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ON THE STREET AND/OR ON TWITTER? The use of "every day" sources in economic news coverage by online and offline outlets

Rens Vliegenthart and **Mark Boukes**

By means of a large-scale manual content analysis of Dutch economic news coverage in 2015 (n = 4251 articles), we compare the use of "every day" sources by online and offline outlets. The use of those sources is argued to increase news consumers' attentiveness to the news item. We investigate whether online outlets use the "ordinary citizen" less frequently, both generally speaking as well as a source, while relying more on social media posts. Our empirical analysis focuses on a comparison between two online quality outlets (nrc.nl and vk.nl), two online popular outlets (nu.nl and telegraaf.nl), two offline quality outlets (NRC Handelsblad and de Volkskrant) and two offline popular outlets (Algemeen Dablad and de Telegraaf). Overall, results suggest a limited use of ordinary citizens as news sources, and even less use of social media. Multivariate logistic regression models, controlling for the length of news items as well as the day of publishing, 'show that offline outlets use ordinary citizens more often, while online outlets rely more on social media'. Additionally, we find the differences between popular and quality outlets a lot less pronounced, with the latter only making slight more use of social media sources.

KEYWORDS sources; online outlets; content analysis; economic news

Introduction

The use of ordinary citizens as a source in the coverage of current affairs is nothing new. The early tabloids in the nineteenth century already had an eye for the stories of the common man (Sparks 2000). In recent years, however, citizens have become increasingly prominent in the news (De Keyser and Raeymaeckers 2012; Umbricht and Esser 2016). The explanation for this increased presence of ordinary citizens has been twofold. First, growing commercial pressures with which journalists are confronted today force journalists to produce attractive, comprehensible and inexpensive stories (Bird 1998; Hinnant, Len-Ríos, and Young 2013). Secondly, the use of ordinary citizens as sources may be perceived as a form of "public journalism" through which ordinary citizens may be engaged and (re-)connected to the political and societal processes (Ahva 2013).

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Whereas numerous studies investigate the effects of news coverage that contains elements of personification (Boukes et al. 2015; Gross 2008; Iyengar 1991), there exist fewer studies that explore the content differences in terms of presence and roles that ordinary citizens play across different types of news outlets (see Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers, 2014 for a noteworthy exception). This is remarkable, since news content that includes citizens, in various roles, for example as reflecting the opinion of the ordinary man (vox-pop, Kleemans et al. 2017), as exemplars that demonstrate the consequences of issues and policies for specific citizens (Lefevere et al. 2012) or as key features of the episodic framing of issues (Iyengar 1991), has specific effects on readers' or viewers' involvement. Most notably, the use of ordinary citizens in communicative content has been demonstrated to increase attention among those exposed to the content, thereby enlarging its potential (persuasive) effects (Zillmann and Brosius 2012; Zerback and Peter 2018). With the undeniable rise of digital technologies—also in the profession of journalism—the role ordinary citizens play in the news has significantly changed: journalists today turn to the streets less frequently to interview the "(wo)man on the street" but instead reactions on social media may be used to give the audience a sense of the public opinion (Paulussen and Harder 2014). Here, it is important to not assume that social media provides an adequate reflection of "reality" (Lewis & Molyneux, forthcoming).

Fundamental questions that deserve attention is how often and in what ways ordinary citizens are featured in the content of online news compared to offline news, and how these content characteristics differ across different types of outlets (popular vs. quality news media). Content differences between those types of outlets can be substantial. A recent study, for example, shows that the online versions of Dutch newspapers significantly differ from their print counterparts and are dominated by press agency content. This is even more so for popular online newspapers than for quality online newspapers (Boumans 2016).

In this paper, we focus on the presence of ordinary citizens in news content, as well as the use of social media content as a possible alternative way for ordinary citizens to obtain a place in the news. We take a broad conceptualization of ordinary citizens and are both interested in them as sources that are quoted or paraphrased as well as passive actors that are discussed by others. Additionally, in line with work by Kleemans and colleagues (2017), we distinguish between random citizens and citizens that are involved with or affected by the issue that is discussed in the item. The first type resembles the "vox pop" category if they are indeed quoted. Relying on an extensive content analysis of economic news in a range of Dutch media ($n = 4251$), we make two comparisons. First, we compare the use of ordinary citizens and social media sources across online and offline news outlets. Second, we consider the differential use of those two types of sources by popular and quality online outlets. Economic news is a suitable topic for the current paper, as it features stories throughout news outlets: It can be found on front pages, domestic or foreign news, or in economic sections. Furthermore, economic news has been demonstrated to have a profound impact on citizens' levels of optimism about their own economic situation (Damstra and Boukes 2018), making the question of content characteristics, and the prominence of ordinary citizens that can enhance this type of news effects (Zillmann and Brosius 2012) all the more relevant. Moreover, studies suggest the use of ordinary citizens in economic news has rapidly increased over time (Hopmann and Shehata 2011).

Theory

It is ubiquitous that the media landscape has fundamentally altered in the past 10–15 years. In recent years, the consumption of online news has increased substantially at the expense of traditional, mainly printed outlets (Thurman and Fletcher 2017). The use of online media differs in substantial ways from that of offline media and their effects on all kind of political variables such as participation might differ considerably (Shah et al. 2005). Additionally, their actual content characteristics could be different (but see Ghersetti (2014) who reports relatively few differences) and at least deserve careful consideration. Below, we argue that the different logic for online and offline outlets can possibly account for differential use of ordinary citizens and social media. The even-higher time pressure for online outlets to respond quickly to events that take place might explain the lower use of ordinary citizens, while the possibilities to link directly to social media content might yield the expectation that these social media are more frequently used.

The rise of the Internet and the development of this platform as the main news provider for many citizens went hand in hand with declining circulation figures of printed newspapers, though the latter are still important players in today's media environment (Chyi and Tenenboim 2017). Considerable research efforts have been made to capture the quickly changing media consumption patterns of especially young people, and the consequences for their political interest, knowledge and participation. We still lack, however, a full understanding and systematic comparison of how the content of news online and offline differs. This is important, since it is arguably not only the *channel* characteristics, but also the *content* characteristics of the news consumed that feed into citizens' political engagement (Schuck et al. 2016). One of the key aspects of journalistic production is the actors that feature in news stories. In many instances they might, as sources, determine to a considerable extent the actual content of the stories. Also their mere presence has shown to have potential strong effects, as Hopmann et al. (2010) for example show in their study on the effects of actor visibility on voting behaviour. This study zooms in on the presence of specific actors; it focuses concretely, on ordinary citizens and social media posts. The latter can be social media posts *by* ordinary citizens that are replacing or complementing more general appearances of those citizens in the news. In that way, social media can be used as a cheap alternative way to access citizen sources (Heinrich 2011). Alternatively, it might also be that those social media posts are mainly used as a source of information about opinions and views of institutional, elite actors, as they often are very active and visible on this type of social media (Jacobs and Spierings 2016).

Regarding social media, studies have found that with the rise of platforms as Twitter and Facebook the journalistic practice has definitively changed (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013), but journalists themselves are still hesitant to use quotes from social media (Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016), though studies have shown that they equate social media with public opinion (Anstead and O'Loughlin 2014). The use of ordinary citizens, by contrast, has become an established approach in journalism to humanize stories and increase reader identification (Hinnant et al. 2013; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2017; Umbricht and Esser 2016). The question, though, remains whether platform (print vs. online) matters for how frequently ordinary citizens or social media posts are used as source. Survey research with journalists already showed that considerable

differences may exist between platforms and contexts; yet, little is known about the content itself (Gulyas 2013). The comparison between offline and online outlets might seem straightforward, but it is often not. In many instances, large news websites are actually published by the same publishing houses and have the same titles as printed newspapers. Online outlets have partly overlapping content with their offline counterparts. Boundaries between online and offline content are thus permeable. For the Dutch case we study this is partially true as well: the websites of national newspapers are among the most-often used ones. However, the most frequently used news websites is an independent one (nu.nl, see Reuters 2017). Furthermore, the vast majority of Dutch newspapers has a separate online newsroom and previous research shows that indeed content differs considerable between offline and online content of the same title, with the latter relying more heavily on news wire content (Boumans 2016).

Given the possible overlap between offline and online versions of the same outlets, differences might not be as pronounced as one might expect. Additionally, the fact that systematic comparisons are largely absent in empirical research makes us even more cautious to expect *à priori* large differences.

Ordinary Citizens in the News

Citizens can feature in multiple ways in news stories and their presence has been conceptualized from different perspectives. First, they can be used as sources of information, either as actors that are directly involved with the topic of the news item, or as random people who express a view on a political issue and thus reflecting (parts of) the public opinion. While the involved citizen is associated with research on public journalism and has a positive connotation, the latter presence has received considerable attention in the literature under the notion of "vox populi" or "vox pop" and is often considered questionable from a normative point of view. Second, the ordinary citizen, rather than a source of information, can also be present as an object that is affected by other actors or issues, but not being provided with the opportunity to express their own views or opinions (Kleinnijenhuis et al. 2006). Here, we theorize about the general presence of citizens in news coverage and in first instance do not distinguish between different types of appearances. We do, however, additionally investigate the ratio of different types of presence and how this ratio might differ across different types of outlets.

Online news sites can take multiple forms, ranging from aggregated news sites, to alternative media and from standalone sites to online counterparts of offline newspapers (see e.g. Deuze 2003). Here, we focus on the largest online outlets, which are either standalone, or counterparts of offline newspapers. In both instances, journalists are involved in the news production in a comparable manner as for the offline outlets, but they do face the different requirements and limitations that are part of the online news environment (e.g. the need to be fast, often more limited resources, see further below).

Simply looking at the sources of information that journalists use themselves, Gulyas (2013) generally found that those who work for print outlets use less social media in their daily life than journalists of online outlets; although, journalists rather use social media to promote their own work than as a source of news. Not only the

use of social media, but especially the ease with which sources can be included in journalistic items and the credibility assigned to this type of source, arguably, should determine the frequency of use. After all, journalists have been faced with a strongly increased workload. On the one hand, the number of reporters has declined considerably as the consequence of falling circulations and reduced advertising incomes (Lichterman 2015). On the other hand, the editorial output has increased—in the United Kingdom for example with more than 300% in the 20-year period between 1985 and 2006 (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). Altogether, fewer journalists have to write more stories. This leads us to the general expectation that journalists prefer sources that without much difficulty match the format of their outlet.

For printed newspapers, journalists have shown to perceive *personification* as an important news factor. By including personal elements of ordinary citizens in their stories, a news item may become more interesting for the audience and overall contributes to the *newsworthiness* of a topic (Caple and Bednarek 2013; Eilders 2006; Galtung and Ruge 1965). Heavily relying on such routines (David 2008; Ryfe 2009), journalists of print outlets probably have continued to use ordinary sources to make their storylines more engaging and comprehensible—especially in the context of abstract issues such as the economy. Ordinary citizens are a relatively easy to access source of information compared to experts or involved elites who have more interests at stake, which makes them particularly helpful under circumstances of heavy workload. For news websites, this seems less so. Journalists working for online platforms are more occupied with rapidly disseminating short news items (Burggraaff and Trilling 2017) than providing an interpretation or investigating it in-depth (Cassidy 2005), and often simply lack time and resources to ask 'the person on the street' her/his opinion about the issue. Accordingly, ordinary citizens might feature less prominently in online news content. Since, so far, any systematic comparisons between online and offline outlets have been lacking, we refrain from formulating a hypothesis and pose the following research question:

RQ1: Do print news outlets feature ordinary citizens more frequently than online news outlets?

Social Media

Regarding the use of social media sources, we might expect the opposite from what we expected for ordinary citizens in general. Though in many instances criticized for not being a credible source of information (e.g. Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), for online media, it is more easy to integrate social media posts in their articles, by providing a hyperlink to posts on Twitter or Facebook, and by doing so quickly creating additional content and the perception that they provide some kind of background information to their stories. This is in particular true for the reporting of unexpected events and "breaking news" which often relies on social media posts to get quick information about what is actually happening (see for an example Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2012). Compared to their offline counterparts, online news outlets are particular aiming to provide those quick updates (Maier 2010). Offline outlets do not have the opportunity to simply add a hyperlink to social media content and need to explain the background of an individual tweet and place it in the right context,

journalists of print outlets will have to invest a certain amount of time. Time that they might not have or want to spend on other issues. So, given the somewhat differing routines by which journalists of different outlets work, one might expect variation in the use of social media. However, again, we have little empirical work that sustains this claim. Consequently, we. pose the following research question:

> RQ2: Do online news outlets more frequently feature content from social media than print news outlets?

Of course, social media sources can potentially include a whole range of different actors, including prominent political en economic figures, but also random people who express their opinions on Twitter of Facebook. Recent studies have considered the degree to which social media, and in particular Twitter, are used as an easily accessible source for expressions of opinions—"vox pops" (Beckers and Harder 2017). Indeed, journalists use Twitter as a source for statements by the 'man on the street' and also use general references to Twitter to back up statements about public opinion in general. A study by Paulussen and Harder (2014) focusing on main Flemish newspapers suggests that when journalists quote social media, almost half of the time the source actor is an ordinary citizen. Broersma and Graham (2013) find that this number is considerably lower for Dutch newspapers in the period 2007–2011: 14 per cent of Tweets used in newspaper content are coded as "vox pop". We do not know, however, the extent to which those findings are generalizable over time. Neither do we know whether they are similar for the specific (economic) issue our study focuses on. Furthermore, we do not know the degree to which presence differs across online and offline news outlets. To understand the degree to which social media serve as an (alternative) source of information for public views, we thus ask the following question:

> RQ3: Which share of social media content used in news coverage originates from ordinary citizens and does that share differ between online and offline outlets?

Finally, we can compare outlets not only on their platform (print or online), but also on their journalistic genre. Scholars frequently make a distinction between popular and quality outlets—others refer to their original formats of tabloid versus broadsheet papers. On the one hand, one might expect that popular news outlets feature more non-institutional actors than quality outlets (Boukes and Vliegenthart 2017; Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers 2014), because especially these outlets attract a readership that appreciates and needs the examples that are given in personified news to comprehend a story (Bird 1998). On the other hand, it might be quality outlets that are more likely to adhere to bottom-up approaches of the news like public or civic journalism (Brants and De Haan 2010), and one might expect citizen sources to be used more frequently. Here, we anticipate the first effect to be stronger, also because of the 'institutionalized' position of vox pop in popular outlets. One of the newspapers in our sample has for example a frequently published column where random people are allowed to respond to the news. Additionally, social media sources have been argued to be used mainly for 'soft news' topics and contribute to sensationalism and the "tabloidization of news" (Hladík and Stetka 2017), thus fitting better with popular newspapers content wise. Social media posts that require little research and resources may, therefore, be expected to be found more often in popular outlets as well. Again, we pose a research question:

RQ4: Do popular news outlets feature (a) ordinary citizens and (b) social media sources more frequently than quality news outlets?

Method

Our analysis entails a systematic analysis and comparison between a comparable sample of online sources (telegraaf.nl, nu.nl, nrc.nl en vk.nl) and offline sources (*Telegraaf*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*). Both NRC Handelsblad and de Volkskrant are considered quality newspapers, while de Telegraaf and Algemeen Dagblad are popular newspapers with the highest circulation rates (Boukes and Vliegenthart 2017). For the online sources, nrc.nl and vk.nl are the online counterparts of the offline quality newspapers and can also considered to be quality outlets. Also telegraaf.nl is included as a popular online source. While newspapers tend to publish partly overlapping content on their different platforms, research has shown that for those titles considerable differences between online and offline content exist (Boumans 2016). Nu.nl is the most widely used news websites in the Netherlands and includes a variety of sections, paying relatively much attention to news in categories such as "entertainment" and "sports" and can be considered a popular news source.[1]

In the context of a larger content analysis project, all economic news in four offline sources was collected for the period between 1 February 2015 and 8 July 2015. Relevant articles were selected using a broad search string.[2] In a second step, human coders would select relevant articles by looking at the headline and first section and subsequently answering the question whether explicit references were present to the economy, economic developments (e.g. employment, price changes, economic growth/shrinking, housing, consumer behaviour, inflation, import/export), government spending, or the economic and financial situation of individuals or businesses. This left us with a total of 3181 articles (709 for NRC Handelsblad, 688 for de Volkskrant, 540 for Algemeen Dagblad and 1244 for de Telegraaf). For the online sources, a similar procedure was followed to identify relevant articles, but this time, because of budget constraints, we only considered a 25 per cent random sample for the online newspapers (nrc.nl, telegraaf.nl and vk.nl). For nu.nl, we analyzed all economic news items.[3] It is important to realize that online news content is dynamic and changes, since articles can for example be altered and extended (Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2016). Thus, we capture only a snapshot of each article. This resulted in a total of 1,070 articles (269 for nrc.nl, 263 for vk.nl, 124 for nu.nl and 414 for telegraaf.nl). The total number articles (both offline and online) included in the analysis adds up to 4251.

For each of the news items, an elaborate manual coding was conducted. In the project, a total of 22 student coders participated. To capture the presence of the ordinary citizen in news items, the codebook included a variable that asked the coder to indicate which actors played a role in the news item. The closed list included the options "Dutch layman person", "Dutch '(wo)man on the street'", "international layman person" and "international '(wo)man on the street'"). If any or more of those actors were indeed present, we considered ordinary citizens to be present in the article. To capture the use of social media sources, the question whether the news item included references to either Facebook or Twitter was used. These two social media are among

the most frequently used ones in the Netherlands: 62% (Facebook) and 15% (Twitter) of the Dutch population uses them at least weekly (Reuters 2017)—providing journalists with ample opportunities to find expressions of views and opinions of all kind of individuals.

In an additional analysis, we considered for both the ordinary citizens whether they were 'involved' with the topic of the item (i.e. directly affected by it) or "random" (i.e. no direct involvement with the topic). Additionally, we recorded whether they were quoted or paraphrased as source, or not. For references to social media we capture whether the content originated from an involved ordinary citizen, a random ordinary citizen, or another type of actor, or it was actually a general reference to Facebook or Twitter, that is to their business results. In the latter case, social media are actually not a source of information.

To test intercoder reliability, an initial sample of 102 items was coded by multiple coders. Since some of the coders only participated in the coding of offline news and some only in the coding of online news, they did not code all 102 items all of them, but they were all present in the reliability analysis. Overall, reliability scores of the key variables in our analysis can be considered satisfactorily, with 92% agreement on the presence of the ordinary citizen (standardized Lotus=.85) and 95% agreement on the reference to social media (standardized Lotus=.90).[4] For the additional coding featuring the role of the citizens, we double-coded 61 articles (20% of the total sample). Results were again considered satisfactorily with a 85% agreement on the role of the citizen (no, random, involved) (standardized Lotus=.70,) and 92% on the source (standardized Lotus=.82). Finally, for the additional coding of social media reliability was 79% (standardized Lotus=.58) for whether the underlying source was a random citizen, involved citizen or no citizen at all. Here, scores are arguably lower since it is more difficult to distinguish random citizens from involved citizens in cases were for example tweets are presented in addition to the main text.

Analysis

Our key variables of interest are dichotomous: an ordinary citizen is present as source in the article, or not; an article refers to social media, or not. Thus, our unit of analysis is the news item. We consider the likelihood of occurrence of those content characteristics to depend upon outlet characteristics (online versus offline outlet, RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3; quality versus popular outlet, RQ4). We consider those relationships both in a univariate setting, relying on cross tabulations and Chi-squared statistics, as well as in a multivariate setting, where logistic regression analyses are most appropriate to use. In the latter instance, we include *article length* as an additional control variable. In general, one might anticipate the likelihood that any content characteristic is present in an article increases with an increasing length of the article. To check whether any (linear) trends are present, we additionally include a variable that records the day of the year on which the article is published.

Results

First, we compare the use of ordinary citizens as actors in online and offline outlets. Overall, we see that ordinary citizens are not often used. Only 6.0% of all articles

TABLE 1
Presence of ordinary citizen per medium

Medium	Presence of ordinary citizens
Offline	
NRC Handelsblad	43 of 709 (6.1%)
Volkskrant	58 of 688 (8.4%)
Algemeen Dagblad	54 of 540 (10.0%)
de Telegraaf	69 of 1,244 (5.5%)
Online	
nrc.nl	7 of 269 (2.6%)
vk.nl	9 of 263 (3.4%)
nu.nl	0 of 124 (0.0%)
telegraaf.nl	14 of 414 (3.4%)

*N*total = 4251.

we analysed ($n = 254$ of 4251) contains a reference to an ordinary person and/or (wo)man on the street. The data reveals a variety of ways in which this happens, ranging from short quotes by apparently random people (vox pop style), mainly in the online and offline editions of de Telegraaf, as well as more elaborate interviews with citizens that are affected by for example lay-offs or changes in economic policies. During our research period, the economic crisis in Greece received a considerable amount of attention (16% ($n = 41$ of 254) of articles containing an ordinary citizen deals with the Greek debt crisis), and random Greek citizens occur frequently in both online and offline news outlets.

Table 1 lists the number of items and percentages per medium. We see considerable variation, with the popular daily Algemeen Dagblad paying attention to ordinary citizens in one our of each ten items, while the website nu.nl does not refer to ordinary citizens in its economic coverage at all.

We see that in offline outlets the ordinary person is present a lot more frequently than in online outlets: 7.0% ($n = 224$ of 3181 offline articles) contains a reference to this type of actor, compared to only 2.8% ($n = 30$ of 1070 online articles). This difference is significant ($Chi^2 = 25.60$, $p < .001$). The difference between popular and quality outlets (print and online) is a lot less pronounced and not significant: 5.9% ($n = 137$ of 2322 articles published in popular outlets) versus 6.1% ($n = 117$ of 1,929 articles published in quality outlets) respectively ($Chi^2 = 0.51$, *ns*).

The results of the multivariate logistic regression analysis as reported in Table 2.

Here, we see again a clear confirmation of the difference between online and offline articles. The first shows almost a two-third smaller odds of referring to an ordinary citizen. Contrary to the findings from our univariate analysis, we find a significant difference between popular and quality newspapers. The latter have a 44.4% higher odds of mentioning the ordinary citizen. This is most likely caused by the fact that we control for article length here: articles in quality outlets are on average more than 200 words longer than those in popular outlets (498.61 vs. 298.43). If we take this length into consideration, popular newspapers score higher than quality newspapers. Indeed, length has a positive and significant effect on the likelihood of the ordinary citizen being mentioned. Throughout our research period, this chance increases slightly as well, as denoted by the positive effect of our time variable. Overall, the explanatory power of

TABLE 2
Predicting the presence of ordinary citizens in news coverage

	B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio
	general presence		*as a source*	
Constant	−3.860*** (.214)	.021	−4.259*** (.239)	0.014
Online outlet	−1.023*** (.211)	.359	−1.039*** (.234)	0.354
Popular	0.367* (.145)	1.444	0.331* (.160)	1.393
Length	0.001*** (.000)	1.001	0.001*** (.000)	1.001
Day	0.004* (.001)	1.004	0.005** (.002)	1.005
Nagelkerke R-squared	.083		.090	

Note. *N*total = 4251; $^{*}p < .05$, $^{***}p < .001$.

the model is not very high, with a Nagelkerke R-squared of .083. This is not very remarkable, given the wide variety of other content characteristics that might account for the use of laymen in coverage that are not taken into consideration here. If we would, instead of predicting all references to ordinary citizens, take the use of ordinary citizens as a source as the dependent variable, the results are similar. Popular and offline outlets devote significantly more attention to ordinary citizens as sources (see Table 2).

Overall, the findings provide an affirmative answer to research question 1: indeed, offline outlets offer more room for ordinary citizens compared to online outlets. Also, research questions 4a receives an affirmative answer: quality outlets devote less attention to the ordinary citizen, but only if we control for article length.

In what ways is the ordinary citizen presented in news coverage? Both online and offline outlets focus in the majority of the cases on citizens that are involved in the issue that is discussed: 68% offline ($n = 152$ of 224 articles) and 63% online ($n = 19$ of 30 articles)—with no statistically significant difference between them (Chi-squared=.246, *ns*). Random citizens are only present in roughly a third of the cases. In a vast majority of the cases, the ordinary citizen is given the opportunity to express her opinion: 81% for offline outlets and 83% for online outlets. Again, the difference between both outlets is not significant (Chi-squared=.110, *ns*). So, overall, while offline outlets indeed refer to the ordinary citizen more often than online outlets, they do so in a very similar manner. Significant differences do exist between quality and popular outlets, with the latter when including ordinary citizens referring more often to random, not directly involved ones: (39% ($n = 54$ of 137 articles in popular outlets) versus 24% ($n = 29$ of 117 articles in quality outlets), Chi-squared = 6.14, $p < .05$).

We now move to our second variable of interest: the use of social media sources. Table 3 presents the numbers per outlet. Again, we find that scores are very low, with only 1.4% ($n = 58$) of the articles referring to social media platforms. Differences between online and offline outlets are in line with our expectations: online outlets refer considerably more often use Facebook and Twitter as a source than their offline counterparts (3.4% ($n = 36$ of 1070 articles) versus 0.7% ($n = 22$ of 3181 articles)) and this difference is significant (Chi-squared=42.51, $p < .001$). The difference between popular and quality newspapers is as well, but contrary to what we might expect, it are the latter that refer to social media more frequently (0.8% ($n = 19$ of 2,322 articles in popular

TABLE 3
Use of social media sources per medium

Medium	Presence of social media posts
Offline	
NRC Handelsblad	8 of 709 (1.1%)
Volkskrant	5 of 688 (0.7%)
Algemeen Dagblad	3 of 540 (0.6%)
de Telegraaf	6 of 1,244 (0.5%)
Online	
nrc.nl	14 of 269 (5.2%)
vk.nl	12 of 263 (4.6%)
nu.nl	8 of 124 (6.5%)
telegraaf.nl	2 of 414 (0.5%)

*N*total = 4251.

outlets) versus 2.0% ($n = 39$ of 1,929 articles in quality outlets), Chi-squared $= 11.34$, $p < .01$).

Table 4 presents the results of the multivariate logistic model. They are in line with the findings presented above. Online news media make substantially more use of social media sources than offline media, with an odds ratio of 4.361. If we compare popular outlets with quality outlets, we see that the first have almost half the odds of using a social media source versus not using a social media source. Finally, again, length and time both exert a positive influence: longer articles are more likely to include social media sources and the use of those sources increases somewhat throughout our research period. The explanatory power of this model is a bit higher than the one predicting the presence of the ordinary citizen, with a Nagelkerke R-squared of .142. Again, we also conducted the analysis with a stricter dependent variable—that is, social media used as a source and excluding general references to Facebook or Twitter. The results resemble that one of the general reference to social media: the main difference is between online and offline outlets, with the latter using a lot more social media sources. Here, the difference between popular and quality outlets is not significant (see Table 4).

Overall, those results provide an affirmative answer to research question 2, which questioned whether online media to use social media sources more frequently. They also lead us to formulate a maybe unexpected answer to research question 4b: quality media, and not popular media, refer more to social media, while if we consider them as sources specifically, no significant difference exists.

Finally, the question that has so far remained unaddressed is the degree to which social media content originates from ordinary citizens and whether that share differs between online and offline outlets (RQ3). It turns out that in a reasonable amount of the cases, social media content originates from ordinary citizens: for offline media this share is 59% ($n = 13$ of 22 articles including social media, 14% random citizens, 45% involved citizens), for online media this number is lower: 39% ($n = 14$ of 36 articles including social media, 17% random citizens, 22% involved citizens). In other instances, the references point to social media content of other actors, such as the former Greek minister of Finance Yanis Varoufakis who frequently used Twitter to

TABLE 4
Predicting the presence of social media sources in news coverage

	B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio
	general		*as a source*	
Constant	−6.258*** (.450)	.002	−6.731*** (.525)	.001
Online outlet	1.473*** (.288)	4.361	1.834*** (.350)	6.259
Popular	−0.630* (.292)	.533	−0.490 (.335)	.613
Length	0.001*** (.000)	1.001	0.001*** (.000)	1.001
Day	0.009** (.001)	1.009	0.008* (.003)	1.008
Nagelkerke R-squared	.142		.160	

Note. *N*total =4251; $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$,$^{***}p < .001$.

communicate about the EU negotiations on the Greek debts. The differences between online and offline outlets are not statistically significant, probably due to the limited number of cases (Chi-squared = 3.50, *ns*). These findings do suggest that in online outlets, social media are only to a limited extent used to replace "regular" ordinary citizen occurrences.

Conclusion

The rise of online news, partly at the expense of offline news, begs the question to what extent the content in different outlets differs. Focusing on actors in the news, we find a clearly distinct pattern: while offline outlets make more frequently use of the ordinary (wo)man, online outlets use social media more as a source. These insights complement recent studies by for example Beckers and Harder (2017) and Paulussen and Harder (2014) who focus either solely on online or on offline outlets. These differences are more pronounced than the differences between popular and quality outlets, where we only find the latter to use social media sources somewhat more frequently.

We have found that the presence of ordinary citizens in news coverage is limited. We consider this simple observation a relevant one: while considered a key content characteristic of much news coverage by many scholars, our results demonstrate that, at least when it comes to economic news coverage, it actually is a rare phenomenon. This might be partly due to the issue under investigation: whereas ordinary citizens are visible in welfare issues, journalists use them less frequently in economic news (Kleemans et al. 2017)—although that number has been increasing over time (Hopmann and Shehata 2011). Also the use of social media sources remains limited across the board. Our results in that sense deviate from those of Broersma and Graham (2013), who find a more frequent use of social media as a source. The difference might be, at least partly, attributed to the specific type of news we focused on: economic news can be considered "hard news", where the use of social media is a lot less frequent than for "soft news" topics such as entertainment.

If ordinary citizens are present they are most frequently citizens that are involved with the issue of the article, and not random people. Also they are in a vast majority of the cases used as a source, both by online and offline outlets. They are, however, even less visible in online outlets compared to offline outlets. This clear difference between

online and offline outlets implies that citizens who consume their news online are less often confronted with exemplars, which are often part of episodic or human interest framing of news. While effects of this type of coverage on attitudes towards all kind of societal and political issues are far from straightforward (Lefevere et al. 2012), previous research has shown that exemplars in many instances attract audience's attention and have considerable persuasive power (Zillmann and Brosius 2012). The absence of those actors in online news might mean that readers are less "captured" by the story and will more easily click to other content. We do need more research that tests whether this is indeed the case, and what the differences in content between online and offline sources mean for key outcome variables such as (political) interest, attitudes and behaviour.

While the absence of the ordinary citizen in online news coverage might yield not-so-positive effects, the more frequent use of social media might deserve a somewhat different assessment. On the one hand, one could consider referring to Tweets or Facebook posts as a form of 'lazy' journalism: there is no need to contact a source directly and short quotes can be easily obtained, favouring those (political or societal) actors that are present and visible online. On the other hand, sensible use can be a useful addition to the quality and verifiability of coverage: readers can easily check the source of the quote or statement and even have the opportunity to get directly involved by for example retweeting, sharing or commenting on social media. In that sense, it offers readers more opportunities to actively engage with the news. However, it is important to note that social media posts hardly serve as a replacement for the regular appearance of the ordinary citizen: social media posts are used infrequently, and if they are used, it is more often than not that content of other actors is featured.

Our statistical analysis shows systematic and considerable differences between online and offline media, and also between quality and tabloid outlets. Overall, however, we are only able to explain only a limited amount of the variance in the presence of an ordinary citizen in a specific news item. All kind of other factors, such as time of publication, specific sub-issue or section in which the item is published might be helpful to get to better predictions. Our aim here was not to provide a comprehensive account of the presence ordinary citizens in news coverage, but we were specifically interested in inter-outlet variation. Still, future research might profit from extending the range of explanatory variables to further extend our understanding of this phenomenon.

Our study is not without weaknesses and one that definitely needs to be mentioned here is the specific issue we focused on. We already mentioned that we looked into economic news coverage, and while this type of coverage shares many of the content characteristics of other types of news coverage (see e.g. Boukes and Vliegenthart 2017 for an elaborate discussion of the news values that are present in this type of news), it also has a couple of distinct features and might not be the place where ordinary citizens are most frequently present. In that sense, our results complements previous research that finds ordinary citizens to be an important (and increasingly important) source of information and actor that defines the news. Our findings suggest that the degree to which this is the case depends on the issue at stake, as well as on the outlet one considers. It might also be that the results depend on the country context. While we have no à priori theoretical reason to expect the results to be fundamentally different in other industrialized countries than the Netherlands, cross-national comparative research is needed to test this.

Yet another notable and important consideration for our study is the fact that some of our popular news sources, in particular the online and offline version of de Telegraaf, devote a lot of attention to financial and economic news and do so in a very qualitative manner. This fact might not so much influence the online/offline comparison, but it might hamper a 'clean' comparison between quality and popular newspapers. As a result, they might be more similar than they would be when other issues are considered. Future research should take into consideration a broader range of topics when considering variation in the use of sources to test to what extent our findings are generalizable.

Despite these potential shortcomings of this study, the robust and striking differences between online and offline outlets when it comes to the use of sources are relevant on their own, and in our view a useful starting point for further comparisons.

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NOTES

1. We decided to include nu.nl instead of the online version of Algemeen Dagblad (ad.nl) for two reasons. First, we want to provide a varied and representative account of the Dutch online news environment and nu.nl is an important player in that landscape. Second, during our research period nu.nl is used considerably more than ad.nl and is actually the most frequently used news website (Reuters 2017).
2. The following Boolean search string was used (translated into English; original Dutch search string available upon request). Keywords searched for in the title or first paragraph: economi! OR financi! OR monetary OR "labour force" OR "Central Bank" OR "Dutch Bank" OR export OR import OR "national income" OR "gross national product" OR "public spending" OR "government spending" OR "government cuts" OR "government budget cuts" OR "labour participation" OR recession OR savings OR vacancies OR "job openings" OR jobs OR "interest on savings" OR "mortgage interest". Keywords searched for in the main body of text: employment OR unemploy! OR "housing market" OR "house prices" OR TTIP OR inflation OR deflation OR "consumer spending" OR "consumer expenditure!" OR ((dismissed OR fired OR sacked OR discharged) AND (employee OR "staff member!" OR jobs). Offline media content was collected from LexisNexis, online news outlets downloaded directly from the respective websites.
3. Since we are interested in relative and not absolute differences in the use of ordinary citizens and social media between offline and online outlets, we

decided not to rely on a similar size sample for the offline outlets, but use all the material we have at our disposal.

4. We use Lotus instead of Krippendorff's alpha, which is the most common measure to assess intercoder reliability. We did so because Lotus is particularly suitable for assessing reliability of phenomena that occur relatively rarely (Fretwurst 2015), as is the case for the both the presence of the ordinary citizen, as well as the use of social media as a source.

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