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“That’s what I’m talking about”: Twitter as a promotional tool for political journalists

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, journalists have adapted to technological innovations that facilitate the creation of an individual identity online and personal connections with audiences. In parallel, the rise of hyper-competition in the media industry raises questions about the increasing importance of market considerations. Under these conditions, journalists gradually develop promotional practices online. This article examines the scope of these promotional practices among political journalists on Twitter through a content analysis of messages posted by members of the Press Gallery of the Quebec National Assembly. It also analyzes motivations and norms related to these practices through a series of interviews with Press Gallery members. The findings indicate that promotion is an important feature of the production of Quebec parliamentary press on Twitter. The quest for visibility, competition, and the requests made by management teams in a context of economic hardship are key motivations for using Twitter as a promotional device.

Introduction

Political journalism plays a key role in democratic politics. As stated by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Raymond Kuhn, “It is a formally independent institution that is part and parcel of representative politics, engaged in criticising those in positions of power, promoting particular political actors, issues, and views, keeping people at least to some extent informed about public affairs and mobilising citizens for political action—all often done in concert with other estates, but never simply as their instrument” (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014, p. 2). However, despite the recent technological transformations and the reconfiguration of the media system, few studies have investigated how political journalists use social media platforms, particularly outside of the United States and outside of election campaigns. More specifically, there has been limited work focusing on promotion as an emerging practice and norm among political journalists who use these platforms.

In the last decade, professional journalists have had to adapt to technological innovations that encourage the creation of an individual identity online and facilitate personal connections with more engaged audiences (Bruns, 2012). In parallel, the rise of hyper-competition in the media industry generates questions about the increasing importance of market considerations in daily journalistic routines (Brin, Charron, & de Bonville, 2004;
McManus, 2009). Under these conditions, professional journalists may develop promotional practices online at the individual and/or organizational level(s) (Molyneux & Holton, 2015). Thus, our article aims to better understand the fabric and scope of these emerging promotional practices among political journalists on Twitter by asking three questions:

- How and to what extent do they use the microblogging site for self-promotion or to promote their organization?
- What are their motivations for promoting themselves or their organization on Twitter?
- How do these uses and motivations influence norms and standards of political journalism?

This article presents the results of a mixed-methods case study that combines online content analysis and semistructured interviews. We assessed different dimensions of promotional practices online by conducting a four-week quantitative content analysis of the 3,577 messages posted on Twitter by the 38 journalists of the Quebec National Assembly’s Parliamentary Press Gallery. We also analyzed the motivations and the norms related to these practices through a series of semistructured interviews with 28 of these parliamentary journalists. Our analysis shows that promotional practices are an important characteristic of political journalists’ production on Twitter. However, the adoption and the acceptance of these promotional practices among the members of the Press Gallery were not unanimous, showing tension between traditional and emerging norms. This study offers a systematic analytical framework that may be useful to scholars seeking to understand promotional logics associated with journalistic practices and discourses on social networking sites.

Literature review

The current digital networked environment contributes to changing the relationship between journalists and their publics. The development of new online platforms creates opportunities for dialogue with and transparency toward media audiences (Hermida, 2013; Lasorsa, Lewis, & Holton, 2012; Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington, & Holton, 2014). It also gives journalists the capacity to share directly their news content with their publics, to build individual and organizational brands online (Brems, Temmerman, Graham, & Broersma, 2016; Molyneux, 2015), and to use tools that measure audiences’ interests (Anderson, 2011; MacGregor, 2007; Usher, 2013). Nevertheless, research also suggests that each of these potentialities has not necessarily materialized. The use of the Internet and its applications tends to vary depending on a variety of contextual factors: particularly, the perceptions journalists have of their audiences online, as well as the previously established practices in their work environments (Boczkowski, 2004; Dagiral & Parasie, 2010). Therefore, we distance ourselves from any deterministic perspective to focus on the uses made by journalists of digital technological tools available to them, and try to assess how and to what extent these practices represent a challenge to the traditional boundary between the news production process and the business functions of the media.
The wall

Independence from political parties and commercial pressures is a core value of modern North American journalism (Schudson, 2011). The boundary between journalistic and business functions of the media has been shaped by the professional rhetoric to preserve editorial autonomy over news decision making. It has also materialized in the structure of media organizations, with news and business departments working independently from each other. Independence as a value is tightly linked to the credibility of the profession, which rests on the journalistic value of loyalty to citizens first (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). As stated by Coddington (2015, p. 67), “[the] wall, between the journalistic and business-oriented functions of a news organization, is one of the foremost professional markers of journalism, a principle that is reinforced most strongly in the central sites of its socialization—journalism schools, textbooks and reviews, not to mention thousands of newsrooms large and small.” Typically, journalism’s duty is to serve the public interest by informing audiences, presenting facts and balanced analysis of news events. In contrast, marketing aims to increase brand recognition in order to generate sales and profit. In short, while journalism’s goal is information, marketing’s main purpose is persuasion (Geana, 2009).

However, since the 1980s and 1990s, with the arrival of 24-hour news channels, the Internet, and the rise of hypercompetition in the media industry, scholars have identified a trend toward commercialization of the media (Brin et al., 2004; McManus, 2009; Siegert, Gerth, & Rademacher, 2011; Underwood, 2001). Market considerations appear to have gained in importance in the daily work of professional media organizations; the imagined preferences of the audience contribute to shape the media agenda and the fabric of journalistic discourses (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). Market concerns are not new in the media sphere, but the difference that seems to characterize the current changes is the amount of pressure felt by journalists “perceiving a significant shift toward business principles and away from their professional values” (Coddington, 2015, p. 70).

Where is the audience?

In the last decades, the legacy media have faced declining revenues combined with rapid technological changes. These changing conditions have contributed to put journalism under pressure. Media consumption has gradually been moving toward user-driven processes including search engines and social networking sites as gateways to access news content (Newman, Levy, & Nielsen, 2015). A recent survey shows that 45% of American and 48% of Canadian adult Web users get news from social networking sites (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018).

In this context, news organizations are intensively trying to reach out to younger audiences on the Web and on mobile platforms through social networking sites (SNS). However, the logic of SNS differs from traditional media logic, resembling what Manuel Castells defines as mass-self communication: “self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many” (Castells, 2007, p. 248). Individualized social media accounts allow journalists to communicate directly and even to connect emotionally with their audiences. From a managerial perspective, this also means that individual journalists could be considered as “sub-brands” of their news organizations. Usher (2014, p. 189–194) observes that editors and
managers at *The New York Times* rely on individual reporters’ brands to generate traffic on the website. Axel Bruns (2012) also suggests that individual journalists are in a better position to connect with their audiences on social media, sometimes having developed a more prominent brand than their own organization. Thus, we concentrate our attention on the work of individual political journalists. In doing so, Twitter constitutes an appropriate platform to investigate the scope of their promotional practices online.

**Journalists and self-promotion on Twitter**

Twitter was quickly embraced in newsrooms for monitoring information and breaking news (Hermida, 2010). In the political sphere, the microblogging site became a key platform to access live information on political events (Chacon, Giasson, & Brin, 2015; Chadwick, 2011a, 2011b; Elmer, 2013; Gainous & Wagner, 2014). Research also shows that media organizations use Twitter strategically for marketing purposes (Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Lin & Peña, 2011). Furthermore, an emerging body of literature suggests that individual journalists tend to use the platform for self-promotion (Kim, Kim, Lee, Oh, & Lee, 2015; Lasorsa et al., 2012). In an exploratory study based on interviews with Canadian columnists and political journalists, Mathys (2012, p. 107–108) mentioned that social media were used to convey their journalistic work, either their reports or their blog posts, or to shape their personal identity online. Through a survey conducted among the members of the Norwegian Press Gallery, Rogstad (2014) found that some political journalists—especially the most enthusiastic social media users—utilized Twitter for self-promotion; some also used it for personal branding and visibility purposes. In a qualitative textual analysis, Molyneux (2015) found that U.S. journalists reporting on the 2012 presidential campaign used Twitter to establish a personal brand or to share the work of other journalists with retweets or hyperlinks, frequently promoting colleagues from their own organizations, a practice also observed in Usher’s ethnography at *The New York Times* (2014). However, scholars also noted the uncertainties and ethical concerns among journalists, associated with these emerging practices. Journalists may feel a tension between their will to incorporate more branding into their production on social media platforms, in order to enhance their visibility and value on the market, and their obligation to maintain the traditional tenets of the profession (Molyneux & Holton, 2015).

**Research questions**

Despite concerns about blurring boundaries between news and commercial rationales, recent empirical studies on this subject are very scarce (Coddington, 2015). We also found that these studies rarely investigate the practices and norms of political journalism, and are generally limited to self-reporting methods such as surveys or interviews. These methods, which are subject to a social desirability bias, would benefit from being paired with other techniques such as content analysis or direct observation. This study aims at gaining a better understanding of how and to what degree political journalists use Twitter for promotional purposes. Some journalists might focus on self-promotion by tweeting their news stories or forging their persona online. Others might prefer to put forward their media organization’s brand. Thus, we seek to investigate the scope of these practices. We also intend to better understand the motivations linked to these emerging practices and to
assess, through the perspective of the journalists, the potential ongoing normative transformations. These objectives lead us to the following research questions:

(RQ1) How and to what extent do political journalists use Twitter to promote their organization or for self-promotion?

(RQ2) What are their motivations for promoting their organization or themselves on Twitter?

(RQ3) How do these uses and motivations influence norms and standards of political journalism?

Methods

We conducted a mixed-methods case study focusing on the practices and discourses of political journalists of the Quebec National Assembly’s Parliamentary Press Gallery. The Parliamentary Press Gallery is a nonprofit corporation that brings together journalists of almost every national media organization in Canada. Press Gallery members are appointed by their news organization to provide daily coverage of parliamentary proceedings, issues and events that have to do with the business of Parliament and the government, as well as the day-to-day life of the various political parties (Charron & Saint-Pierre, 2012). These political journalists—like their colleagues in press galleries around the world—not only write or talk about politics, but also form an institution that benefits from an official recognition from the government that allows them to work closely with the political elite. Thus, we believe that this specific group constitutes an interesting case to investigate recent transformations in political journalism practices and norms.

Quantitative content analysis

In the first part of our case study, we completed a quantitative content analysis of the messages posted on Twitter by parliamentary journalists. Our corpus consists of all the tweets \( (N = 3,577) \) posted by the 38 parliamentary journalists of the Press Gallery, over two 2-week periods in February and November/December 2014, between 7 a.m. and midnight. We selected periods in which the Quebec National Assembly was in session, so as to reflect typical routines of political journalism. To avoid any loss of data, the tweets were collected and archived using the application Twitonomy.com, a paid subscription-based online tool that uses Twitter’s Application Programming Interface (API) to archive tweets on the basis of criteria selected by users (e.g., according to previously identified usernames, hashtags, keywords, etc.). This method is not without flaws, for data transmission interruptions are possible. Nevertheless, Twitter’s API remains the only way researchers can access this data (Bruns & Liang, 2012).

We developed a codebook inspired by recent studies investigating similar phenomena (Molyneux, 2015; Molyneux & Holton, 2015). The coding unit is the tweet (an individual message of 140 characters or less). The first part of the coding system identified the tweet’s author, with the date and time it was posted. The second part classified the various
components of each of the tweets. We assessed promotional practices with three indicators. First, we determined the degree to which political journalists share the messages posted by other users (retweet). We then sorted and classified the various authors of retweeted posts into one of the three following categories: (1) a user (media/journalist/host/columnist/blogger) from the same media organization, (2) a user (media/journalist/host/columnist/blogger) from another media organization, or (3) any other type of user (i.e., a politician or an activist). Second, we sought to determine whether political journalists mostly used hyperlinks to convey (1) their own work, (2) that of other users from their own media organization, (3) that of users from other media organizations, or (4) content produced outside the media community. Third, we assessed whether the text of the tweet (excluding the hyperlink) aimed to promote (1) the journalist herself or her work, (2) her media organization or a colleague from her media organization, (3) another media organization or a user working in another media organization, or (4) none of these options. Intercoder reliability was established on a sample of 100 tweets coded independently by two coders. The simple agreement reached on each variable ranged from 0.91 to 0.97.

**Interviews**

To assess the motivations and norms linked to journalistic practices online and more specifically on Twitter, we conducted 28 in-depth interviews among the 38 journalists of the Quebec National Assembly’s Parliamentary Press Gallery. Interviewees included journalists working in French or in English for print, radio, television, and online news, in various public and private media organizations. Interviews were conducted in person, either on Parliament Hill or in a location chosen by the participants, in Quebec City and Montreal, between June 27 and September 29, 2014; their average duration was approximately 50 minutes. Samples of the data collected during the content analysis were presented to participants in order to base our conversation on their real practices. All interviews were transcribed. We agreed with the interviewees not to disclose their identity. The coding of the transcripts was carried out manually with the software NVivo. We conducted a thematic analysis of the verbatim of the interviews, identifying themes and patterns in the data, using both a deductive and an inductive approach (Bazeley, 2009; Boyatzis, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Findings**

**The scope of promotional practices on Twitter**

We systematically assessed the political journalists’ promotion practices on Twitter using three indicators: retweets, hyperlinks, and commentary (anchor text) in tweets. We first analyzed the retweets by identifying the source of the message retweeted by political journalists. We categorized these sources into three types: (1) a user working in the same media organization as the political journalist, (2) a user working in another media organization, and (3) any other type of user. Only retweets initially produced by a user working in the same media organization were considered as promotion. As data in Table 1 indicate, the majority of political journalists’ retweets (50.2%) share content produced by
users from their own organization. For instance, reporter Charles Lecavalier of the *Journal de Québec* shared a tweet from his newspaper’s institutional account (@JdeQuebec):

**Charles Lecavalier** @CLecavalierJDQ Nov 26

RT @JdeQuebec Six leaders’ debates at TVA? Françoise David could be part of the duels #assnat #polqc


In comparison, 37.4% of retweets share a post from another media organization. Among these posts, we found exclusive content from Canadian media or tweets from foreign media. Only 12.4% of posts retweet nonmedia users, either politicians or ordinary citizens. Therefore, we observe that the retweet function is mainly used for organizational promotion, rather than collaborative news production with other media, politicians, or citizens.

Second, we analyzed the hyperlinks included in political journalists’ posts on Twitter. **Table 2** shows a strong trend of promotional activity in those hyperlinks. The majority of these links (63.4%) point directly at their author’s organizational website. In contrast, only 20.7% of hyperlinks point to another media organization website, while 16% link to any other type of websites. Hyperlinks are clearly used by parliamentary journalists for individual or organizational promotion purposes, rather than for transparency goals.

Third, we analyzed the text of each tweet in order to track promotional elements. We determined whether a post was referring to the journalist herself, to her production or to her media organization (including a user working in her media organization). Our data indicate that only 6% of tweets’ anchor texts (excluding hyperlinks) are self-promoting or promoting the journalist’s organization. Often, these self-referential posts serve as a notice for an upcoming radio or television appearance, as depicted in this tweet from Ryan Hicks (@rhicks), a parliamentary correspondent working for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (@CBC):

**Ryan Hicks** @rhicks Nov 26

On @CBCRadioNoon in a couple mins to talk pension reform - the reason everyone is protesting today - and new amendments to the bill #cbcmtl

In sum, as **Table 3** reveals, promotion is a significant feature of the production of Quebec parliamentary press on Twitter. Twenty-eight percent of the total number of tweets collected in the two periods included at least one element of promotion.\(^3\) Political journalists not only break news on Twitter, they also distribute different forms of promotional content in order to increase their visibility.

**Table 1.** Posts retweeted by political journalists (N = 923).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Number of retweets</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posts from the same media org.</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts from another media org.</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>37.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts from another type of users</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Sources of anchor text linked in political journalists tweets (N = 1081).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Number of hyperlinks</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalist’s own media website</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another media website</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another type of website</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) Political journalists not only break news on Twitter, they also distribute different forms of promotional content in order to increase their visibility.
More precisely, 13% of the journalists’ tweets were retweets of posts from their own organization; 20% of tweets collected contained a hyperlink pointing at contents generated by the journalist himself or herself, or by a user working in the same organization. The content promoted in the links included news stories, blog posts, pictures, and videos. Finally, 6% of the tweets’ texts (excluding hyperlinks) were self-promoting or promoting the journalist’s organization.

Both individual and organizational forms of promotion were found in the data, representing respectively 12 and 19% of our corpus (Table 4). Self-promotion was mainly done using hyperlinks for distributing parliamentary journalists’ own news production, while the retweet function was often utilized for sharing content produced by colleagues from their home news group (organizational promotion). We also observed that journalists retweeted contents generated by other news outlets, especially to share international news or exclusive material; however, these nonpromotional retweets (345 posts) were less frequent than promotional retweets (464 posts).

Also, according to our data, organizational promotion was slightly more frequent than individual promotion. This trend appears in both the first and second data collection periods, as illustrated in Figure 1.

When comparing the two periods, we observe an increase in promotional tweets practices in the second period of November/December 2014. One explanation may reside with new online coverage guidelines imposed to reporters in several news organizations.

### Table 3. Twitter functions used by political journalists for promotion (% = 3,577).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Post count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retweet</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperlink</td>
<td>685</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweet transcript</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of posts with a promotional element</td>
<td>998</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The categories are not mutually exclusive. Each post may contain more than one code.*

### Table 4. Type and frequency of promotional tweets (% = 3,577).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of promotion</th>
<th>Post count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-promotion</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational promotion</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The categories are not mutually exclusive. Each post may contain more than one code.*

![Figure 1](attachment:image.png)  
**Figure 1.** Distribution of promotional posts for each data collection period (%).
during the provincial election of April 2014. As the next section reveals, journalists from different organizations described in their interviews how their managers and editors explicitly told them to tweet and share their media’s news content, using retweets and hyperlinks, throughout the election campaign. For some journalists, these new habits may have persisted following the election.

**The motivations for self-promotion and organizational promotion**

When investigating the motivations associated with promotional practices, we find that 26 of the 28 interviewees referred to self-promotion or branding as common practices among political journalists. Twenty-one of the 28 participants said they personally use Twitter or another SNS to share their own work or their organization’s news content. Very often, they used the terms “to promote” or “self-promotion” to describe these practices. Parliamentary journalists reported using hashtags to gain visibility and hyperlinks as a gateway for audiences to access their news content online, their website, or the mobile platform of their organization. Meanwhile, a minority of interviewees clearly expressed their refusal to adopt such practices.

Interviewees recurrently mentioned three motivations to use Twitter as a promotional device: “increasing visibility,” “remaining competitive,” and “following a suggestion/request from editors or managers.” Twenty-one of the 28 participants associated their use of Twitter or another SNS with the objective of increasing their visibility, by being either read, heard, seen, or known. This quest for visibility was often connected with another motivation: to follow a suggestion or comply with a request from an editor or a manager, in order to promote their organization. This journalist reported this explicit request from his managers:

> Before the election campaign, they knew it was coming so that’s when they talked to us. All the journalists changed their username. They asked us to include [the name of the organization]. … The vice-president responsible for news and information asked us to tweet as much as possible and the person in charge of communication and marketing in [our organization] also said that, ideally, we should retweet our colleagues. (Interview, Journalist 9)

This quote clearly highlights how journalistic use of Twitter is structured by a media organization in a concerted way between news and marketing managers in order to promote the brand. Another journalist explained the efforts made by his media organization to integrate the various platforms online and offline in order to generate readership and increase traffic on their website:

> We integrated our operations. A breaking news story is going right away on the Internet; it became common practice. Twitter, Facebook, Internet, print, all of these are connected. In the print edition, readers can see my e-mail address and my Twitter username. On Saturday, we have more than 500,000 copies. That’s a lot of people … What is our goal? We want to inform people. Therefore, we use all possible means in order to reach them. (Interview, Journalist 25)

The desire to increase visibility on an organizational scale was also linked with the intention to remain competitive. Journalists in different news organizations said they preferred to share content generated by colleagues from their organization. However, if
they believe that information provided by the competition is important for their audience on Twitter, they might share it. This journalist explained this rationale:

I retweet the competition less. … I tweet professionally. What I mean is, I will encourage my colleagues before encouraging the competition on a same topic, for instance, if we both work on it. If it’s an exclusive from a journalist from elsewhere, I might retweet it, but I try to be “sectarian” with my own organization. (Interview, Journalist 23)

Twitter was also used to increase visibility at the individual level. Many journalists from almost every news organization in the Press Gallery explained their inclination to use Twitter to share their own work online or to promote their on-air presences. Few participants also acknowledged the potential of Twitter to expand their personal visibility and broaden their personal audiences geographically. This rationale was mainly mentioned by journalists working for regional media, as illustrated in this quote:

I want to enhance my profile as a journalist. … On Twitter, I can have managers or great editorialists from Toronto, or everywhere across the country following me, or knowing me because of Twitter. Thus, it’s a way for me to promote the fact that I’m here, covering politics. They will know me, my name, my face. (Interview, Journalist 12)

In several organizations, motivations to use Twitter for promotional purposes, such as visibility and competition, were closely associated with the availability of audience metrics in the newsroom. A journalist said that he encourages his colleagues to increase their presence on SNS: “Our company analyzed this and our readers are there. When we monitor our websites, we see that the source of traffic comes from Facebook and Twitter” (Interview, Journalist 25). In another organization, a reporter explained how audience metrics are shared with the staff:

It’s done by e-mail. We receive all the statistics: the news that are shared the most or read the most, every hour, and at the end of the day we have an aggregate. Personally, it doesn’t necessarily affect my daily work, but as a team, we have some quantitative objectives to reach. (Interview, Journalist 26)

When audience metrics and website traffic patterns were invoked, a recurrent theme was also discussed by the interviewees: the speed bonus. Many journalists mentioned the current race among the press corps on Twitter to post content first in order to increase their visibility. In two different organizations, journalists explained the reason for this race in greater detail.

In being first, you don’t give the choice to readers. … You’re alone, so you attract the totality or the exclusivity of click numbers. Your news content spreads everywhere. If people want to read it first, they must click on your news content. Then, you obtain the clicks from people that wouldn’t necessarily come to your website by generating buzz. (Interview, Journalist 7)

The importance of rankings on search engines was mentioned by another journalist:

If you are the first one to put the news online, you have an advantage on Google. Google recognizes that you are more important than the others. … So you have to be first, like everywhere else, because of the rankings. (Interview, Journalist 26)

In sum, most participants said they were using Twitter to increase their visibility online. Organizational factors, such as the implication of the management team and the availability of audience metrics, also seemed to influence the way political journalists used the
microblogging site. However, some interviewees also expressed their disapproval, doubts, or criticisms regarding promotional practices on Twitter. These journalists were mainly working for print media or news agencies. Some of these journalists pointed out that self-promotion had much to do with personal “vanity.” Others perceived both individual and organizational promotion as a breach of traditional journalistic norms.

**Contested norms**

As stated by Bicchieri and Muldoon (2014), “Like a grammar, a system of norms specifies what is acceptable and what is not in a society or a group.” In regard to promotional practices on Twitter, participants were not unanimous on what seemed acceptable or not. The quest for visibility was largely accepted, but the intensity, the means, and the economic logic associated with it were perceived quite differently.

For many journalists, the profitability of their media organization was cited as an important concern. In times of economic hardship for the media industry, the financial viability of their organization justified their promotional efforts. Some journalists spoke about “selling the product” on Twitter. A journalist used what Coddington (2015, p. 74) called the “survival rhetoric” in describing how and why he uses Twitter:

> To me, it’s a question of visibility. And for the company also. If you put hyperlinks pointing at your website, clearly, it will generate clicks. This is really good. I do it systematically with [our platform], in order to publicize it. Our future is at stake and, you know, it’s great if I can contribute to it. (Interview, Journalist 1)

In a broader perspective, a journalist explained how the Web and its economy contribute to change journalism practices, now influenced by a quantified perception of audiences, even in the traditional domain of political journalism:

> Another thing that changed journalism: with the Internet, obviously, we try to get clicks because it’s the way we are paid. That’s how we sell ads and generate revenues so it changes what we consider as news. . . . We cover what we were covering before but we also talk about lighter stuff that we wouldn’t have put in newspapers before. For instance, we create lists, like 10 surprising quotes from the Charbonneau Commission, or stuff like that. (Interview, Journalist 26)

But this quest for clicks and revenues also generates interrogations among parliamentary correspondents. Many interviewees said they were not ready to convey their opinion or humorous messages in order to increase their visibility, showing their attachment to the norm of objectivity. This journalist expressed a tension between marketing imperatives and the media’s democratic role of informing the public:

> Obviously, I’m happy when my article is the most read on [my website]. . . . But then, with this logic, there’s also a context of commercialization of news and the way we make money. The cost of advertising varies with the number of eyeballs. So, I don’t know if I’m alone but I tell myself, “I brought people to my [organization website].” But then, should you tend to write articles that are pleasant or informative? (Interview, Journalist 11)

Finally, a minority of journalists expressed their complete disapproval of promotional practices online. They considered them as a transgression of the traditional separation
between marketing and news processes, incompatible with their primary role of serving the public interest:

Personally, I don’t want to participate in this trend. Even if I must stay in the shadows, I prefer to work for a media organization that is not into this, because I believe that marketing and news are two different things. I don’t think that the public interest is well served with this. Some are searching the interest of their company, that’s what I see. This is unhealthy. (Interview, Journalist 5)

This last opinion notwithstanding, the collective narrative of participants regarding the search for visibility rather reveals the presence of an emergent internalized professional norm among Quebec parliamentary journalists. Twitter was generally perceived as a useful tool to achieve marketing goals through individual or organizational promotional activities. Only a small minority of interviewees were opposed to its use to increase readership or audience. Profitability also seems to emerge as a norm among parliamentary journalists, albeit a contested one. While some journalists questioned or disapproved of a logic they perceived as conflicting with their duty to serve the public interest, many expressed their concerns about the financial survival of their news organization and associated that concern with their promotional efforts on Twitter. While each of these normative perspectives is not totally new in the Quebec media environment (Brin et al., 2004; Le Cam, 2005), the prevalence of the latter seems to indicate a shift in the way political journalists define the boundaries of their profession, suggesting the wall between commercial interests and journalism has become more permeable.

Discussion and conclusion

This article investigates the scope of promotional practices among Quebec political journalists on Twitter, and the motivation and the norms associated with these practices. First, through a quantitative content analysis, we found that self-promotion and organizational promotion are significant features of the production of Quebec parliamentary journalists on the microblogging site, with more than a quarter of the tweets collected comprising at least one element of promotion. Retweets and hyperlinks are mainly used for promotional purposes, rather than collaborative or transparency goals.

Organizational promotion is also more prevalent than self-promotion. This finding differs from the results obtained by Molyneux and Holton (2015, p. 225), studying the perceptions and drivers of personal branding on social media platforms among U.S. health journalists, concluding that “journalists are squarely focused on branding at the individual level (rather than branding the organization they work for).” On the contrary, Quebec political journalists were keen in 2014 to promote their organization through individual channels, a finding consistent in both our content analysis and our interviews and more in line with the conclusions of a subsequent study by Molyneux, Holton, and Lewis (2017). In our view, these results suggest the importance of managerial pressures on journalists’ practices. In sum, Twitter appears to be used as a corporate tool by political journalists (Hanusch, 2018).

Through a series of research interviews with parliamentary journalists, we discovered that the quest for visibility and clicks, the competition between media organizations, and the suggestions/requests made by the editors and management teams are key motivations
For using Twitter as a promotional device. In some organizations, the search for visibility is explicitly associated with audience metrics and immediacy imperatives. These findings help explain how technology, combined with the desire to comply with managerial demands, influences the routines of journalists who are encouraged to be proactive on Twitter, to share their organization’s news content, and to convey information as quickly as possible in order to generate traffic and clicks online. As observed by Anderson (2011) and Usher (2013), who studied the journalistic uses of audience metrics, managerial orientations and decisions play a major role in the integration, uses, and understanding of technology in newsrooms.

Also, the interviews indicate that the quest for visibility online was a norm shared by a majority of Quebec parliamentary journalists. In addition, in order to increase their visibility and to preserve the financial viability of their media organizations, many political reporters agree to take part in the marketing of their news production and of their organization on Twitter. These journalists not only produce news online, they actively work for its promotion and its circulation. In a more competitive online advertising market, media organizations become more sensitive to market pressures. However, some journalists also state that they feel a tension between this economic rationale and their primary role of information, while a small minority of interviewees express a clear disapproval of branding and promotional practices online, arguing that these practices are linked with marketing imperatives that are not compatible with their public service mission. As explained by Bicchieri and Muldoon (2014), “When norms are internalized, abiding behavior will be perceived as good or appropriate and people will typically feel guilt or shame at the prospect of behaving in a deviant way.” On the contrary, we observed a diversity of perceptions regarding promotional practices, showing that norms are not yet fixed among the members of the Quebec National Assembly Press Gallery.

In sum, this case study contributes to the existing literature on political journalism by assessing the scope and the fabric of promotional practices by parliamentary journalists on Twitter, which is now a central platform in the circulation of political news and information. This research analyzes the motivations associated with these emerging practices. It also highlights the changing role of political journalism, which now takes a greater part in the marketing of news content. In the last two decades, scholars have described this trend in media organizations to develop news content according to commercial imperatives first and foremost (see McManus, 2009). Building on recent works by Molyneux (2015) and Molyneux and Holton (2015), our study goes one step further by documenting how and to what extent individual journalists use Twitter to accomplish functions such as distributing and promoting their “product” and increasing brand awareness, functions that are typically associated with marketing practices (Geana, 2009). Our data indicate that Twitter is commonly used by political journalists as a corporate tool to promote their media’s brand and increase readership/viewership. They also document how these promotional practices are structured by managerial interventions, which explains the relative importance of organizational promotion over individual promotion. Finally, the research depicts how these practices were contested within the journalistic community, but often legitimized by a narrative of survival in a context of crisis in the industry (Coddington, 2015).

In focusing on a well-defined group of political journalists similar to those of other press galleries in Canada and around the world, our analysis offers an interesting potential of transferability. However, national differences matter in the practice of
political journalism (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014). Therefore, more research is necessary to assess how broadly and in what conditions these findings apply, taking into account that social media practices are still evolving (Brands, Graham, & Broersma, 2018; Enli & Simonsen, 2018). Further research may also examine other dimensions of promotional practices that have not been addressed by this study, namely, the use of hashtags for promotional purposes and the notion of personal brand development among journalists (Molyneux, 2015). Nevertheless, we believe that this study constitutes an important step in systematically examining how and why political journalists use social media for promotional purposes.

Finally, our analysis brings to light some important questions regarding the erosion of the boundary between news and business as well as the definition of political journalism’s identity. In the past, journalists often represented their public service mission and commercial aims in opposition to each other (Coddington, 2015). Their credibility rested, at least to some extent, on the “impenetrable wall” between corporate interests and journalism (Taras, 2015, p. 103). The metaphor of the wall allowed journalists to claim social responsibility as a professional norm. Now, in a context where political journalists also act as marketing representatives or public relations agents to their organization and themselves, could the profession maintain its credibility and its claim to serve the public interest, two fundamental criteria on which rests its special standing in democracy? Media corporations are not neutral actors in the political arena. Could political journalists be business oriented while fulfilling their public service mission? Is there a tipping point where the balance shifts and poses a challenge to journalism’s social responsibility? Promoting a brand and generating clicks and revenues while producing news that contributes to a better public understanding of political issues are not necessarily incompatible tasks. Yet as the boundary between journalism and marketing seems to blur, the profession might need to reassess its norms and standards in order to maintain its integrity in the current context of financial hardship and fast-paced technological change.

Notes
1. We define motivation as a reason or an explanation for behaving in a particular way, or “an answer to the question, ‘why did she do it?’” (Finlay & Schroeder, 2012). We define norms as the customary rules that govern behavior in groups and societies, by specifying what is acceptable and what is not (Bicchieri & Muldoon, 2014).
2. We used a conservative measure of promotion, excluding hashtags from our analysis although they may be used as a promotional tool (Molyneux, 2015). During the interviews, some journalists explained that hashtags were used in order to send their tweets directly to their website widget; journalists also utilized hashtags for expressive purposes. Therefore, it was impossible to clearly distinguish promotional hashtags from nonpromotional hashtags.
3. The categories are not mutually exclusive. A single post may contain more than one element of promotion.
4. Of all hyperlinks retrieved, 64% were identified as individual and/or organizational promotion.
5. The Charbonneau Commission was a public inquiry commission created by the Quebec government to investigate allegations of corruption and collusion in the province’s construction industry in regard to public work contracts. The commission also investigated possible financial kickbacks to political parties. Its hearings lasted three years (2012–2014) and were covered extensively in the Quebec media.
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