

“The next tweet could get you fired!” – Or promoted?

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Many news organizations have introduced internal guidelines or policies for journalists using social platforms such as Twitter (for example, see BBC News’ social media guidance [here](#)). While these have become commonplace in newsrooms, variation remains, both in journalists’ awareness of their existence, and in their content and institutional enforcement. I spoke to 26 political journalists, who work for some of the most influential legacy media organizations in the country, both in print and broadcasting. I wanted to know about the influences that shape and drive their Twitter use, as well as the benefits they get from engaging with the platform and its users.¹

If journalists’ affiliation with legacy news media traditionally warranted their adherence to a set of institutionally defined procedures and practices, then we have to consider the control that news organizations have over journalists (as both autonomous agents in a normative sense, but also in their subordinate and dependent roles as employees) and how this impacts their behavior on Twitter.



A formalized stance on Twitter: institutional guidelines vs. policies

Some individuals I spoke to have told me how their employer encourages journalistic Twitter use with a hands-off, trust-based approach, leaving the journalist with a “don’t do anything stupid” mantra and a considerable degree of

autonomy. Other news organizations mandate behavior (including rewarding and sanctioning certain practices, or making journalists sign these as part of their contractual agreement).

One journalist described that he felt like “I had a gun to my head”, and another one said:

[A] year and a half ago I changed newspapers and they are much more forceful with their social media use and as soon as I joined up they converted my pretty much non-existent Twitter account, they got it verified, they got me going, they kinda got me set up and kinda laid down the law that I need to be using this more often.

Only a minority of individuals I interviewed didn't know what the content of their organizational social media policy was or, in fact, if one existed. My interview data strongly suggests that the existence and nature of any formalized institutional stance on Twitter is indicative of the role that the platform plays in the wider organizational strategy. Depending on how Twitter is integrated into such a strategy, there is a signifying difference in the terminology chosen. While a “policy” implies a top-down approach, which streamlines journalists' Twitter engagement, often targeted at institutionally defined outcomes and performance goals, “guidelines” are looser points of orientation that leave the journalist with some freedom of decision and judgement. Journalists' accounts of these explain diverse forms of engagement (or their absence), not only between industry competitors, but especially amongst colleagues.

Twitter and opportunity: a rationale of economics?

Many journalists indicated that their news organizations associate a perceived economic opportunity with Twitter; there is a sense that having an active Twitter presence helps with competitiveness, particularly in times of uncertain business models and financial instabilities. News organizations are keen, many journalists told me, on maximizing the reach of their content and capitalizing on the Twitter audience's “power of clicks,” generating more traffic (and hence revenue) from digital advertising. That said, one journalist suggested that his organization often tends to prioritize

how many people looked at a tweet versus actually clicked on the link. [...] You want them to click on the link, that's the point.

A majority of journalists conveyed that perceived opportunities of Twitter also focus on the platform as a tool for optimizing workflows (e.g. for content dissemination, to find story ideas, for news gathering, etc.). It is also seen as a means to increase audience engagement and customer loyalty, and for branding purposes — even though these opportunities take a secondary position with less concrete short- and long-term outcomes.

Yet, the value an organization ascribes to Twitter does not always align with the benefits a journalist expects it to yield (a notion I will elaborate on in a future post with more key findings). These perceptions are difficult to reconcile and pose a potential field of conflict, especially as journalists may [tweet in an organizational, professional and personal capacity](#), often simultaneously from one account.

Between empowerment and policing: evaluating performance

My interview data indicates that many journalists have a keen awareness of analytics that readily quantify and evaluate Twitter engagement for their employers. My findings suggest that organizations with stricter social media policies, in particular, often introduce indicators that compare “performance” and “impact” (if and how such indicators are meaningful and reliable is certainly a key question). Journalists' Twitter presence then becomes the subject of such scrutiny that counts followers, likes, and retweets, traces links and their reach, or measures interactions with

other platform users, as well as the depth and density of their social network on Twitter. Yet, uncertainty prevails within the study's sample of interviewees as to how employers might use these insights. One journalist said:

We get a report each week. So I know they track it. I'm not aware that that is part of any sort of job performance evaluation or that people are rewarded or punished. But page views obviously are more and more important each day.

Another journalist told me:

I don't think there's anybody at our headquarters making layoff decisions based on social media necessarily. But it's certainly a factor. They expect reporters to be able to use social media and be able to develop a following.

There appears to be a considerable degree of variation in how news organizations approach this. Some journalists whose Twitter presence is subject to such metrics admitted to deliberately adding a performative element to their Twitter engagement in order to boost their metrics. As one put it,

I care more now about how many page views I get on a story than really where the story places in the print edition.

Another journalist explained:

It's part of your job and it should be evaluated. That's why having a large following and using Twitter in a very straightforward, aggressive way to share reporting has really helped my career, because it is considered part of what I do as a daily job. It's not just some sideshow.

Navigating risk and negative experiences on Twitter

Despite a largely shared “common sense” approach to Twitter engagement that goes hand in hand with organizational guidelines or policies, the platform evokes a sense of unpredictability and ambiguity among journalists. Many voiced a concern over unintentionally and unknowingly overstepping the bounds of what is acceptable behavior. Referring to how “Twitter has a way of blowing things out of proportion,” one journalist admitted,

I definitely would not be surprised if, say a year from now, I tweet something just kind of candidly and it ends up coming back to haunt me and getting me fired. Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised at all.

Yet, the awareness that “the next tweet could get you fired” (to use another journalist's words) equally works in the opposite direction, as a career asset. One journalist in the sample was hired specifically for the presence and reputation he had built up on Twitter, though this appeared to be an exception rather than the rule.

As a matter of principle, the vast majority of news organizations encourage the pursuit of audience interaction and relationship building. The higher a journalists' visibility and exposure, the better. But what if these experiences turn

bad?

While news organizations are quick to punish misdemeanors (and seem more cautious to reward desirable behavior), there appears to be another twilight zone on Twitter. Not all instances of conflict or harm (e.g. abuse, harassment, trolling, etc.) are related to journalists' actions, as one lamented:

For no apparent reason, people can be really vicious to you.

Some journalists implied that their news organizations do not have proper mechanisms in place to help them deal with these instances. Instead, they are left to their own devices. Within my interview sample, this predominantly affected female reporters, who, if not personally affected, could often share an anecdote of a colleague who experienced gender-related abuse. One told me:

Yeah, I definitely have seen it with other people, but I don't think I've dealt with that as much because I have a relatively small Twitter presence. [...] I know there have been instances where I felt like... – I don't know so much that it's my gender that comes into play or my looks. [...] I can't think of the last time that I have felt unsafe or threatened being a woman. However, I'm aware how quickly that can happen, I see it all the time with other people.

Twitter recently rolled out their “[quality filter](#)” to all platform users (which was previously only available for verified accounts). It is designed to [curb abuse](#) and give users more agency in managing negative experiences on the platform.

How the newsroom's culture can make a difference

The vast majority of journalists share an acute awareness of how their news organization's changing structures and management determine how they act in the workplace. Many journalists highlighted how the culture within the newsroom (or even smaller units, teams or communities) can shape their Twitter engagement. While these cultures are largely informal, implicit and unstructured, three distinct practices emerged in journalists' discourses:

1. *Peer recommendations are perceived as authentic and reliable*. Some early Twitter adopters encouraged colleagues to join the platform, and some of the laggards were convinced to sign up (this was, of course, before the dawn of the many guidelines or policies that now often mandate having a profile). Other journalists have told me about pointing towards and sharing resources, such as lists of Twitter accounts to monitor or follow, but also tips and tricks of “what works” and lessons learned. One journalist highlighted:

[One of my colleagues] was a really, really early adopter and converter and is just a big, big believer. So we started out having Twitter classes a few years ago. He would explain how the apps work and how to not be obnoxious and hashtag, and all the regular caveats – not to engage with people who were just trying to get your goat, you know?

2. *Colleagues provide or receive spontaneous and occasional mentoring*. While some journalists mentioned organizational newsletters with social media updates and even formal training sessions, others indicated how mentor-mentee relationships in the newsroom have become a valuable resource, especially amongst those who got a late start or are not as digitally skilled (often associated with older generations of journalists, but not predominantly so within the group of journalists interviewed for this study). One journalist told me:

I remember when I first started using Twitter. I wasn't an active Twitter user until 2011. [...] I was talking to another journalist [...] and I was asking him advice about how to use Twitter. I remember this really well for some reason; it just stuck in my mind because we were having this conversation [...] about what should your Twitter mix be?

3. *When in doubt, colleagues can be sounding boards*. For example, some journalists have told me about checking in with their peers about the content and nature of a tweet, as its tone can be somewhat of a grey area, blurring the boundaries between the journalist's personal and professional voice. One journalist explained:

I think if I have a brilliant or not so brilliant thought about the news I do think, 'okay, this is something if I put this out there is it going to get attention?' And then I think, 'okay, but is it good attention? Is it bad attention?' You know, sometimes I'll talk to people and say, 'Hey, what do you think about this tweet? Is this okay? Is this not ok?'

What's next

Watch this space for the next post in the "Beyond 140 character" series, which discusses how the news environment and political events, competitive pressures, and Twitter's socio-technological attributes shape political journalists' engagement with the platform.

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

This is the third 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 methodology and data collection.

¹ In every interview, I prompted journalists with questions related to four general topic areas: 1) the landscape and context of their work; 2) their uses and sentiments of Twitter; 3) the motivations and perceived benefits of their Twitter engagement; and 4) their accounts of the journalistic past, present and future.

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