in this area should consider using causal relationships. Furthermore, the current study's findings are based on one type of social media (Twitter); other digital news media should be considered before definitive conclusions may be drawn. Moreover, while the present study used two Twitter news providers to analyze the intermedia agenda-setting effect, future research should consider a bigger sample with more than two sources.

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