



Survey

Attention to news and its dissemination on Twitter: A survey[☆]Claudia Orellana-Rodriguez^{*}, Mark T. Keane

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, news media have been hugely disrupted by news promotion, commentary and sharing in online, social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit). This disruption has been the subject of a significant literature that has largely used AI techniques – machine learning, text analytics and network models – to both (i) understand the factors underlying audience attention and news dissemination on social media (e.g., effects of popularity, type of day) and (ii) provide new tools/guidelines for journalists to better disseminate their news via these social media. This paper provides an integrative review of the literature on the professional reporting of news on Twitter; focusing on how journalists and news outlets use Twitter as a platform to disseminate news, and on the factors that impact readers' attention and engagement with that news on Twitter. Using the precise definition of a *news-tweet* (i.e., divided into user, content and context features), the survey structures the literature to reveal the main findings on features affecting audience attention to news and its dissemination on Twitter. From this analysis, it then considers the most effective guidelines for digital journalists to better disseminate news in the future.

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1. Introduction

In recent times, the emergence of the online world, and notably social media, has transformed the news industry in many unforeseen ways. Traditional news providers have been assaulted by one disruption after another from people sharing news on social media, to everyone becoming a potential “citizen journalist”, to a tweeting President that refuses to give traditional press briefings. Importantly, each of these disruptions are progressively undermining the business model of these news organizations, damaging their traditional income streams and depleting their paying audience. As always, however, such disruptions present as many opportunities as they do challenges; opportunities that depend on understanding the dynamics of news in this brave new world of social media.

If traditional news outlets are to survive then, critically, they need to understand the dynamics of news production, consumption and dissemination in social media. Social media enable users to create, read and share news content in a social way, via sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Twitter, in particular, has attained a special status as *the* social media platform for news; it has become a venue where newsworthy tweeters, news consumers and journalists converge to report, read, discuss and share the news. Hence, insight into the dynamics of news in this social media world, relies on research that helps us understand the impact of news on readers [1,2], the features of news that engage people [3], and the factors that drive the sharing of news on these social media platforms [4].

In this survey, we focus on the dynamics of news on Twitter; specifically we review recent research on how news providers tweet about their news and on the features of these *news-tweets* that impact audience readership, attention, and engagement. Here we define *audience readership* as the community of Twitter users that attend in any way to these news-tweets and *attention* as the passive attention (e.g., just reading or scanning a tweet) or active attention (i.e., commonly called “engagement” where users re-tweet, quote, mention, etc.) that these readers give to these news-tweets.¹ In the following sections, we provide basic definitions for the components of this ecosystem, as well as identifying newly-emerging concepts. We also address the important issue of spanning the gap between these research findings and journalistic practice by considering practical guidelines for optimizing journalistic use of social media platforms when publishing the news. As such, the review aims to establish how the main findings of the literature might concretely inform the news industry’s response to their current challenges.

¹ The terminology used in the literature is often inconsistent and confusing. *Engagement* is often used to refer to active interactions (e.g., re-tweeting) but these actions are also often labeled simply as *attention* (with no passive/active distinction). Though we propose more precise definitions, throughout the paper, to be consistent with the literature we often use the less precise terminology “attention and engagement” to refer to user behavior.

1.1. Online developments: News moves online & social

Throughout the 1990s, most major news providers moved online establishing significant digital presences. For example, by 1996, most major American newspapers – including *U.S.A. Today*,² *The New York Times*³ and *The Washington Post*⁴ – had established websites and were publishing digital versions of their papers. Inevitably, this led to digital-only news providers; in 2000, the *Southport Reporter*⁵ was launched as the first online-only UK newspaper. Such offerings continued apace with the emergence of digital-first news; for instance, by 2006, *The Guardian* was offering a “web first”⁶ service where news was first published online before it appeared in the physical newspaper. Nowadays, the online publication of news typically precedes newspaper publication thus becoming the first and, in some cases, primary source of most of the news that people read.

In the 2000s, with the emergence of social media sites – Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) – there was yet another turning-point in online news delivery and consumption. These sites enabled the real-time sharing of online news and gave the audience the opportunity to interact with news providers, directly. Furthermore, as these social media platforms were “always-on”, they fast became key fora for collating updates, gathering comments and reporting breaking news. Indeed, in many cases, they became the news *themselves* [4].

Of all social media sites, Twitter has emerged as *the* platform for news [5]. Unlike other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Youtube) where news is mainly encountered as a side-effect of other interactions, many Twitter users specifically use the platform to track news developments [4,6,7]. Accordingly, this micro-blogging platform is favored by journalists and news organizations to live-tweet news events that are being broadcast in real time or to share incremental reporting threads and other content [8].

Fig. 1 shows the top-25 newspapers, by worldwide circulation, ordered by the dates on which they created their official Twitter accounts. *The New York Times* joined Twitter on March 2nd 2007, being the first of the five most popular American newspapers to use the service, swiftly followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (March 31st 2007), and the German tabloid *Bild*⁷ (October 2nd 2007). Most of the other newspapers in this list, created their official accounts between 2008 and 2010, though two other outlets – *Rajasthan Patrika* and *Eenadu* from India – did not officially join Twitter until late 2013.

² <http://static.usatoday.com/about/timeline/>.

³ <http://www.niemanlab.org/2016/01/20-years-ago-today-nytimes-com-debuted-on-line-on-the-web/>.

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/apps/g/page/national/washington-post-co-timeline/374/>.

⁵ <http://www.southportreporter.com/>.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/jun/07/theguardian.pressandpublishing>.

⁷ <http://www.bild.de/>.

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