

“Beyond 140 Characters”: A Tow Center project about the forces that shape journalists’ strategic Twitter engagement

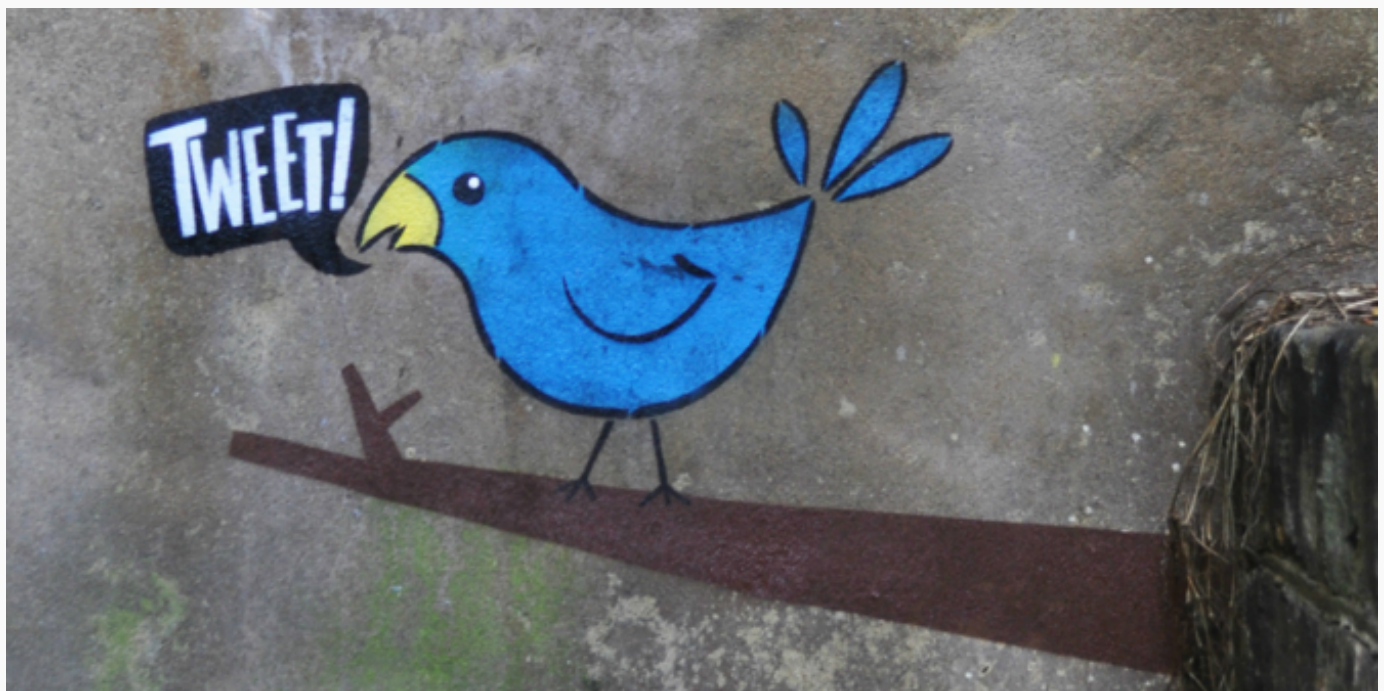
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In 2009, The Washington Post’s [Paul Farhi](#) wrote a feature for the [American Journalism Review](#) on what he called the “[Twitter Explosion](#)”. He questioned the micro-blogging platform as the “world’s most overhyped technology” and “latest media obsession” and set out to argue for its value as a journalistic reporting tool. Seven years are a lifetime in the tech world and today, we don’t need much convincing (if any at all) that Twitter has long since found its place in American newsrooms and journalists’ digital lives.



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In an attempt to control the negative repercussions and benefit from the positive ones of the “Twitter Explosion,” legacy media organizations have since created [social media news desks](#) and came up with social media training for reporters as well as organizational policies that guide desirable, acceptable and punishable behavior (in some cases more successfully so than in others, take, for example, [CNN’s recent suspension of Elise Labott](#)).

Journalists themselves, like every new Twitter user at the time, had to go through a trial and error phase to discover the risks and opportunities of Twitter. We have witnessed a learning curve that united early adopters, laggards, and everyone in between at the promise of capitalizing on what Twitter can do for them as professionals and for news production as a whole. Oftentimes, as we [know](#) from [previous research](#), journalists have embraced Twitter to break news, disseminate content, source stories and engage their audiences with an unprecedented immediacy. While

none of these are genuinely novel elements in the news cycle, Twitter as a medium enables professional journalists to pursue these activities in a broader variety of ways and under profoundly different conditions than ever before.

Despite an overall stagnating user base and recent reports of [Twitter struggling](#) as a business, it remains as one of the key social media platforms for journalists and news organizations. For example, the numbers of users (62% according to [Pew data from 2015](#)) for whom Twitter serves as a source for news about events and issues outside the realm of friends and family are consistently rising. More surprisingly, they now cut across nearly every demographic group. Over the short span of just a few years, news organizations and journalists have been propelled into a time where they are now ever more strategic in identifying the prospects of platforms like Twitter. Amidst the myriad opportunities of the current age of [post-industrial journalism](#), they are pondering new monetization strategies, [the power of clicks](#), [user generated content](#) and [crowdsourcing](#).

If the on-going social media hype puts pressures on journalists to constantly be active on platforms like Twitter, and to capitalize on the many affordances of digital technologies, then what are the underlying forces that shape the conditions, degree and breadth of their Twitter engagement? Many of their activities on Twitter are directly observable, but we know little about why, how and when they engage in one way or another, or which outcomes (both actual and sought after) journalists' efforts on the platform, ultimately, generate.

As a [Tow Fellow](#), I've spent the fall of 2015 speaking to 26 political journalists about the motivations and strategies that shape and drive their Twitter use, as well as the benefits they get out of engaging with the platform and its users. These journalists work for some of the most influential legacy media organizations in the country, both in print and broadcasting. While I'm still sifting through the data I've collected, I can already say as much: journalists' individual approaches to and skills of tweeting vary and range across a broad spectrum, from submitting to the mandates of organizational social media policies, to competitive pressures and "fear of missing out", or making substantive investments into Twitter because the platform is viewed as a potential career asset in an unstable labor market.

So watch this space for an upcoming mini-series of blog posts that discuss the project's key findings.

By Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde

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