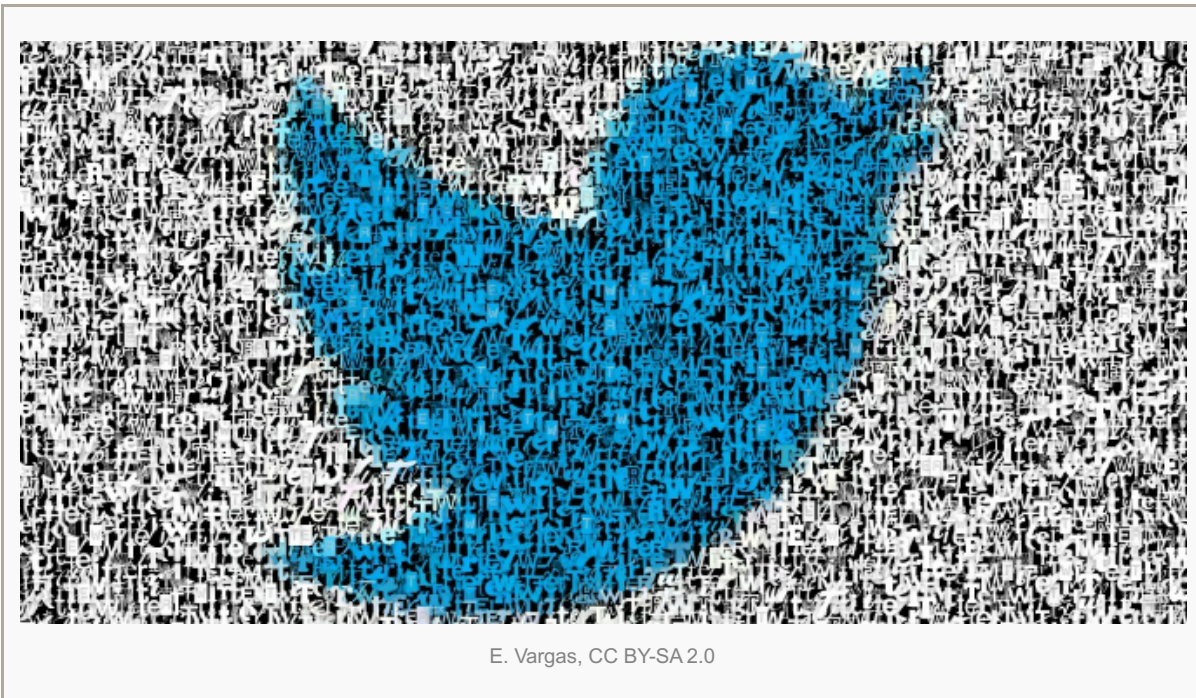


How the nature and circumstances of a news event are key in shaping political journalists' Twitter engagement

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2017/01/19/how-the-nature-and-circumstances-of-a-news-event-are-key-in-shaping-political-journalists-twitter-engagement/

2017-1-19

Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde is a [Fellow](#) at Tow Center for Digital Journalism and a [PhD candidate](#) in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE



E. Vargas, CC BY-SA 2.0

Note: This is the fourth post in the [Beyond 140 characters](#) series, which investigates how, why, and under what circumstances political journalists engage with Twitter. This piece shares some of the project's key findings. The [previous post](#) reflected on the role of news organizations, institutional social media policies and economic considerations.

The practice of journalism is highly situational: during key news events journalists follow different rhythms and work patterns than during slow news phases. Findings from the “Beyond 140 characters” project indicate how political journalists' engagement with Twitter varies between mundane and intense news periods. For example, many journalists apply the value of newsworthiness to Twitter in a similar fashion as they would to legacy media. One journalist described his approach during slow news phases as follows:

I think one Twitter skill for reporters is that – and I've had to learn this – when news is not happening, you don't want to abuse your Twitter following. They're there to get great information from you, not to know about your life story. They don't want to know that we're getting coffee. You don't want to over-share. You have to have the same respect for your followers on Twitter as newspapers do for their readers. You don't want to inundate them and you don't want to give them just information that's meaningless.

During breaking news events, there is a significant increase in the scope of how journalists take to Twitter. This is

twofold: most journalists spend decisively more time on Twitter, but their practices on the platform also become more diverse. For example, one journalist compared an average to an intense news day on Twitter, juxtaposing how much space each takes up in his work day, as well as the different purposes the platform serves depending on how much is going on in his beat:

During a regular day, I sometimes need a little mental break for a couple of minutes. I'll scroll through Twitter as I kind of think about what I just talked about in an interview, and what I might want to do with that. So I would say... during an average day maybe my total time on Twitter would be half an hour. But if I'm live tweeting something, an event or meetings I cover, which often go on for seven, eight, ten hours... I wouldn't be on Twitter without interruption, but visiting multiple times in an hour for hours on end.

Many journalists are readily able to lay out how Twitter is used for a variety of reasons during busy news periods. One described a commonly shared approach and objective:

We use it to break news, we use it to live tweet events, we use it to engage audiences in conversation. We use it to make sure that as many people as possible see the content and the storytelling that we're doing on whatever event it is.

The nature and circumstances of an event matter

But a breaking news event can encompass a range of different events and stories, and not all news events allow for or facilitate equal journalistic responses and coverage. We know from [previous research](#) of Twitter's [utility](#) and [status](#) in the context of breaking news. Many journalists agree, to use one individual's own words, that:

You're sort of curating your own kind of news feed in a way. And so the downside of it is that you can get lost in that stream of information. And so I think that the challenge really as a journalist is using the platform to gather information that you otherwise would never have gathered.

The vast majority of journalists in my study confirm that Twitter has, whether for active or passive usage, become the go-to medium in breaking news scenarios for first-hand information as they unfold, real-time commentary, eyewitness accounts, and footage from user-generated content. Many journalists shared ample examples of how Twitter emerged as a vital tool in their past coverage of breaking news. One summarized its role as follows, outlining how it overtakes traditional news media during intense and information-sensitive news periods:

If there's a breaking news event going on I definitely follow Twitter more closely. I follow it to the point of distraction almost, but that's where you can get the news much quicker, even more quickly than broadcast news.

Opportunities to experiment

But there are other intense news periods that aren't necessarily *breaking* stories, despite the fact that they might still be major stories on a national (or even international) scale. Predictable or scheduled news events (think, for example, elections or rulings in high profile court cases) are anticipated and non-spontaneous. The nature and

circumstances of such news events are key for journalists on Twitter, as the story is embedded into an existing information ecosystem and offers established channels to pursue it: most, if not all, actors involved are known, thus providing access to legitimate and reliable sources (one of the [key challenges in breaking news scenarios](#), in fact); official statements and press releases are widely accessible; and coverage of the event might have been going on for weeks or months already, providing a narrative backdrop and points of reference that any further coverage can be linked to.

Many journalists continue to approach these (non-breaking) intense news periods with a “business as usual” perspective and appropriate many of Twitter’s socio-technological affordances to fit long-standing journalistic practices (a phenomenon that has been discussed as ‘[normalization](#)’ in previous studies). One journalist told me:

If something breaks, we are open to covering it on Twitter. But I’m also kind of in the realm where unless it’s something really big, you’re better served, and your readers are better served, by tweeting out a link to the final story. It’s like instead of just having ten tweets that have one different fact in them and no links to your website, take all those ten facts that you were going to tweet out, put them in a story, and then tweet that link. It seems like that benefits your newspaper better.

A select few take a more creative stance. These individuals are keen to explore the potential that lies beyond simply mapping traditional journalistic routines onto Twitter. A small but considerable number of journalists recognize Twitter offers myriad opportunities to experiment with new journalistic formats. One told me about the wider institutional social media strategy that drives both the news organizations’ and individual journalists’ Twitter practices during intense news periods:

If you take the Democratic Debates that we had in Vegas [in 2015]... I’m really proud of what we’re doing in terms of social first editorial storytelling. We’re trying to do that more and more for political events... We turned a two-hour TV event into a two-day, trending affair across Twitter and Facebook. We used it to try different ways of storytelling, such as Twitter Moment collections, an Instagram movie series, and backstage from the debate we went live on Facebook.

The rationale behind this is simple:

The days of taking what you’ve done on another platform and putting it on social are over.

Gaining or losing a competitive advantage?

Competition is fierce in the news industry, particularly during intense news periods when many national political journalists are likely to be covering the same story. It can be a key moment for both an organization and a journalist to position themselves in the market and use the platform as added value, grabbing the audience’s attention and establishing competitive superiority, as one journalist explained:

To me, those same qualities that make a great reporter in the newspaper or on television apply to Twitter. But what makes Twitter different is that you can break things on Twitter and really get into the political ecosystem in a way. I mean if I break something on Twitter and it’s a good scoop... in terms of it moves a story forward, brings fresh information. I’d rather break it on Twitter than anywhere else because it bleeds out very quickly. And the news just becomes like wildfire on Twitter. So if you could

do that, you could develop a reputation eventually as a reporter, as someone who is really at the front of information. And that's what you want.

But there are two sides to this reality, which many journalists are grappling with. On the one hand, there are those journalists who deliberately and pro-actively share scoops in order to still the 'thirst to be first,' such as the one quoted above. On the other hand, there are those on the receiving end of such tweets, who benefit from the exclusives another journalist may just be handing to them, as one journalist explained:

I think [name of a journalist who works for the competition] on social media does give away too much. I mean, he is very plugged in with certain politicians and we know [about those individuals]. And I can watch his Twitter feed and know about it before he gets anything onto his news organization's website. He'll have tipped me off. I don't want to be like that. He's great, you know, but he's helping me.

There is a delicate relationship between the promise of being the first to pick up on and break a news story on Twitter versus the risk of giving away a scoop. After all, to use another journalist's words, "once it's on Twitter it's not new anymore," and using a competitive advantage in a tweet might sometimes mean losing it for the bigger story.

Having a breakthrough moment

In my interviews, I prompted all journalists to tell me about a particularly significant experience they had on Twitter, given its unprecedented speed and immediacy, and how things can go viral. One journalist, more conservative and less creative than others in his take on Twitter, pondered its short-lived memory and wondered about tangible impact his efforts on the platform produce:

Every day is now like 20 different news cycles. One little development will happen and it will just like ripple through Twitter and then, by the end of the day, it can be totally forgotten.

In the end, the vast majority of memorable experiences that journalists shared—irrespective of whether these were positive or negative—were immediately linked to a particular news event. My data suggests that it is during periods of covering high political activity or breaking news that the aspired and perceived return on journalistic investment into Twitter becomes most visible. One journalist reflected on a key milestone in his career:

You have to have a breakthrough moment on Twitter. Mine was the government shutdown in 2013. I went from probably 10,000 to about 50,000 in two weeks... [I] got a huge following because people wanted to follow it minute by minute. And I was giving them what they wanted with fresh information. And that Twitter explosion and all the scoops I had in 2013 led directly to me getting [my current] job.

Ultimately, Twitter has become a critical tool beyond merely being "another distribution channel"; it allows journalists to place their finger on the pulse of current events.

Svenja Ottovordemgentschenfelde is a [PhD researcher](#) at the London School of Economics and Political Science and a [Fellow](#) at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism. She works on the '[Beyond 140 characters](#)' project . Find her on Twitter [@sgentschenfeld](#).

This piece first appeared on the [Tow Center for Digital Journalism Blog](#)

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science