Bounded or Boundless: A Case Study of Foreign Correspondents’ Use of Twitter During the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

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Abstract
This study advances the understanding of journalists’ social media practices by examining the Twitter feeds of foreign correspondents working for Western legacy media during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill protests in Hong Kong. We found that these correspondents were more likely to use Twitter to report facts than to express their opinions and that they tended to interact with each other on Twitter far more frequently than with those outside their professional circle. Furthermore, the expression of personal opinions by the correspondents on Twitter appeared to encourage audience engagement. Finally, these personal opinions tended to be sympathetic to the protesters and critical of the handling of the protests by the authorities, especially the police. We argue that news media outlets have a moral obligation to free their journalists from constraints on the exercise of free speech on social media because doing so protects the freedom of the press on both the institutional and individual levels.

Keywords
Twitter, foreign correspondent, journalism norm, news engagement, protest

There have been considerable debates regarding whether journalists should voice political opinions or withhold them for the sake of professional ethics and objectivity. Some media scholars advocate a “journalist-first-citizen-second” approach and insist that journalists should adhere to strict professional standards in order to protect the credibility of the news outlets that employ them (Calvert, 1998). Clearly, journalists need to be accountable to both their audiences and their organizations in terms of guarding against any political, social, economic, or cultural bias in their reporting (Ryan, 2001). As scholars have observed, complete objectivity is impossible (Nanda, 1998; Voakes, 1997). Especially with the rise of social media, journalists have increasingly challenged norms of objectivity and instead provided interpretation of news events and interacted with their audiences (Lawrence et al., 2014; Molyneux, 2015, 2019).

The question of whether journalists should voice their opinions or adhere to factual reporting is particularly crucial in the times of protests. News media, as the important window for public to learn about protests, have been criticized for its uneven coverage and for reinforcing the “protest paradigm that habitually privileging the perspectives of established power relations” (Di Cicco, 2010; Gitlin, 1980; McCarthy et al., 1996; Smith et al., 2001). Yet, the shifting media landscape and macroenvironment have led to greater diversity in media representations of protests, which challenges the protest paradigm (Lee, 2014; Papaioannou, 2015). What deserves close attention is that social media provides an indispensable venue for journalists, bystanders, and protesters to not only disseminate information and also interact with one another (Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Ismail et al., 2019; Mourão & Chen, 2020). Although most studies in this vein focus on how journalists tweeted domestic protests (Mourão & Chen, 2020) or protests happened aboard (Harlow & Johnson, 2011), it is little known how foreign correspondents who are physically in the place where the protest burst out use Twitter and its implications on engagement.

This article examines Twitter practices among 20 foreign correspondents during the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement (hereafter Anti-ELAB) in Hong Kong. Starting in June 2019, Hong Kong citizens participated in demonstrations against the government’s introduction of the Fugitive Offenders amendment bill, which would

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have allowed extradition to a jurisdiction with Mainland China. More than 2 million people have come forward to say “NO” to the bill. The protests were started to escalate into violence amid the police’s crowd control tactics and caught the world’s attention. Foreign correspondents play an important role in the progression of the Anti-ELAB protest. On one hand, they inform both global and local community of the protest. Western media outlets such as CNN and BBC assigned their journalists to Hong Kong for reporting the protests. Meanwhile, the tweets of foreign correspondents were often picked up as witness accounts by local media (AppleDaily, 2019). On the other hand, the coverage by foreign correspondents on the government’s response to the protest has a bearing on the international image and even the government’s legitimacy, which in turn enables the protesters to garner support from the global community.

Theoretically, our study fills critical gaps in the existing literature. First, the study contributes to our understanding about the extent to which foreign correspondents could enjoy their autonomy on social media. Some believe that foreign correspondents, usually situated in cross-cultural contexts, may be free from organizational control (Archetti, 2012; Hamilton & Jenner, 2004). Others contend that foreign correspondents, acting as proxies for their organizations and positioning themselves as elites (Zeng & Song, 2018), may not fulfill individual autonomy on social media. Furthermore, the study advances the literature on news engagement by looking at how foreign correspondents, an important but relatively less-studied group, engaged the global public on social media during a local protest.

**Journalists on Twitter: Bounded Versus Boundless Practice**

Blogs and especially Twitter have provided new platforms for journalists to take responsibility for their role in society because they make it possible to bypass editors and disseminate reporting and commentary directly to the public. Since Twitter enables shared conversations and facilitates the dissemination of information, journalists interact more with their audiences on that platform than they do on blogs, which tend to function more as traditional one-way news distribution systems (Skewes, 2007). Thus, Revers (2014) has drawn attention to the tension between the institutional logic of professional control on one hand and the ideal of transparency in journalism on the other hand in relation to the use of Twitter.

Scholarly accounts of the implications of social media for journalistic practices can be divided into two camps. One group of scholars has pointed out that the opportunities for information distribution and exchange afforded by social media have created many opportunities for journalists to reinvent the norms and routines of their profession. During the 2012 Republican and Democratic conventions, many political journalists provided personal opinions on campaign issues through Twitter that went beyond their traditional roles as gatekeepers of a one-way flow of information (Lawrence et al., 2014). There is also evidence that journalists are increasingly willing to immerse themselves in the culture of social media. According to Holton and Lewis (2011), journalists are ready “to step outside their traditional, serious persona and adopt some of the interpersonal humor and flavor of social media” (p. 12). For instance, journalists personalize their reporting on social media to attract resources and attention to their individual brands (Molyneux, 2019).

The second group of scholarship, informed by the theory of journalistic normalization and professionalism, argues that journalists tend to approach social media platforms such as Twitter in a manner consistent with existing professional norms and practices (Lasorsa et al., 2012; McGregor & Molyneux, 2020). Political journalists, for example, have used Twitter to promote their organizations and articles as well as to interact with fellow journalists within their own circles (Molyneux & Mourão, 2019; Mourão, 2015). Such a tendency to reinforce the status quo through social media can be explained at least in part with reference to media organizations’ wariness of these new tools and therefore making efforts to regulate staff’s use. The updated codes of ethics for news organizations such as Associated Press and National Public Radio prohibit employees from expressing opinions about controversial issues or engaging in activities that hurt their professional impartiality on social media.

In sum, the current debates on whether journalists could enjoy their autonomies on social media fall along the two lines. From the organizational approach, journalists should be viewed as extensions of their organizations’ power (Reese, 1991). Considering the power relations within media outlets, it is thus difficult for journalists to exert their individual will because of organizational constraints (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The rise of social media has allowed journalists to escape from the organizational constraints, as seen in their interactions with key actors and news audiences (Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2019; Poell & Borra, 2012). Especially for those frontline journalists who report the protests in a foreign country, they spend most of their time outside the newsroom, which may give them extra leverage to the bureaucratic means. Therefore, it adds an additional layer to evince the question of whether journalists should voice their opinions or adhere to factual reporting in the times of protests. In the next section, we will overview the scholarship on foreign correspondents’ use of social media during protests.

**Foreign Correspondents’ Coverage of Protests on Twitter**

Journalistic coverage is indispensable for the public to learn about protests. In the first place, media coverage opens up discursive opportunities for protesters to argue that their concerns are broadly relevant, to find a place on the public agenda, and to work to change government policy (Benford & Snow, 2000). Studies on protest paradigm point out that
mainstream media coverage has often disparaged protesters and ridiculed their claims, which led the public to be critical of protesters and hesitant to identify with them (Chan & Lee, 1984; Hertog & McLeod, 1995; Lee, 2014). Recent research has identified factors, such as ideology of media outlets, political culture, and location of the newspaper, that can predict the use of protest paradigm in reporting protests (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Shahin et al., 2016). Unlike domestic media, foreign media outlets may offer a more sympathetic view of protesters and be less likely to apply the protest paradigm (Harlow et al., 2017). Moreover, foreign correspondents have been playing an ever-larger role as “sense makers” amid the enormous amount of information available to news consumers in times of protests (Archetti, 2012). Foreign correspondents also connect local activists, bystanders, and global audiences during political unrest times through their reporting (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2017).

The rise of social media has been shifting the dynamics of protests coverage. As mentioned above, social media platforms, by providing information that is not available on mainstream media, serve as sourcing and reporting tools for journalists while covering protests (Hermida et al., 2014; Veenstra et al., 2014). Of particular note, social media has emerged as a networked space in which activists and journalists can connect during times of social unrest (Mourão & Chen, 2020; Poell & Rajagopalan, 2015). On social media, foreign correspondents can offer unique perspectives, personal perceptions, and feelings on protests not otherwise available in their published news stories through media outlets. One study shows that Nick Kristof, then a New York Times foreign correspondent, offered a sympathetic perspective toward the protesters in Egypt while his newspaper continued to marginalize the protesters (Harlow & Johnson, 2011).

Foreign correspondents, who, unlike their local colleagues, report from locations far from the headquarters of their organizations, may be subject to relatively little institutional control over their day-to-day professional activity (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004). In addition, as representatives of their organizations in the global news arena (Zeng & Song, 2018), they may consider it especially important to adhere to traditional standards of objectivity and professional practice. Therefore, they may use social media differently from their local counterparts, such as being less likely to interact with the public. One study shows that foreign correspondents mainly use Twitter for their work, ranging from reporting break news to promoting their organizations (Cozma & Chen, 2013). But it is not clear how foreign correspondents used Twitter during times of protests. To advance the body of knowledge, this study will examine foreign correspondents’ use of Twitter during the Anti-ELAB protest in Hong Kong.

The Context and Research Questions

The Anti-ELAB protest began in Hong Kong in June 2019 against plans to allow the extradition of its citizens accused of crimes to mainland China. The concern was that the bill would expose Hong Kong citizens to unfair treatment in mainland Chinese courts, thereby curbing their autonomy and infringing on their civil liberties under the “one country, two systems” arrangement. When the protest was initiated in March 2019, the government ignored it and pressed ahead to pass the bill, which ignited the radicalized and prolonged protests calling for the complete withdrawal of the bill. As the street protests continued, the police turned to strong-arm tactics, resulting in a spiral of escalating violence. The protesters’ slogan was “five demands, no more or less,” referring the set of concessions that they sought from the government, which included an independent inquiry into allegations of police brutality and universal suffrage in addition to withdrawal of the bill. When the government withdrew the bill in September, the protests continued (Purbrick, 2019).

The Anti-ELAB movement dominated the international news for months. Foreign correspondents based in Hong Kong were the main sources to keep those in their home countries informed. Historically, Hong Kong has been the Asian hub of the global media industry (Chen, 2015) and has housed the Foreign Correspondents’ Club since 1949. Following its handover to China in 1997, Hong Kong continued to enjoy greater press freedom than mainland China and attracted CNN, BBC, and other Western media to locate their main headquarters there. Foreign correspondents have a tradition to cover protests happened in Hong Kong, ranging from the July 1 protest to the recent Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Lee & Chan, 2010, 2018). Their coverage worried the Chinese government, which oftentimes accused the Western media of anti-Chinese bias and of damaging its image in the reporting on the pro-democratic movements in Hong Kong.

Social media has been called another battleground for the Anti-ELAB protests, from the movement’s mobilization to its contested representations by journalists, government, activities, and bystanders (Shao, 2019). In Hong Kong, where the mainstream media are directly and indirectly controlled, social media are even more important to the movement, providing an alternative narrative for demonstrations (Luqiu, 2017). Frontline journalists’ Twitter feeds have become a direct source of information about the movement, in addition to news reports. During the 2014 Umbrella Movement, journalists began to take an “on the ground”/“on the ground” perspective using the protest movement’s images. They were active in front of the camera, not just as observers behind it (Wetzstein, 2017). Meanwhile, the Chinese government used Twitter to disrupt Hong Kong Protests by launching disinformation campaign (Wood et al., 2019). The demonstrators in the Anti-ELAB movement likewise recognized that the protest coverage by Western media outlets could potentially impact international support, both civil and official, for their cause. Citizens of Hong Kong have left many comments, some of them critical, on the Twitter feeds of these foreign correspondents in an effort to
help and even influence their understanding of the movement (Zhang, 2019).

Given the importance of foreign correspondents’ use of social media when covering protests, we focused in this study on the various forms of engagement that Twitter affords—retweets, quote tweets, replies, and posts—for the sharing of personal opinions. We use Goffman’s (1959) theater metaphor as the theoretical framework to study journalists’ performance on Twitter. Several studies have applied this framework to examine self-presentation of individuals on Twitter as a networked preference via language, hashtags, and photos (Brems et al., 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2012). Specifically, we aimed to explore foreign correspondents’ use of Twitter in three aspects, including (1) whether they use Twitter to communicate facts or express opinions, (2) whom they interact with (i.e., fellow journalists or others), and (3) the engagement patterns. The answers to these questions could shed light onto whether Twitter usage of foreign correspondents adheres to the existing professional norms and practices or reinvents their professional norms and routines to suit the digital environment. To guide our inquiry, we formulated the following research questions:

\textbf{RQ1.} During the Anti-ELAB protests, did foreign correspondents use Twitter to report facts or express opinions?

\textbf{RQ1a.} In what ways did these correspondents express their opinions about the protests on Twitter?

\textbf{RQ2.} Did these correspondents interact more with their fellow journalists or with members of the public on Twitter?

\textbf{RQ3.} What sort of content attracted more engagement on Twitter?

\textbf{Methods}

We selected media outlets that had regional offices in Hong Kong and covered the protests. The tweets of 20 foreign correspondents working for these international English-language news organizations, including three newspapers, one online media outlet, three cable television networks, and three news wire services, were selected for study (Table 1). The journalists were full-time staff members who were either based in or assigned to Hong Kong for several months to cover the anti-extradition bill protests. We used mixed quantitative methodology, combining a quantitative content analysis and computerized textual analysis for this study. Mixed methods can be used better to understand the connections between qualitative and quantitative data: coded Twitter attribute variables and texts of personal opinion. They can facilitate different avenues of exploration to answer our research questions.

The correspondents’ tweets relating to the Hong Kong protests were manually collected for the period from 1 June to 31 October 2019. Among the total 17,679 tweets collected from 20 foreign correspondents, they tweeted about 884 posts on average during the period (SD = 918.48, range = 25–3,080). We selected this period because international media outlets began covering the uprising extensively until early June, by which time over 1 million people were taking to the streets regularly to call for the withdrawal of the bill. Although the bill was withdrawn in September, our sample included tweets until the end of October because the protesters demand in addition an investigation of police brutality against them and universal suffrage, which continued to occupy headlines. For data analysis, one of the authors and a research assistant coded around 20% of the dataset; after satisfactory internal reliability had been obtained (Cohen’s $\kappa > .85$), the research assistant proceeded to code the rest of the data.

\textbf{Coding}

\textbf{Tweet Types.} Based on the meta-data, each post was classified as an original tweet (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1$), retweet (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1$), reply (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1$), or quoted tweet (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1$). As the terms suggest, original tweets were posts written by the journalists, retweets were posts written by others and retweeted by the journalists, replies were responses written by the journalists, and quoted tweets included commentary added by journalists to tweets posted by other users. Of the 17,679 tweets collected, 49.9% were original posts, 32.4% retweeted tweets, 3.3% replied tweets, and 14.5% quoted tweets.

\textbf{Tweet Attributes.} We also manually coded a variety of attributes of the tweets, specifically mention (14.5%) (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1$), use of a thread (33.4%) (Cohen’s $\kappa = .88$), or hyperlink (27.4%) (Cohen’s $\kappa = .97$), and multimedia (Cohen’s $\kappa = .98$), the latter category including tweets with associated photos, videos, and/or JPEG images (73.5%; the total exceeds 100% because some tweets featured more than one attribute).

\textbf{Opinion.} Statements by journalists that involved more than simply reporting facts were coded as personal opinions, including statements featuring both facts and personal opinions (13.2%) (Cohen’s $\kappa = .95$). The opinion tweets were further coded into one of the following four topics on which the journalists commented: the Chinese central government (e.g., its handling of the one-country-two-systems arrangement;
34%, Cohen’s $k = .93$), the government of Hong Kong (e.g., its handling of the bill and protests; 25%, Cohen’s $k = .94$), the Hong Kong police (e.g., their treatment of the protesters; 35%, Cohen’s $k = .95$), and other actors (e.g., protesters; 6%, Cohen’s $k = .93$).

**Engagement.** Indicators of engagement included comments on tweets (Cohen’s $k = 1$), retweets (Cohen’s $k = 1$), and likes (Cohen’s $k = 1$). These three variables were summed to represent audience engagement with the journalists, in general.

**Textual Analysis**

To answer our research question regarding foreign correspondents’ use of Twitter to express their opinions, we conducted a computerized textual analysis using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC). LIWC is software for counting the portion of words of 90 linguistic categories. This program assigns words to psychologically meaningful categories, generates empirical results that detect meaning, and measures emotionality and thinking (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

The study includes four summary variables used by LIWC to provide the language dimensions (Pennebaker et al., 2015) measured on a 100-point scales (0 = very low and 100 = very high). The variables are analytical thinking (indicative of analytical, logical, and consistent thinking), clout (indicative of social status, confidence, and leadership), authenticity (indicative of honest, personal), and emotional tone (indicative of the positiveness of emotions).

**Results**

Before answering our research question, we present the descriptive results that reveal the general patterns of Twitter practices among the 20 Hong Kong-based foreign correspondents during the 2019 protests. As shown in Table 2, the usage habits varied across individual reporters, and the patterns did not vary by organizations or types of news media.

We performed the chi-square goodness-of-fit test to answer RQ1. Among all of the tweets ($N=17,679$), we found a statistically significant difference between the numbers of opinion tweets (2,339, 13.2%) and factual tweets (15,340, 86.8%), $\chi^2(1, 17679) = 9,560.8, p < .001$. An additional chi-square test of independence revealed a significant relationship existed between the type (original, retweet, reply, or quoted) and content of the tweets (opinion or fact), $\chi^2(3, 17679) = 2,927.6, p < .001$. While a marked disparity between opinion and factual tweets was observable across all types of tweets, the difference was especially large among the retweets, of which nearly all (>99.9%) were factual in nature. Hence, the foreign correspondents overall preferred fact-reporting to opinion expression on Twitter.

To answer RQ2, we performed several chi-square goodness-of-fit tests. Among the tweets that quoted other users ($N=1,014,701$), we found a statistically significant difference between the numbers of quoted tweets (3,875, 13.7%) and restated tweets (16,118, 86.3%), $\chi^2(1, 17679) = 1,014.7, p < .001$. An additional chi-square test of independence revealed a significant relationship existed between the type (original, retweet, reply, or quoted) and content of the tweets (opinion or fact), $\chi^2(3, 17679) = 2,927.6, p < .001$. While a marked disparity between opinion and factual tweets was observable across all types of tweets, the difference was especially large among the retweets, of which nearly all (>99.9%) were factual in nature. Hence, the foreign correspondents overall preferred fact-reporting to opinion expression on Twitter.

### Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Selected Twitter Handles.

| Twitter handle | Organization | Tweets | Like | Retweet | Comment | Personal opinion | % |
|----------------|--------------|--------|------|---------|---------|------------------|---|
| @austinramzy   | NYT          | 1,269  | 37,610 | 21,081 | 3,137   | 60               | 4.7|
| @amyqin        | NYT          | 293    | 11,912 | 5,555   | 890     | 1                | 0.3|
| @paulmozur     | NYT          | 274    | 14,529 | 6,380   | 795     | 53               | 19.3|
| @nytmay        | NYT          | 544    | 15,512 | 9,132   | 997     | 25               | 4.5|
| @fion_li       | Bloomberg    | 2,058  | 27,068 | 21,004  | 2,730   | 54               | 2.6|
| @saimmarlow    | Bloomberg    | 177    | 661    | 430     | 93      | 22               | 12.4|
| @shanjo        | Bloomberg    | 122    | 341    | 158     | 50      | 12               | 9.8|
| @mbrookerhk    | Bloomberg    | 1,491  | 35,746 | 19,895  | 3,922   | 615              | 41.2|
| @joshchin      | WSJ          | 25     | 1,112  | 644     | 81      | 5                | 20.0|
| @natashakhanhk | WSJ          | 953    | 6,205  | 3,281   | 326     | 10               | 1.0|
| @xinwenfan     | WSJ          | 86     | 2,580  | 989     | 326     | 14               | 16.3|
| @jamespomfret  | Reuter       | 441    | 11,098 | 7,816   | 745     | 12               | 2.7|
| @QIZHAI        | Reuter       | 113    | 1,218  | 857     | 229     | 23               | 20.3|
| @JeromeTaylor  | AFP          | 1,888  | 68,456 | 42,676  | 5,204   | 546              | 28.9|
| @XingSi        | AFP          | 3,080  | 124,874| 72,894  | 9,756   | 145              | 4.7|
| @StephenMcDonell| BBC         | 1,061  | 80,012 | 41,835  | 9,223   | 195              | 18.4|
| @Ramynoerciel  | CBS          | 1,105  | 98,246 | 59,533  | 8,011   | 94               | 8.5|
| @amcoren       | CNN          | 22     | 4,154  | 2,940   | 570     | 2                | 9.0|
| @suelinwong    | FT           | 118    | 3,741  | 2,247   | 286     | 10               | 8.5|
| @stegersaurus  | Quartz       | 2,559  | 88,442 | 40,932  | 5,459   | 254              | 9.9|
retweeted factual information \((N = 4,248)\), a significant difference was found in retweeting information from journalists \((2,955, 69.6\%)\), verified accounts \((221, 5.2\%)\), and unverified users \((1,072, 25.2\%)\), \(\chi^2(2, 4248) = 2,764.7, p < .001\). For tweets that used the @ function \((N = 2,556)\), we found a significant difference in mentioning journalists \((1,730, 67.7\%)\) and citizens \((826, 22.3\%)\), \(\chi^2(1, 2556) = 319.1, p < .001\). Thus, the foreign correspondents interacted more with fellow journalists than with members of the public.

To answer RQ3, we estimated a series of zero-inflated negative binomial regression models designed to predict audience engagement. The dependent variable of engagement, along with its subtypes (e.g., like, retweet, and comment), served as a count variable with over-dispersion and excessive zeros (Table 3). The result showed that posts with opinions encouraged greater engagement than fact-based posts across all three types of engagement, controlling for other characteristics of the tweets.

For RQ1a, the results of the textual analysis using LIWC that answer RQ1a are presented in Table 4. Among their posts on opinions, the analysis identified I-words (0.98%), social words (7.46%), and words associated with positive emotions (2.67%), negative emotions (3.01%), and cognitive processes (10.97%).

The analytical variable score for tweets in which the correspondents displayed analytical or formal thinking was 81.14 points. This indicates that Twitter enabled the foreign correspondents to share their interpretations of the protests. Such usage, by blurring “walls” between news and opinion, would extend their professional practice beyond the straightforward reporting of news and make the coverage more transparent and intelligible to news consumers. The following are the examples of posts that confirmed this expectation:

You hear similar comments from pro-Beijing elites in HK, that HK people don’t trust the Chinese government, the extradition bill, etc., because they don’t understand them. It’s not politically acceptable to admit the reality that people here understand them quite well. @austinramzy

Heroics. Masked protesters carry Lady Liberty, a symbol of the enduring #HK protest movement, to the craggy summit of Lion Rock, where a thunderstorm and howling winds threaten to topple her. At dawn the weather clears and she can be seen from afar #HongKongProtests #AntiMaskLaw. @Jamespomfret

The clout score, referring to the relative social status, confidence, or leadership displayed in writing, was 60.92 points. It indicates that the journalists who shared their opinions had displayed a certain degree of confidence in interpreting and analyzing the protests.

The authenticity score of tweets is 30.01 points, which indicates a certain, but not very high level of personal and honest writing. This result is in line with the finding about

| Table 3. Predicting Audience Engagement on Twitter \((N = 17,679)\). |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                  | Like            | Retweet         | Comment         | Engagement      |
| **Controls**     |                 |                 |                 |                 |
| Hyperlink        | -0.15 (0.01)*** | -0.14 (0.01)*** | -0.15 (0.01)*** | -0.13 (0.01)*** |
| Multimedia       | 0.65 (0.03)***  | 0.85 (0.04)***  | 0.48 (0.03)***  | 0.69 (0.03)***  |
| Mention          | 0.25 (0.02)***  | 0.39 (0.03)***  | 0.39 (0.03)***  | 0.21 (0.02)***  |
| **Focal variable** |                |                 |                 |                 |
| Opinion (Factual = 0) | 0.91 (0.04)*** | 1.04 (0.05)***  | 1.23 (0.04)***  | 0.82 (0.04)***  |
| LR \(\chi^2\) | 879.89*** | 1,021.61*** | 1,256.16*** | 835.54*** |

LR: likelihood ratio.
The last column (“Engagement”) refers to all three types of engagement combined. The coefficients for “Like,” “Retweet,” and “Engagement” were calculated using the zero-inflated negative binomial regression model; standard errors are in parentheses. The coefficients for “Comment” were calculated using a standard negative binomial regression model. All four models suggested that, for data that were over-dispersed, a zero-inflated negative binomial model would be more appropriate than a zero-inflated Poisson model. The Vuong test indicated that the zero-inflated negative binomial model significantly improved the model fit compared with the standard negative binomial model in three of the four cases, the exception being “comments” \((p = .99)\). Therefore, we estimated a standard negative binomial regression model for predicting “comment.”

| Table 4. Results of LIWC Textual Analysis. |
|-------------------------------------------|
| **Traditional LIWC dimension**            | **Data (%)** |
| I-words (e.g., “I,” “me,” “my”)           | 0.98         |
| Social words                              | 7.46         |
| Positive emotions                         | 2.67         |
| Negative emotions                         | 3.01         |
| Cognitive processes                       | 10.97        |
| **Summary variables**                     |              |
| Analytical                                | 81.14        |
| Clout                                     | 60.92        |
| Authenticity                              | 30.01        |
| Emotional tone                            | 20.63        |

LIWC: Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count.

The “functional constituencies” are a rigged joke. It is a way of stopping the people of #HongKong choosing who governs them. Any genuinely progressive person should be able to see this. @StephenMcDonnell

The clout score, referring to the relative social status, confidence, or leadership displayed in writing, was 60.92 points. It indicates that the journalists who shared their opinions had displayed a certain degree of confidence in interpreting and analyzing the protests.

The authenticity score of tweets is 30.01 points, which indicates a certain, but not very high level of personal and honest writing. This result is in line with the finding about...
the rare usage of I-words and other social words by foreign correspondents. Here are three examples:

I’d say below is a slightly extreme, but not abnormal Chinese take. Never mind no one has died in Hong Kong and they’re asking for democratic rights. More say that territorial integrity is the same as racism, and is a line that shouldn’t be crossed. @paulmozur

I have no doubt carrie lam’s comments today only galvanised more ppl to come out, many probably choosing to sit in the AC than an outdoor. @stegersaurus

Carrie Lam holds a 4am presser. Did she sleep? I didn’t. Anyways #HongKong’s chief executive doesn’t resign and doesn’t revoke her controversial extradition bill. That’s all most people are going to take away from this. #HongKongProtests @RamyInocencio

The emotional tone was scored as 20.63 points on the 100-point scale, indicating some degree of negative emotion. The result—that 94% of the opinion posts targeted either the central or Hong Kong government or the police—reflects these correspondents’ dissatisfaction with the official responses to the protests. However, being bound by professional norms, they were unable to express this negative emotion in their reporting. Social media, however, afford them the space to express themselves as citizens. Here are two tweets that connote the negative emotions:

This isn’t the Hong Kong I knew when I lived and worked here just a handful of years ago. Caught on camera, see for yourself. @RamyInocencio

Shocking footage of #HongKong riot police charging into a subway station pursuing pro-democracy activists and firing into them at point blank range. I’ve seen police being provoked here but I’m speechless. Carrie Lam says no police inquiry needed they’re investigating themselves. @StephenMcDonell

Reading these tweets, audiences can feel the tension at the scene, the harshness of the police response to the protesters, and the correspondents’ dissatisfaction with the response. From the perspective of pure self-interest, it is natural that foreign correspondents would be critical of both the Hong Kong and mainland governments.

Discussion

The analysis of the tweets posted by 20 foreign correspondents during the 2019 Anti-ELAB protests in Hong Kong sheds light on these journalists’ leveraging of Twitter’s affordances to interact with (mainly) other journalists, their coverage of the protests, and the reception of that coverage by their Twitter followers. All of the correspondents appeared to be quite familiar with the platform’s affordances, as evidenced by their sharing of URLs to promote their own stories and, on occasion, stories from other sources as well as by their use of such functions as retweeting, quoting, and mentions. Notably, foreign correspondents have been making increasing use of threads for live reporting from a scene and sharing large amounts of information relevant to individual events. Connecting various tweets in this way makes it easy for audiences to follow up on what they have read and thus to situate the information communicated in a tweet within the proper context.

Second, we found that these tweets containing personal opinions were far less frequent than those containing factual information. This finding supports the normalization thesis that journalists tend to map traditional journalistic norms onto social media platforms. The finding indicates that foreign correspondents did not leverage their geographical distance from their employers in order to renegotiate the journalistic boundaries and rework professional norms by freely expressing their personal opinions on social media. Instead, they adhered closely to established standards of objectivity when covering the protests. One plausible explanation is that some news organizations treat journalists as company property with no separate professional identity and require them to represent their organizations and protect their images and reputations. Foreign correspondents, in particular, are expected to act as proxies for news outlets headquartered in various countries (Zeng & Song, 2018), which may constrain what they can say on Twitter. In October 2020, the BBC issued new guidance on social media usage that forbids its staff to express personal opinions (BBC, 2020). However, though our study identified no organizational differences in Twitter usage, future research could systematically examine the influence of organizational control, such as the codes of conduct that accounted for variations in the foreign correspondents’ Twitter activities.

Next, we found that the foreign correspondents tended to interact with each other and local journalists on Twitter far more frequently than with those outside their professional circle, thereby corroborating previous research (Molyneux & Mourão, 2019). This preference suggests that the correspondents were forming an interpretive community with other journalists on Twitter, the purpose of which was to share information with their audiences rather than to invite members of the public to contribute to the news production processes (Mourão, 2015; Mourão & Molyneux, 2020). Furthermore, the findings revealed that tweets containing foreign correspondents’ personal opinions encouraged more audience engagement. More specifically, Twitter users more often liked, retweeted, and commented on posts that included their personal opinions than their more fact-based posts.

Finally, the textual analysis based on the LIWC software showed that these tweets containing personal opinions were overall analytical and indicative of foreign correspondents’ relatively high social status. Meanwhile, their tweets displayed a certain but relatively low degree of self-revealing and authenticity, indicating that foreign correspondents kept...
themselves distant from the protests, partly due to the professional norms. But the results also revealed foreign correspondents’ negative emotions during the Anti-LAB protests. The negative emotions are tied to criticisms on police brutality and the Chinese government. In this sense, foreign correspondents are not only observers but also protest advocates who would challenge the authority who deprives Hong Kong citizens of their freedom. Our finding echoes with what previous research found that language and ideology can predict how journalists will cover protests (Harlow et al., 2017). More profoundly, foreign correspondents’ sympathy toward the protesters could potentially build news consumers’ trust in them and strengthen journalist–audience relationships (Feighery, 2011; Plaisance, 2007).

Our study has contributed to the existing debate on objectivity and professionalism in journalism studies. Objectivity has long been considered a foundational principle for journalists, the assumption being that journalists should suppress their political opinions and self-expression in their professional lives. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, several media scholars proposed reexamining this assumption. Instead, it considered the journalist an autonomous moral agent capable of making ethical decisions and promoting public good while on the job. After internet access became widely available, but before the advent of social media, many news media outlets regulated their journalists’ blog use by classifying their blogs as a news product in the editing process before publishing. This control was possible because a blog is a digital diary-style text entry rather than a platform. On the other hand, social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, are platforms for which there are no alternatives, so media outlets have difficulty pre-screening posts by members of their staff. As Farhi (2009) noted, Twitter gives journalists a variety of identities at the same time: “With their intimacy and immediacy, social networks can put journalists in the murky territory: “Am I a reporter [when tweeting]? Am I an editor? Am I a critic? Or am I just talking among friends?” (para. 33).

From a normative standpoint, the discussion of whether corporate media outlets should strictly regulate their journalists’ use of social media raises an old question regarding whether journalists are citizens first and media professionals second or vice versa or, alternatively, there is in fact no conflict between these roles. In practice, many outstanding journalists have demonstrated that, even when they publicly express their political opinions or participate in political activities, it is possible to remain professionally accountable and act independently of one’s personal views. In the words of Isralowitz (1992), “A more honest set of ethical norms would recognize that absolute neutrality is illusory because all reporters have experiences and affiliations that shape their development as both press professionals and human beings” (p. 281). Our findings support the notion that news media outlets have a moral obligation to free their journalists from constraints on the exercise of free speech because doing so can help to protect the freedom of the press on both the institutional and individual levels. Journalists deserve the benefit of the doubt that they will not abuse their freedom of speech and will remain professionally accountable on their social media accounts (at least those kept under their own names), in part because they are monitored by the public. Continued public scrutiny will improve the quality and credibility of journalism, while the participation of all parties—news media outlets, journalists, and consumers of news—in the circulation of information ultimately nurtures healthy democracies.

The implications of the findings are potentially far-reaching, but we acknowledge that this study was subject to certain limitations. For one thing, our sample size—including the tweets of 20 foreign correspondents—was insufficient to allow for generalization of the findings to all journalists who covered the 2019 Hong Kong protests or to those who have covered other protests. Furthermore, we looked only at the frequency of audience engagement, whereas future studies could provide a more nuanced view by decomposing the social demographics of journalists’ audiences and delving further into the nature of the engagement with their posts.

Particularly in an era of increasing globalization, foreign correspondents fulfill a key function in modern societies by gathering and disseminating information about the members of the international community. Their work is especially valuable during social movements that draw the attention of consumers of news within and across regions and continents. This study contributes to the literature on this aspect of journalism by considering how these important but understudied foreign correspondents used Twitter during the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong.

Technological innovation is restructuring the power balance among journalists, media outlets, and audiences. Twitter in particular is transforming journalistic norms, values, and means of distinction (Barnard, 2016) and helping some journalists to challenge the norms of objectivity and independence (Molyneux, 2015). We suggest that members of the journalistic profession should reconsider long-held norms (Hermida, 2013) in response to the socio-technical dynamics of Twitter and its emergence as the leading social media platform for journalists and citizens to discuss issues, provide context for the news, and foster community values (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2018).

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