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Twitter and the News: How people use the social network to learn about the world

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Overview

How does Twitter change the way people get news? What kinds of thought leaders, journalists and organizations do people follow on the network? How are these Twitter followers different than those social networks? And how are people reacting with added elements, such as advertising and promoted tweets?

At a moment when the network is poised to make a number of changes, the American Press Institute and Twitter, in collaboration with research company DB5, have produced a new study that probes the relationship between news use and the Twittersphere.

The study, which involved an online survey of more than 4,700 social media users, finds that Twitter users tend to be heavier news consumers than other social media users. News indeed, indeed, is one of the primary activities that they engage in on the network.

Twitter users also tend to be younger than social media users in general. They tend to use the service heavily—the majority several times a day—and their use of the network is increasing how much news they consume. Almost all Twitter users are also consumers of other forms of news media.

While Twitter users follow news in general on the service, and sometimes do so just as a way of passing time, they act differently when they are following breaking news, becoming even more participatory—commenting, posting and sharing at moments when events are moving fastest.

74%

of those who use Twitter for news do so daily.

All of these offer signals for how news publishers can make more effective use of social networks in general and Twitter in particular.

These are some of the findings of a comprehensive survey of Twitter users as well as social media users who are not on Twitter, produced by the American Press Institute and Twitter in collaboration with research firm DB5. The study, conducted online, surveyed 4,713 people — 3,713 Twitter users and, for comparison, a separate sample of 1,000 nationally representative social media users, including 469 who were not on Twitter.

The findings come at time when Twitter is increasing its emphasis on news and making tweaks that may affect publishers' strategies. At the end of this report, API has included a set of recommendations for publishers based on the survey findings.

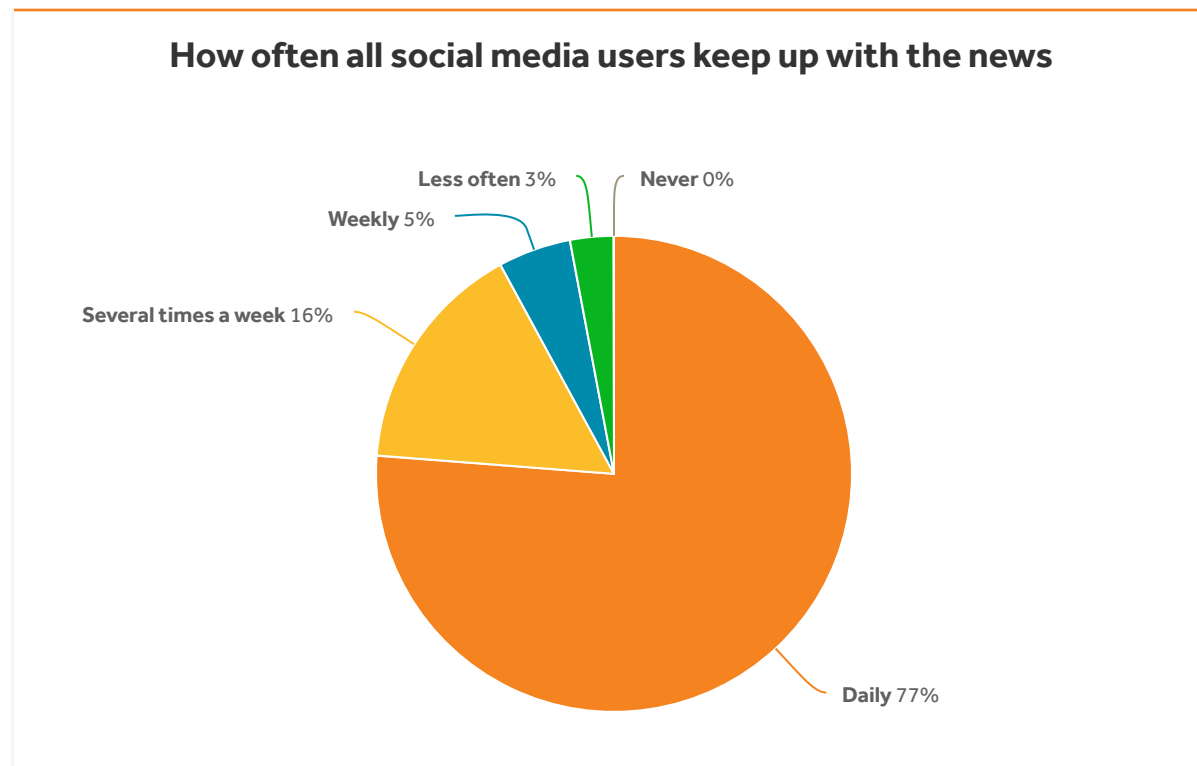
Among the findings from the study:

- Nearly 9 in 10 Twitter users in the study (86%) say they use Twitter for news, and the vast majority of those (74%) do so daily.
- Roughly the same number of people say they use Twitter to be alerted to breaking news (40%) as to keep up with the news generally (39%).
- Three quarters of Twitter news users follow individual journalists, writers and commentators (73%) and nearly two thirds follow institutional accounts (62%). Twitter users also are very likely to discover new journalists and writers and consequently follow their work, often on other platforms beyond Twitter.
- Fully 94% of Twitter news users get their news either through scrolling their timelines or browsing tweets of those they follow. Other features are used far less often: For instance just 34% of Twitter news users say they get news from trending topics and 30% use search.
- 82% of Twitter users access the platform on their phones and many access Twitter across multiple devices.
- A majority of non-Twitter users (51%) have seen tweets. 45% on TV, 33% from friends, 27% in news articles they read, 22% from going to twitter.com without signing up, 12% from search and 8% in a newspaper.

Twitter funded the study but granted API researchers independence to develop the survey questionnaire. DB5 conducted the survey between November 23 and December 15, 2014 and tabulated results. API analyzed the data and produced this written report. All topline results with questionnaire are available to the public, as well as a more detailed methodology.

How people use Twitter in general

In general, all three core groups studied — Twitter users, non-Twitter users on social media and social media users overall — consume a good deal of news. In all, 77% of all social media users said they keep up with the news at least once a day, a number that was similar (76%) for non-Twitter users. But among Twitter users, news is a slightly bigger part of daily life. For those, 81% said they keep up with the news at least daily.

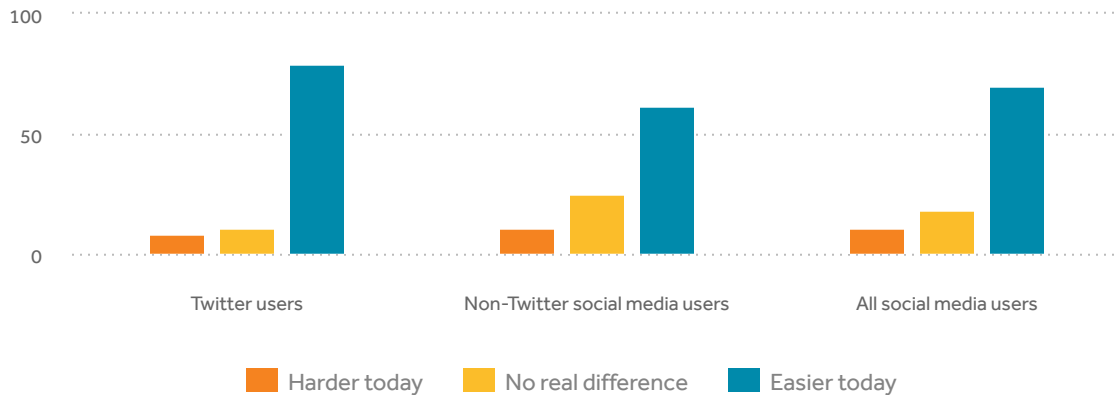


Data Source: Question: First off, how often do you watch, read, or hear the news? By news, we mean any kind of news, including sports, traffic, weather, stocks, politics, lifestyle, or any other kinds of news, by any means. (Base: Total Social Media Users N=1,000)

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In addition to frequency, the survey also probed whether technology is making it easier to be informed. Here, Twitter users are also noticeably more likely than others to say that it is easier to keep up with the news today. Fully 79% find it easier to keep up with the news today than five years ago, compared with 62% of non-Twitter users who feel that way, and 70% of social media users overall.

Ease of keeping up with news compared to 5 years ago

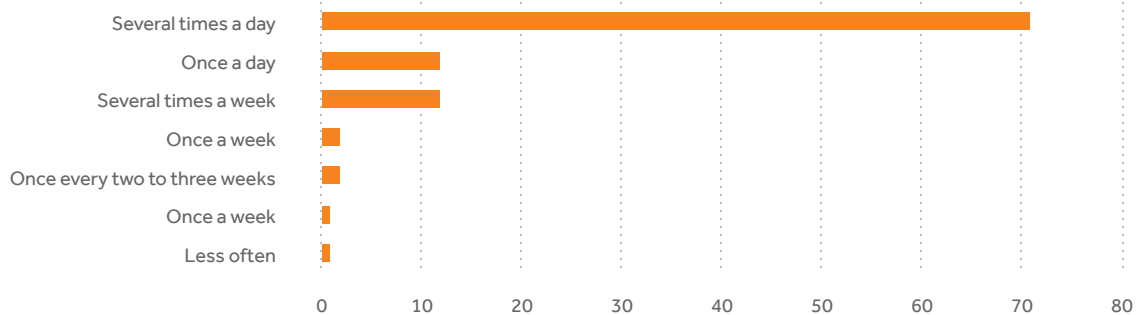


Data Source: Overall, compared to five years ago, do you think it is ... easier today or harder today to keep up with the news? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713, Non-Twitter Social Media Users N=469, Total Social Media Users N=1,000)

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Those on Twitter also use the network heavily. About two thirds of Twitter users, 71%, say they use the network several times a day, another 12% daily and 12% several times a week.

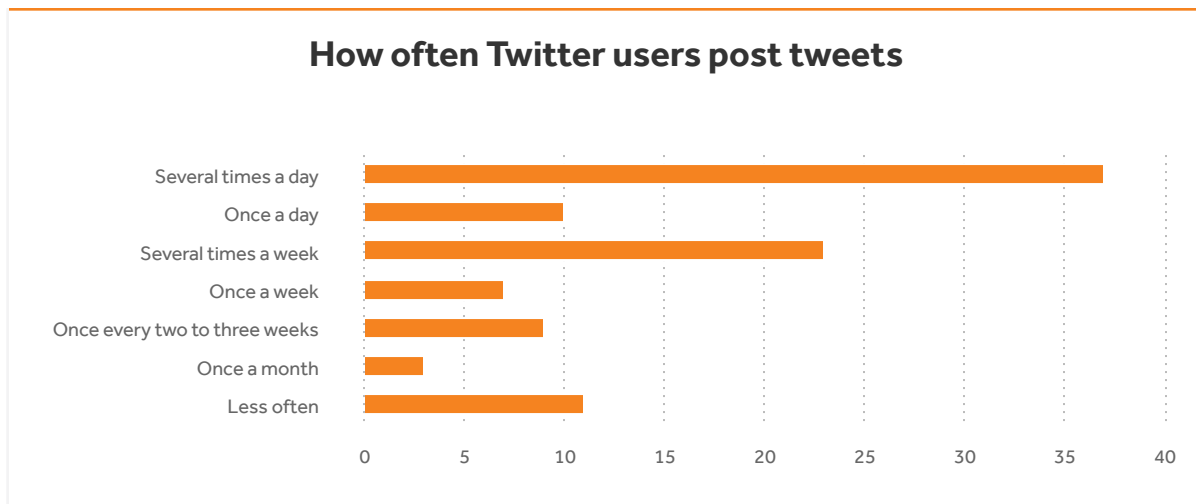
How often users are on Twitter



Data Source: Question: How often do you use Twitter? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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Not all of this activity on Twitter is consumption oriented. Some is clearly more participatory. About a third of Twitter users (37%), for instance, said they post or retweet several times a day, and another 10% once a day, as opposed to just reading tweets.



Data Source: Question: How often do you post your own tweets or retweet other people's tweets? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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Twitter is more than a breaking news service

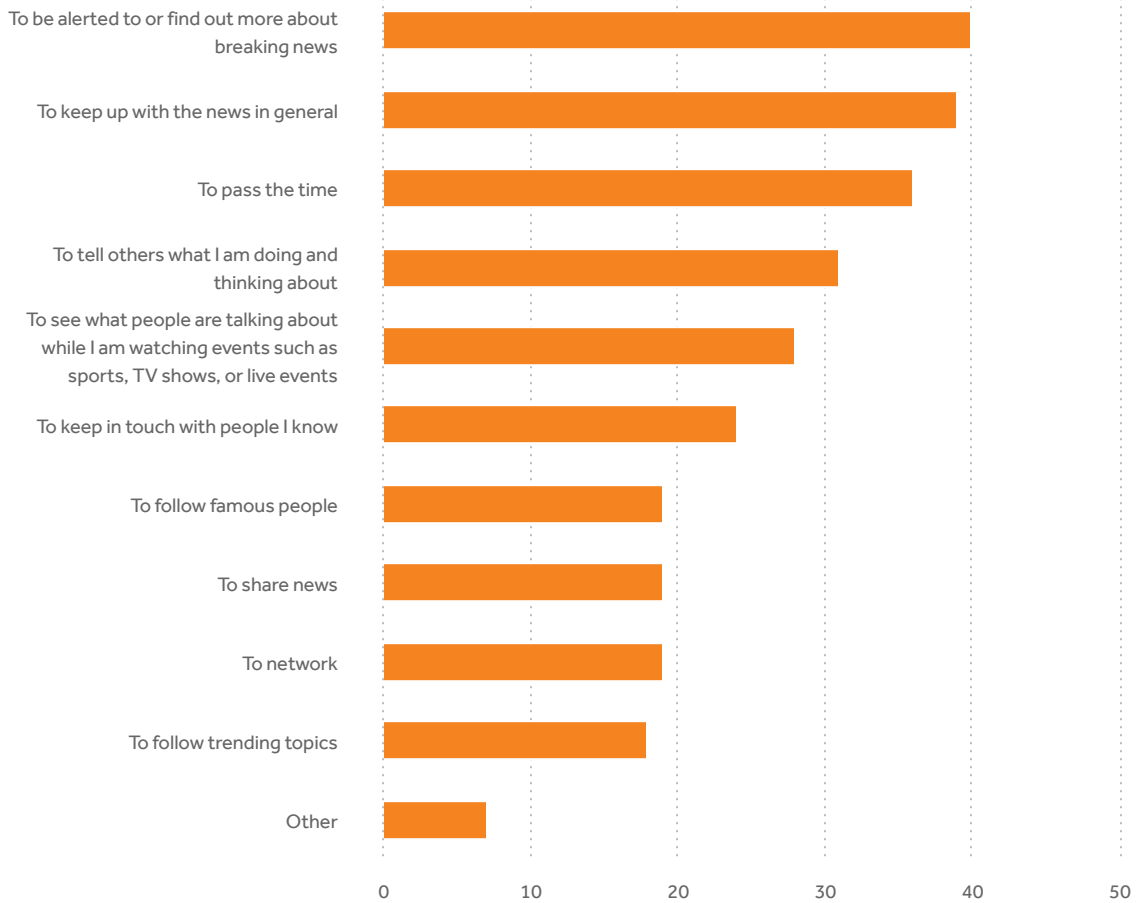
The survey also tried to probe more deeply how people use Twitter in the context of news. While many news organizations think of Twitter as heavily oriented to breaking news — as a way to get up to the minute details or updates rather than a delivery platform for news stories in general — consumers seem more varied in their patterns.

For instance, while 4 in 10 (40%) said they use Twitter to be alerted to breaking news, nearly as many (39%) said they use it “to keep up with news in general” and to “pass the time” (36%). In addition, about a quarter of Twitter users (28%) also say they use the network to second-screen during live events.

Twitter is, in other words, more than just a real-time service, but a way of staying in touch.

Twitter is also a means of social dissemination beyond news. For about 3 in 10 (31%), Twitter is used “to tell others what I am doing and thinking about.” And for a quarter of users, Twitter is a way to “keep in touch with people I know” (24%) and for 20% a way to keep in touch with celebrities (“follow famous people”).

Why people use Twitter



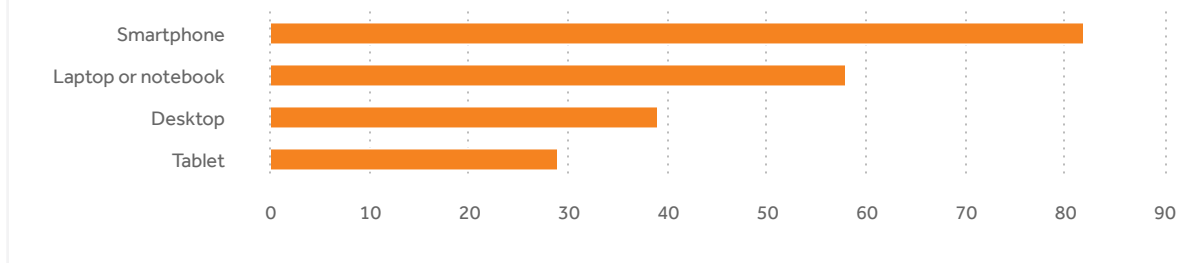
Data Source: Question: Please look at the following statements about the ways in which people use Twitter and select up to three that describe the ways you use it most often. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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People also access Twitter from multiple devices, though Twitter and other social networks are highly correlated to mobile. Fully 82% of Twitter users said they had accessed the network in the last week on smartphones, 58% on a laptop or notebook, 39% on desktop and 29% on tablets.

How people access Twitter

In the last week



Data Source: Question: Which, if any, of the following devices did you use to access Twitter in the last week? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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Just as people access Twitter on different devices, they also don't have one pathway to getting there. For instance, 7 out of 10 (72%) said that in the last week they accessed the network via Twitter's mobile app. Only slightly fewer, 66% did so via the web (Twitter.com). Far fewer, just 11% through a third-party app such as Hootsuite and 5% through Twitter's own Tweetdeck app.

How Twitter users follow the news

People using social media as a news source can design their own news agenda — identifying the sources and topics they want to follow. This has led to speculation that people will become narrow in their interests without the agenda-setting influence of news organizations.

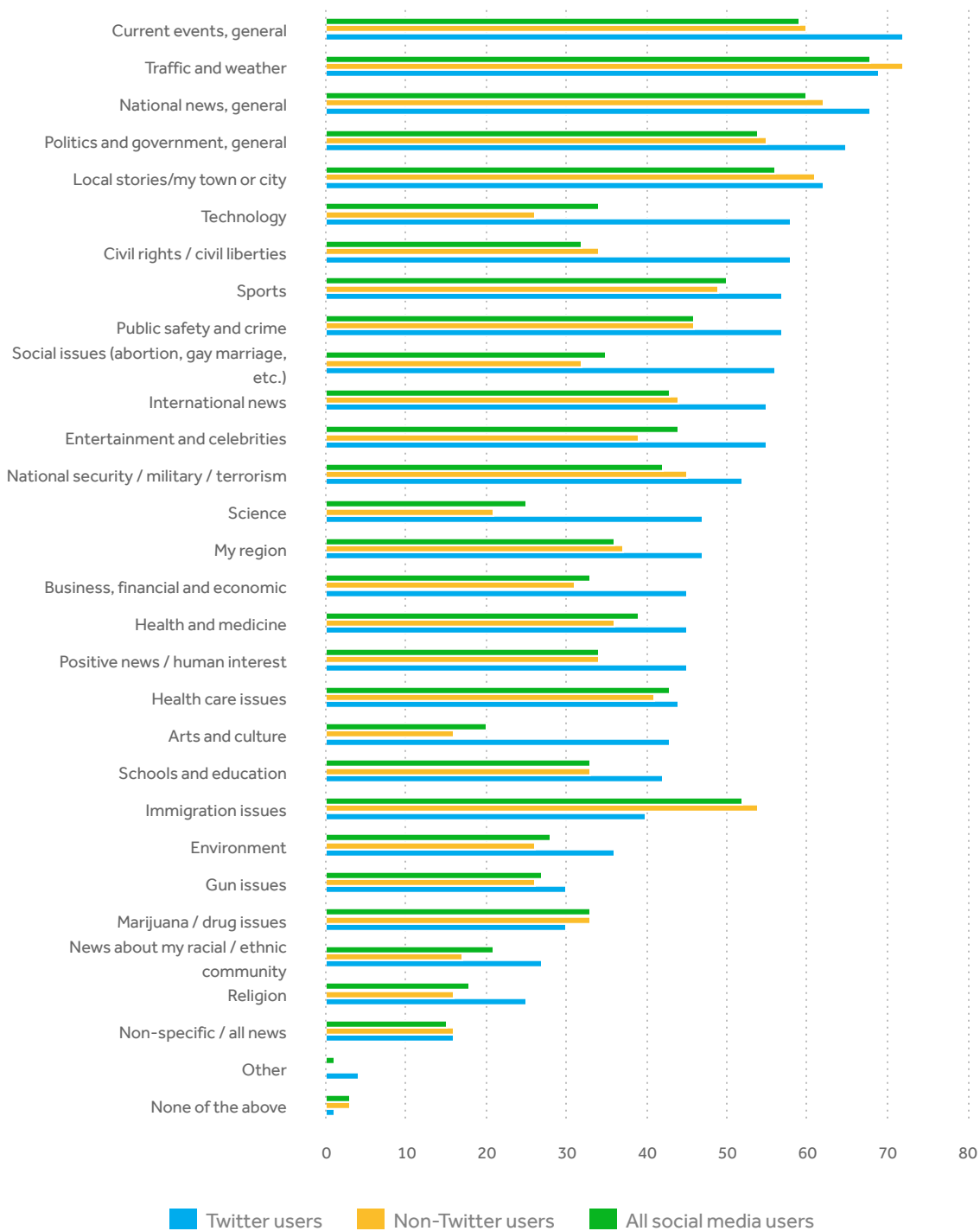
The survey probed this notion in various ways, including by asking people what sources they followed and whether it was more likely a news organization, a friend, an individual journalist or a sub-section of a news organization. (On Twitter, people are more likely to follow individual journalists than the main account of a whole news organization, which will be detailed later).

But the survey probed this most directly by asking people what topics they recalled following in the news in the past week. They were given a list of some two-dozen possible topics.

The findings, which reinforce earlier research conducted by the American Press Institute, suggest that American social media users have a fairly wide curiosity about news. When given a list of some 28 possible news topics, a majority of respondents in the nationally representative sample of social media users named seven that they recalled following in the news in the last week. Non-Twitter users also cited seven. And Twitter users, as we saw in several other questions, seem even more news-oriented. On average, Twitter users followed 14 different topics last week.

Topics social media users followed in the news

In the last week



Data Source: Question: Thinking of the last week, what kinds of topics do you recall following in the news? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713, Non-Twitter Users N=469, Total Panel Sample N=1,000)

Nor is social media the only way that Twitter users and non-Twitter social media users get news. The survey found that most of the three different social media user groups get news from many different news sources or pathways several times a week at least. Indeed, majorities across all groups cite five different pathways they use to get news — from television news, search engines, newspapers, radio and word of mouth.

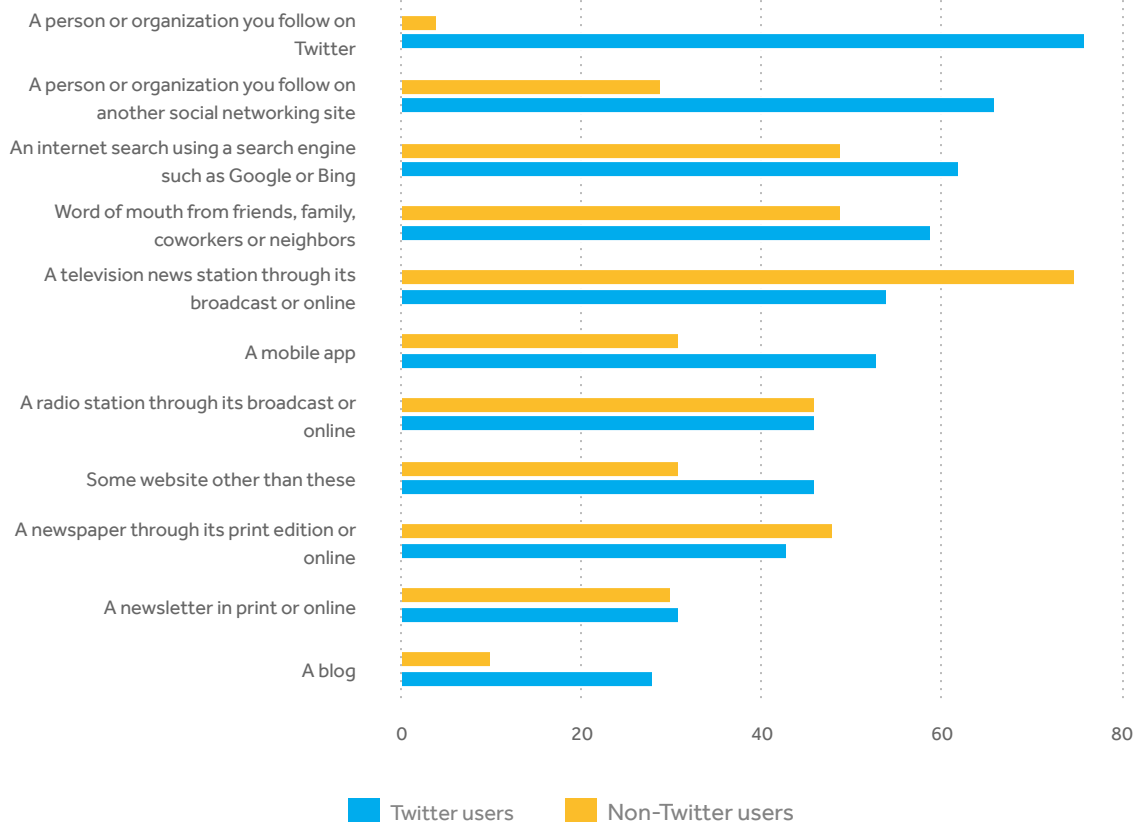
Social networks, in other words, appear to be adding to the ways that Americans are informed, not eliminating more traditional pathways entirely.

There were some notable differences in the news sources and discovery methods cited among the three core samples of social media users, the nationally representative sample, Twitter users and non-Twitter social media users.

Twitter users are less likely to be TV news viewers, more likely to use search, mobile apps and websites and social networks. There were not substantial differences in use of newspapers or radio.

Non-Twitter users, by contrast, are less likely than social media users in general to use various online tools, including search and mobile apps.

News sources social media users used several times a week or more



Data Source: Question: There are many ways to find news. Please tell us how often, if ever, you use each of the following sources to discover news. Note: This 4% of non-Twitter users indicating they got their news from someone they follow on Twitter is likely due to respondent error. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713, Non-Twitter Users N=469)

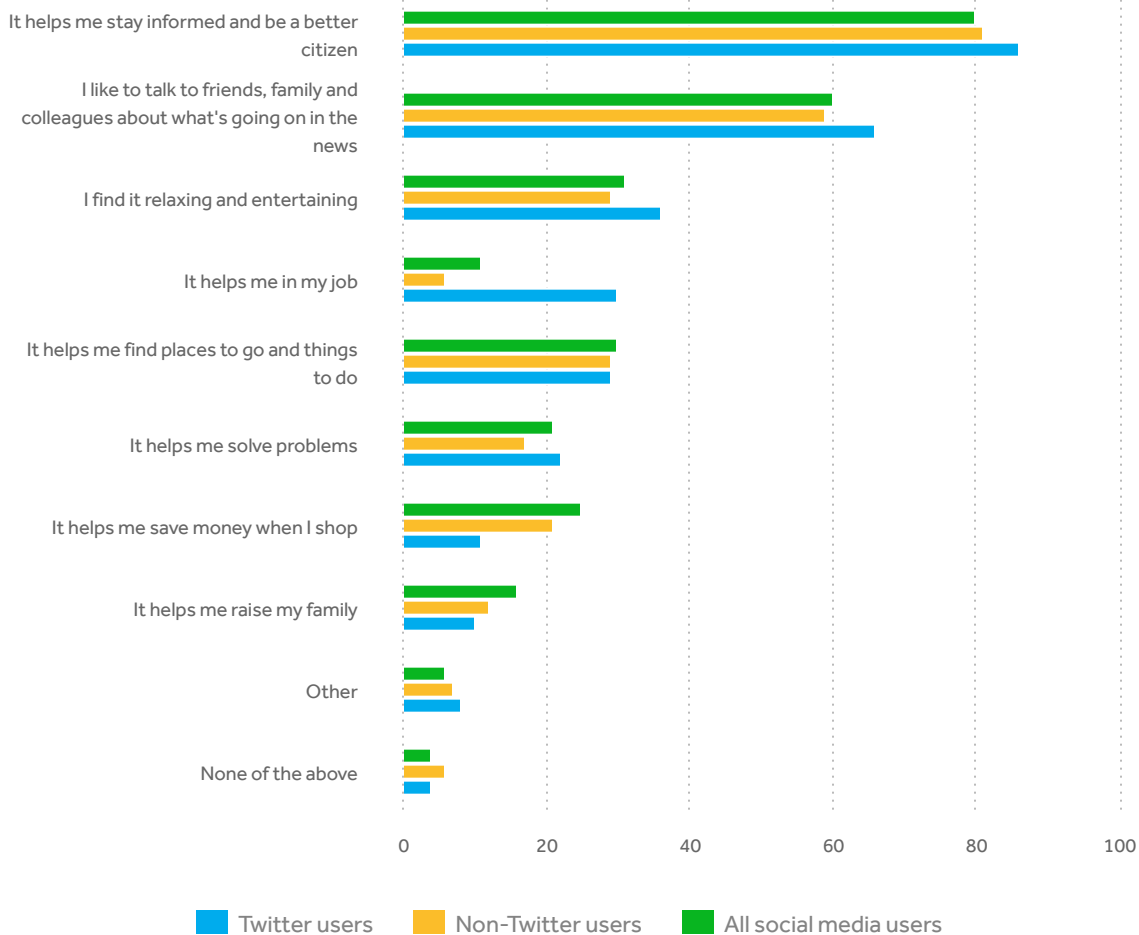
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Why Twitter and non-Twitter social media users get news

People can use news in different ways — to talk about it, for civic action, to save money. The survey asked people the reasons they keep up with the news, and compared the answers of Twitter users and non-Twitter users. There were some differences.

Most people across both groups said it helped them function as a citizen (more than 8 in 10). Twitter users were somewhat more inclined to say they liked to talk about news with friends (66% vs. 59%) and find it relaxing and entertaining (36% vs. 29%). People who use social media but are not on Twitter were more likely to say the news helps them save money when they shop (11% for Twitter users, 21% for non-users). Twitter users were significantly more likely to say the news helps them with their job (30% vs. 6% for non-Twitter users).

Reasons social media users follow the news



Data Source: People use news in different ways. What are the 4 top reasons you, personally, tend to follow the news? From the list below, please select up to four. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713, Non-Twitter Users N=469, Total Panel Sample N=1000)

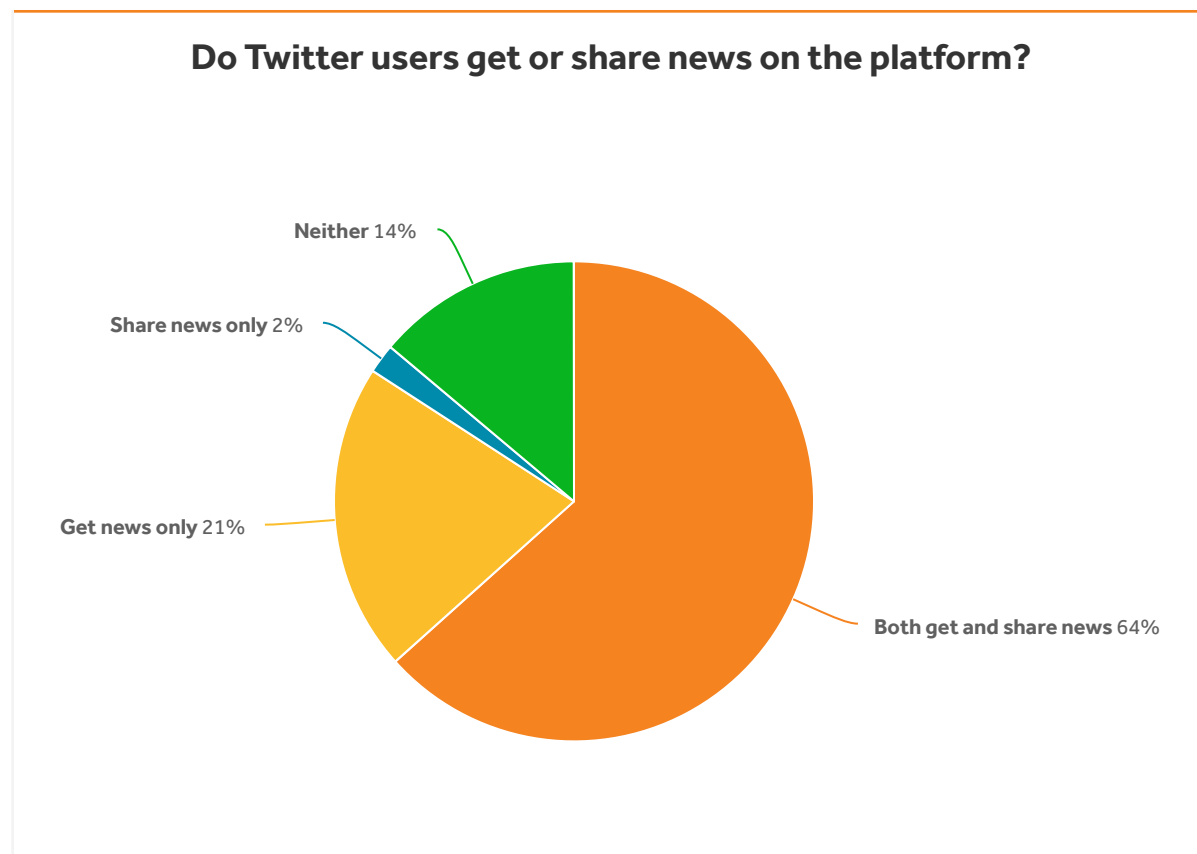
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Twitter and the news

By various measures, the study found that news and Twitter are intimately linked. Fully 86% of Twitter users say they use the social network for news, and the vast majority of those, 74%, do so daily.

The majority of Twitter users in the study also believe that they now get more news than they did before they joined the social network. Fully 6 out of 10 Twitter users (61%) say they get more news since joining. Just over a quarter (24%) say their news consumption has stayed about the same. Only 2% estimate they consume less news since they joined Twitter.

News on Twitter is also highly participatory, meaning it is more than just consuming news. Fully 64% of Twitter users say they both get and share news on the service. Just 21% say they just consume; only 2% say they get their news elsewhere and just use Twitter to share it.



Data Source: Question: You might have already said this, but do you ever use Twitter to get news or share news. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

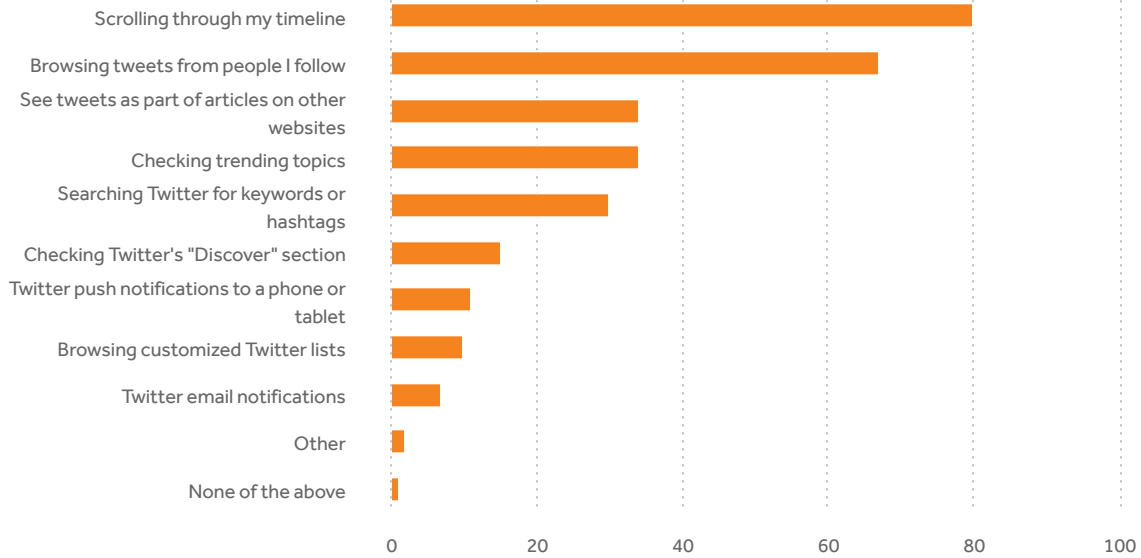
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One interesting finding of the study is that the vast majority of Twitter users rely mostly on two paths for discovering or finding news on Twitter, though there are potentially many more. Fully 80% of Twitter news users said they get news by “scrolling through my timeline” and 67% by “browsing tweets from people I know.” In all, 94% of Twitter news users get their news either through scrolling or browsing.

Beyond that, the other ways that users could follow news are far less frequent. Just 34% of Twitter news users, for instance, said they check trending topics, the same number that said they see tweets as part of articles on other websites. About half as many (15%) said they checked Twitter’s “discover” section, a feature more recently replaced with “while you were away.” And 11% said they employed Twitter push notifications to tablets or phones.

In other words, there are more ways to customize Twitter than the majority of its users are employing most of the time.

How Twitter users get news on the platform



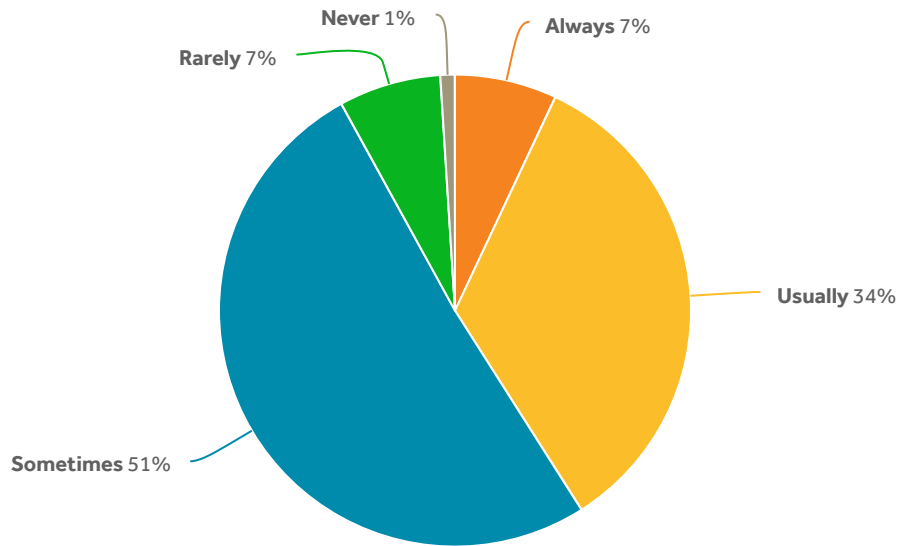
Data Source: Question: How do you get news through Twitter? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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When they do find news on Twitter, how often do people click on stories? Virtually everyone who uses Twitter for news (92%) clicks through to read stories at least sometimes. Thirty-nine percent said they usually or always do so, another 53% said sometimes. Just 8% said rarely or never.

How often Twitter news users click news links

On the platform



Data Source: Question: How often do you click links to a news story in any tweet you read on Twitter? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

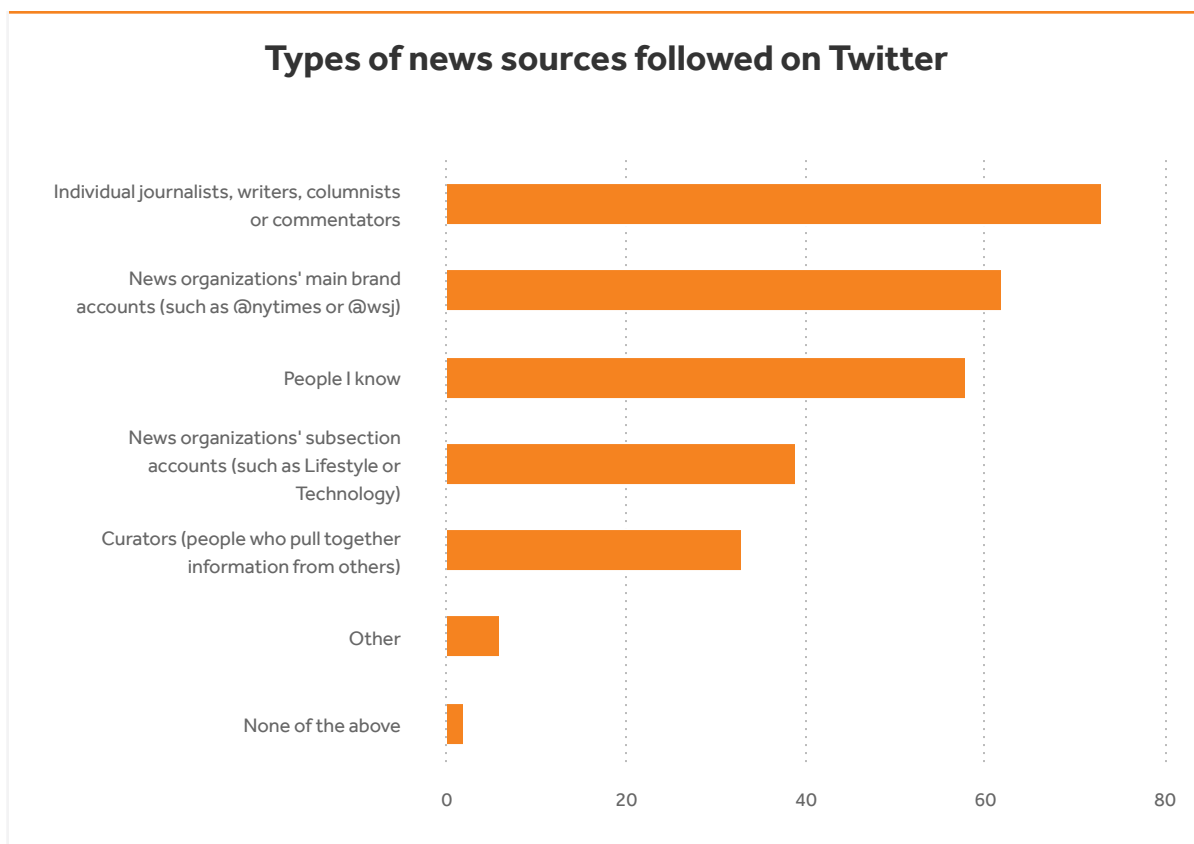
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Who people follow on Twitter

On Twitter consumers can discover new voices, authors, news providers and take following actions as a result. The survey tried to track those patterns by asking what kind of news sources people follow and what kind they had discovered.

The findings reveal that, to a substantial degree, Twitter is a way that news consumers follow journalists and journalistic organizations. More than 7 out of 10 Twitter news users, 73%, said they follow individual writers, journalists or commentators on Twitter. A sizable majority (62%), also said they follow news organizations main brand account. And 4 in 10 (39%) said they follow subsection accounts of a news organization (such as lifestyle or technology).

Twitter is also a way, to a significant though somewhat lesser degree, for people to follow the news their friends recommend. A majority of Twitter news users (58%) also said they followed friends or “people I know.” The smallest number of users (33%) said they follow news curators on Twitter, that is destinations that largely select and present news gathered by others.



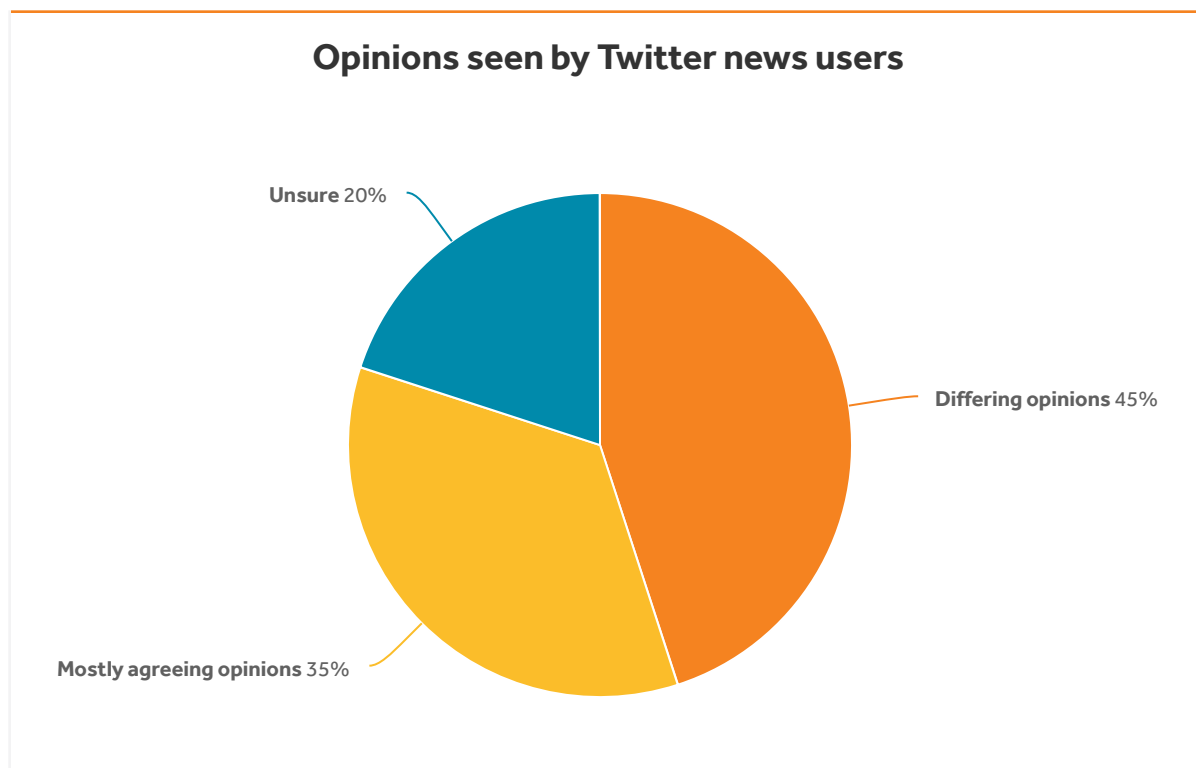
Data Source: Question: When you use Twitter to get news, what kinds of people or organizations do you follow? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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Twitter news users also discover new sources for news. For instance, 67% said they have discovered individual journalists, writers or commentators whose work they had now begun to follow. Half of those said they have also begun to follow that person’s work outside of Twitter.

As opposed to discovering new individual writers or commentators, a slightly smaller number, 45% said they have discovered new news organizations on Twitter and begun to follow them. Of those who did, 53% said they have also begun to follow the work of the organization outside of Twitter.

The survey also tried to probe the degree to which people felt that Twitter created a filter bubble in which they saw mostly opinions of people who agreed with each other. When asked which came closer to their experience, a plurality (45%) of Twitter news users said they see mostly differing opinions. A smaller number, 35%, said they saw mostly agreeing opinions. Another 20% said they weren't sure.



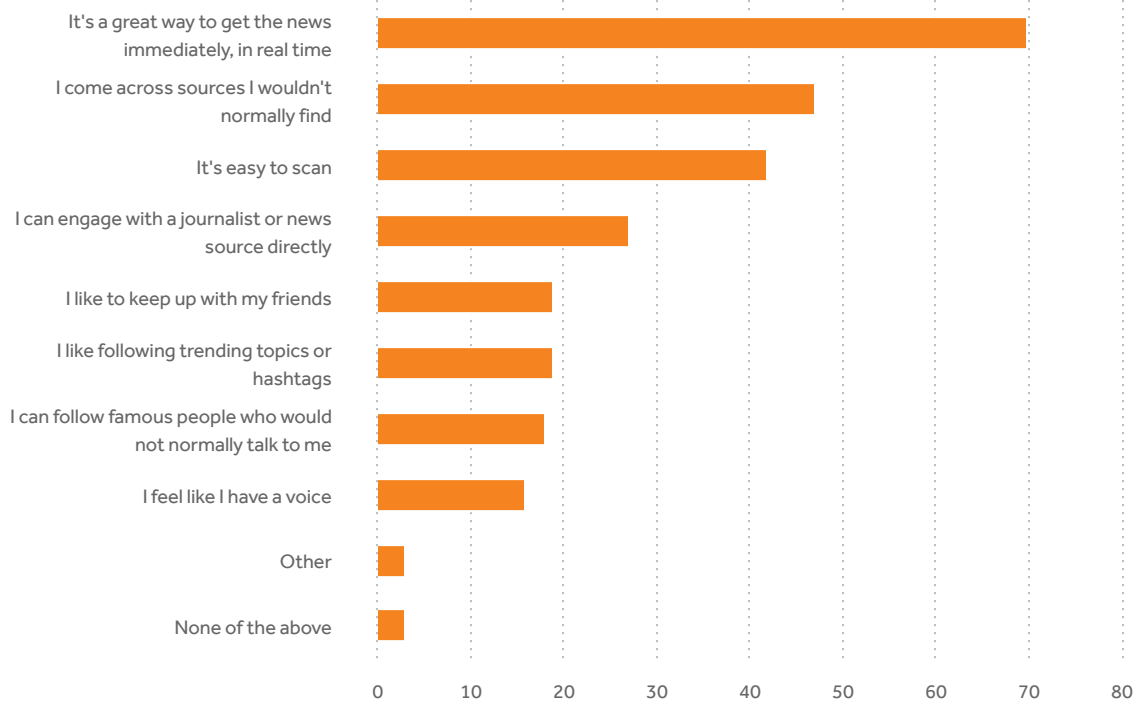
Data Source: Question: Some worry today that people only follow those whose opinions they agree with. Which comes closer to being true for you: Twitter exposes you to more differing opinions than before, or mostly on Twitter you see opinions of people who tend to agree with each other? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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This notion of discovery is linked in part to why people use Twitter as a news delivery platform. Here immediacy became primary. When asked the reasons they used Twitter for news, more than two thirds (70%) of Twitter news users said “it’s a great way to get news ... in real time.” That far outstripped the second most popular reason people say they are drawn to Twitter for news, that they come across sources they wouldn’t normally use (47%) or that it’s easy to scan (42%).

Somewhat fewer but still a sizable minority of Twitter news users said that Twitter was a way to “engage a journalist or news source directly” (27%) or keep up with friends (19%).

Why people use Twitter for news



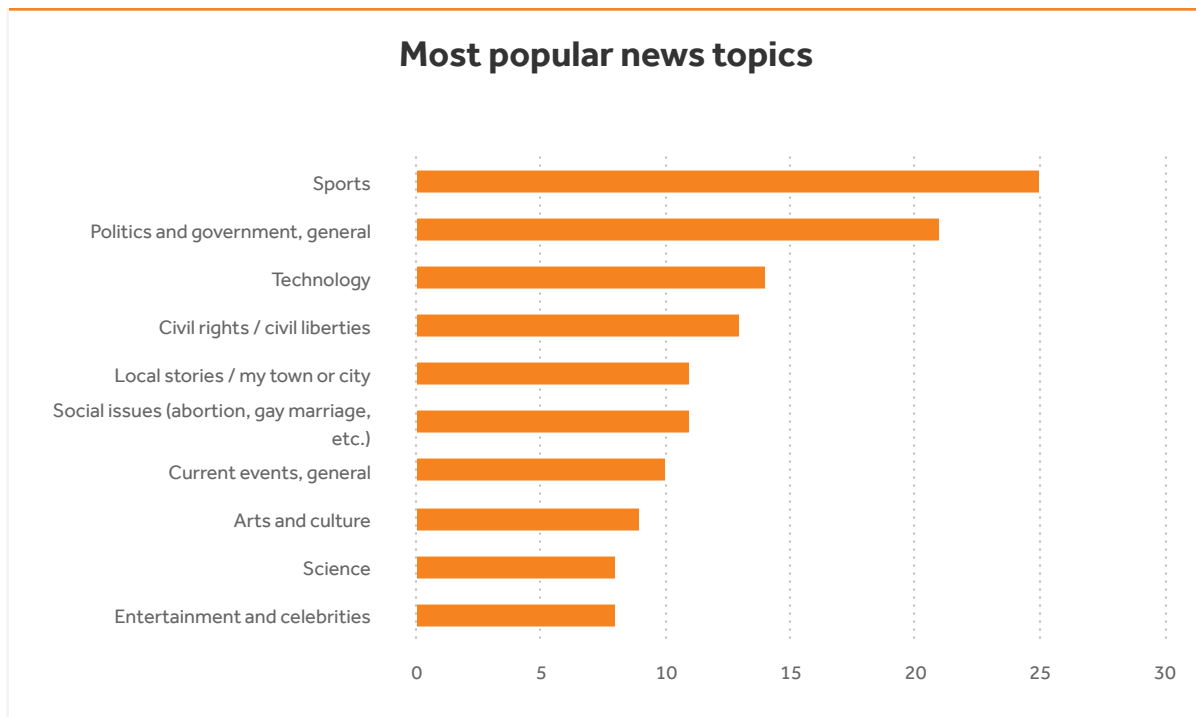
Data Source: Question: There are a lot of reasons people use Twitter. Thinking of how you use Twitter specifically for news, what are the 3 reasons below you consider most important to you personally? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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One dimension of social networks like Twitter is the fact that people can navigate to news many ways, and the research explored this as well.

We began by asking people what topics they are most passionate about and then it asked them how they used Twitter to follow that topic.

The range of topics was fairly wide, with sports (25% cited it as a passion on Twitter) and politics/government (21%) at the top, followed by technology (14%) and civil rights (13%). The survey was conducted around the time of the controversy over a police shooting and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri.



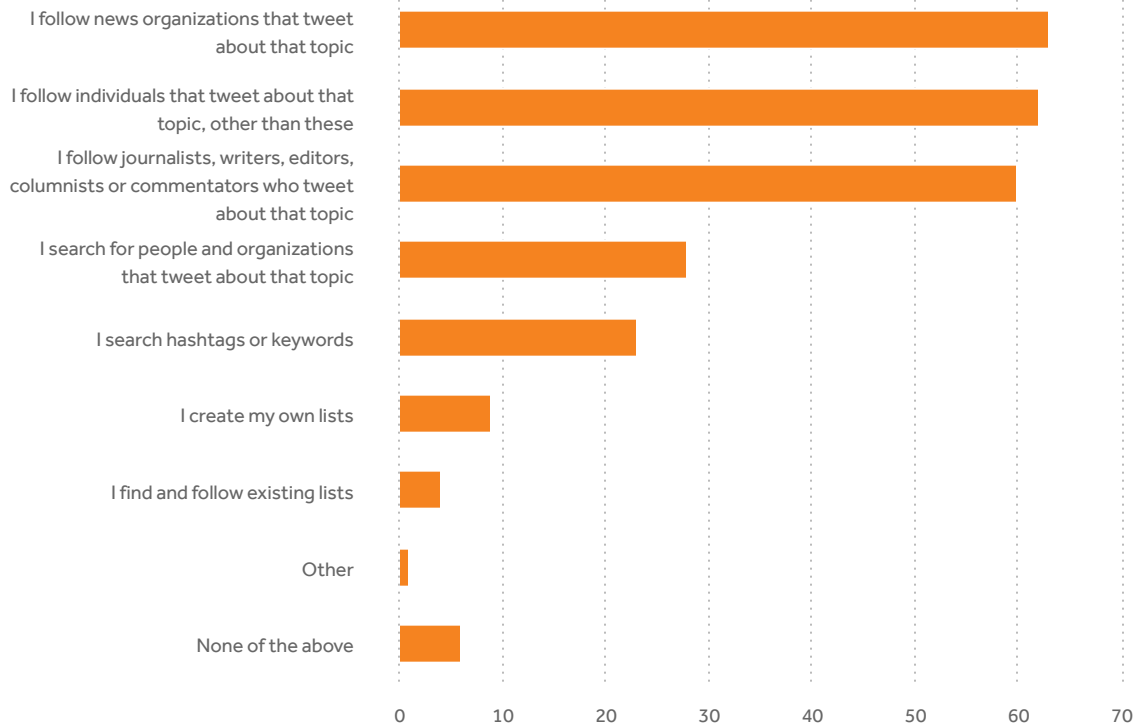
Data Source: Question: Now thinking overall about the types of news stories you pay attention to, what 2 topics are you especially passionate about? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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What may be more interesting are the varied paths that Twitter news users take to follow those topics. The majority of Twitter news users employ three different ways to follow their passion topics — subjects that they have a particularly deep interest in and follow closely. Six in 10 use Twitter to follow specific news organizations (63%) about the topics they are passionate about. A similar number (60%) follow individual journalists, writers and commentators who tweet about the topic and follow other non-journalists who they think are interesting on the topic (62%).

Far fewer Twitter news users use some of the other features of Twitter that could be employed to follow topics. For instance, just 28% say they search for people and organizations that tweet about that topic, and 23% say they search hashtags or keywords. Even fewer, just 9% create their own custom lists of people and organizations to follow on a topic, and just 4% employ the lists that other people have created.

How people follow passion topics on Twitter



Data Source: Question: How do you use Twitter to follow news about that/those topic(s)? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

Twitter and breaking news

While people end up following news in general on Twitter and use the social network “to pass the time,” the immediacy of using the network to track news in real time, as noted above, is one of the primary reasons that people say they use Twitter and the most common form of news that is followed.

To get deeper sense of that experience, we asked people to recall the last time they used the network to follow a news story as it was breaking in real time.

The great majority of those who use Twitter for news (70%) said they had used Twitter in the last month to follow a story in real time. Most of them (80%) said they did so by scrolling through their timeline.

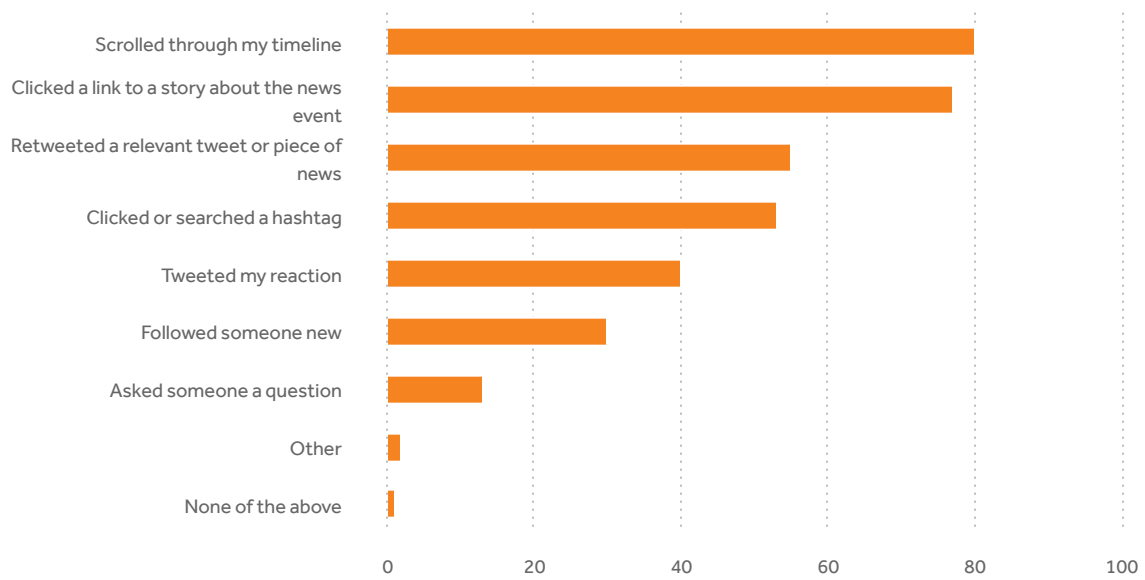
From there, however, people became active in much more marked ways than we see in their general activity on Twitter.

For instance, fully 80% of those who have followed a breaking story in the past month said they clicked on a story as events were moving in real time. That is early double the 39% of Twitter news users who say they “always or usually” click on news stories.

More than half, 55%, also said they retweeted a story, and 53% similarly said they clicked or searched a hashtag. All of these are much higher numbers than said they take these actions routinely on Twitter. More than a third (40%) also tweeted their reaction to the story, and nearly a third (30%) said they followed someone new.

How Twitter news users follow news as it breaks

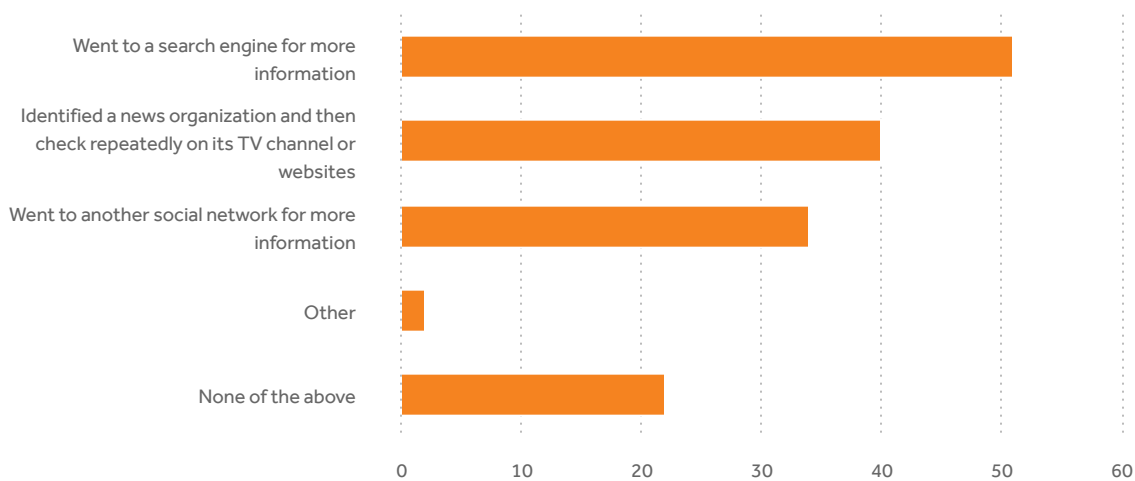
On Twitter



Data Source: Question: Thinking of the last month, did you look at Twitter to follow a breaking news event in real time such as a plane crash, a riot, a disaster, or the death of a notable person? / Thinking about how you used Twitter to follow this event, which of the following, if any, did you do? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206, Followed Breaking News on Twitter N= 2244)

How Twitter news users follow news as it breaks

Outside of Twitter



Data Source: Question: Thinking of the last month, did you look at Twitter to follow a breaking news event in real time such as a plane crash, a riot, a disaster, or the death of a notable person? / Thinking about how you used Twitter to follow this event, which of the following, if any, did you do? / Again, thinking about a breaking news event, did you take any of the following actions outside Twitter? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206, Followed Breaking News on Twitter N= 2244)

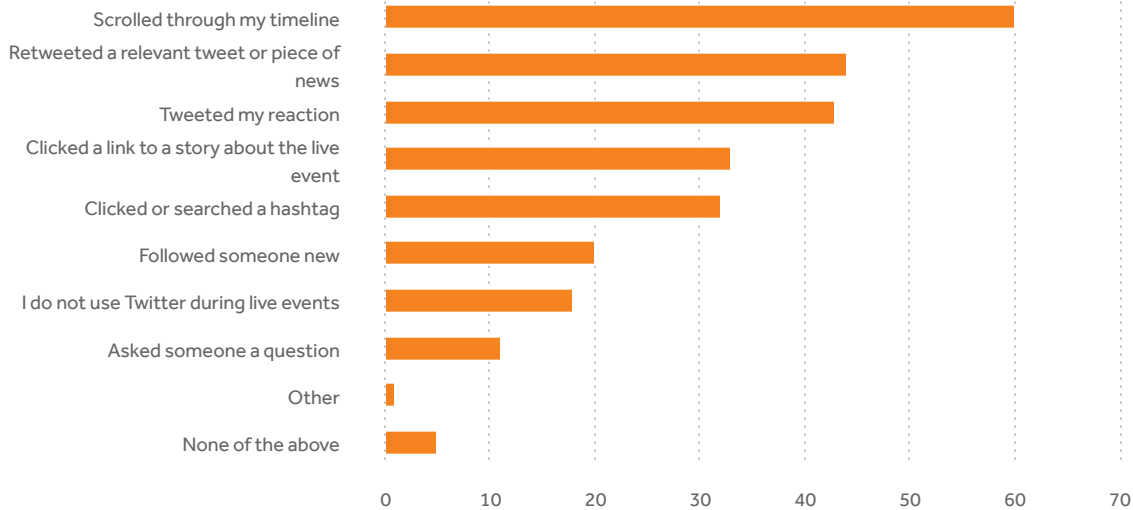
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Many, 78%, then did something outside Twitter. Half, 51%, went to a search engine for more information; 40% found a news organization and repeatedly checked its website or TV broadcast. More than a third, 34%, went to another social network.

The study also probed the contours of how people use Twitter to follow live events. In all, 57% of Twitter news users said they had used the network in the last month to follow or “double screen” a live event in real time, such as a sports event or an entertainment show.

What did they do then? Most, 79%, scrolled through their timeline; 60% tweeted their reaction and 61% retweeted something. A third, 45%, clicked a story about the event and 44% clicked or searched a hashtag.

How Twitter news users follow live events on Twitter



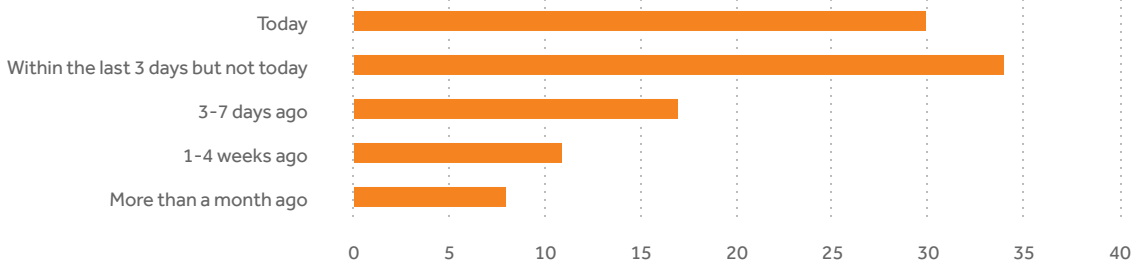
Data Source: Question: Many people turn to Twitter during live events that are planned, such as sports or political events. In the last month, did you access and look at tweets during a live event? / Thinking about how you use Twitter during live events that you might be watching on TV or even attending, which of the following, if any, do you usually do? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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The survey also asked people to recall their most recent interaction with a particular news story on Twitter (any kind of story, whether breaking news, a feature, a trend story, news story or any other type). Most Twitter news users, 81%, could recall engaging with a specific news story on Twitter in the last week, 30% in the last day, and another 34% in the last three days.

Last time Twitter news users engaged with a news story

On the platform

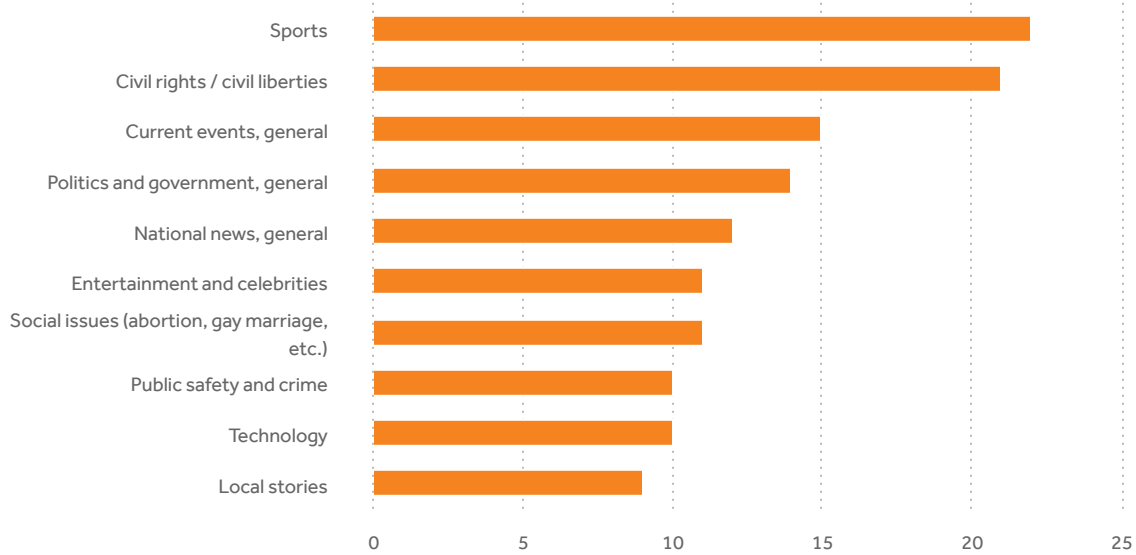


Data Source: Question: When was the last time that you engaged with a news story on Twitter in some way (e.g. retweeted, clicked a link or took some other action) (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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The topics ranged fairly widely, from sports, to civil rights, current events, politics and more. No topic was higher than 22% (sports).

The most recent news stories Twitter users recall engaging

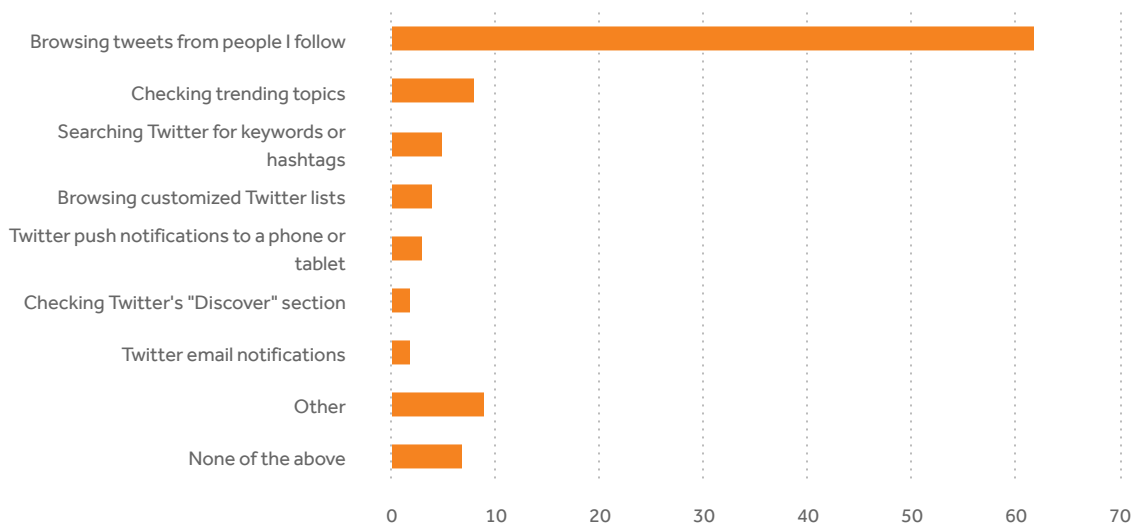


Data Source: Question: What was the topic of the story? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206) Note: The survey was conducted around the time of the controversy over a police shooting and subsequent protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

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By far and away the most common form of discovery (62%) was by Twitter news users scrolling through their timeline of people they follow. The next most common form of discovering that story was by checking trending topics, but that was just 8%.

How Twitter users discovered the most recent news story they engaged with



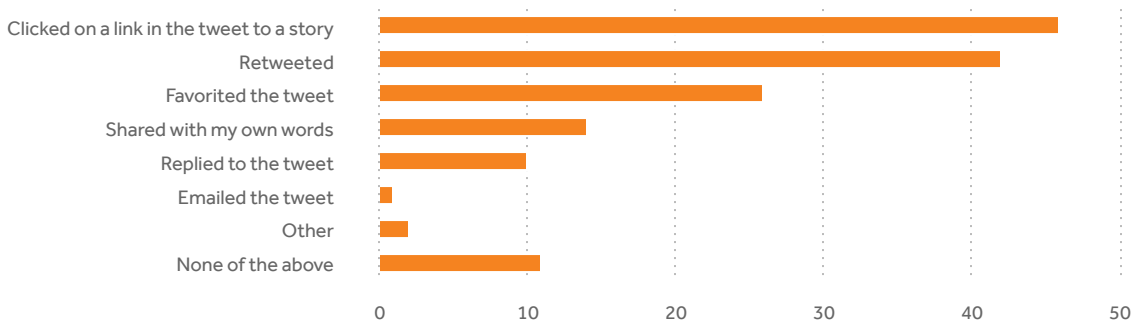
Data Source: Question: How did you find out about the story? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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What did people do next?

As with the tracking of a story in real time, Twitter news users were quite active. Fully 46% said they clicked on a story, not just read tweets, 42% retweeted, 26% favorited a tweet, and 14% tweeted in their own words.

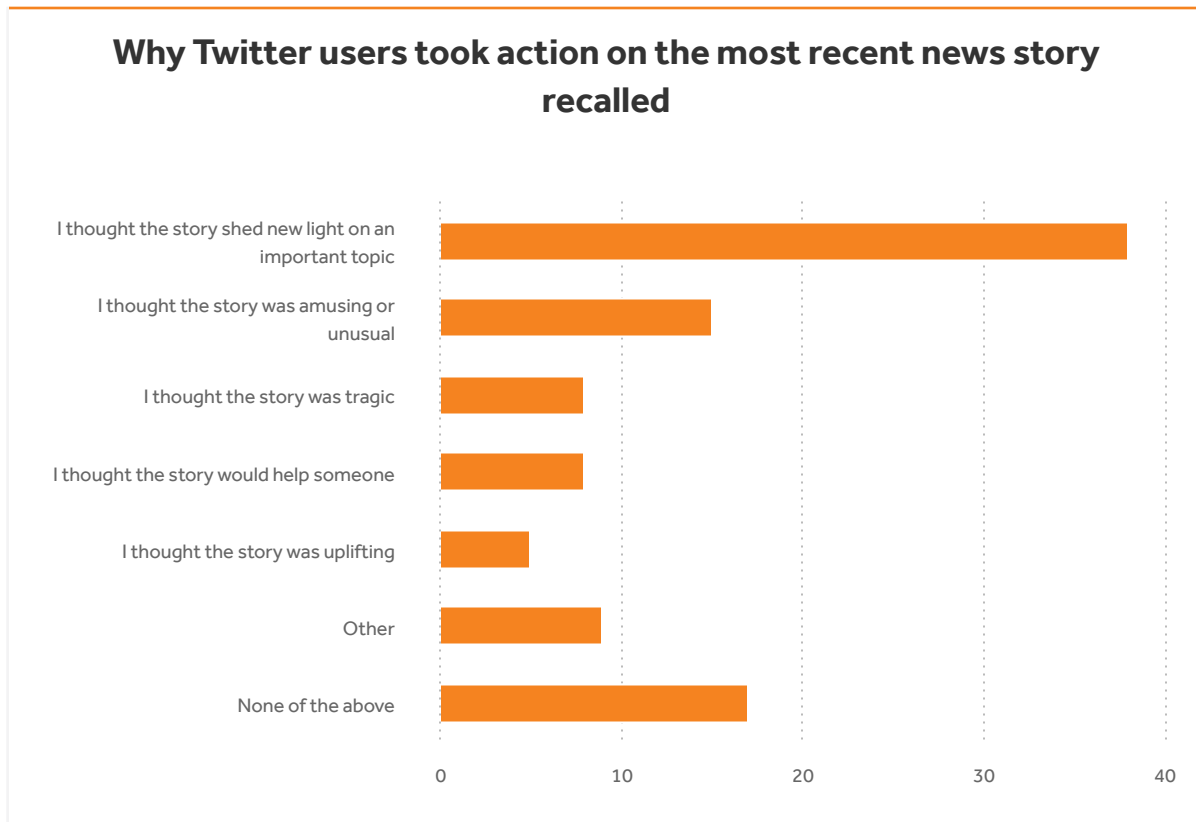
How Twitter users recall interacting with the most recent news story they engaged



Data Source: Question: What did you do on this particular occasion? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

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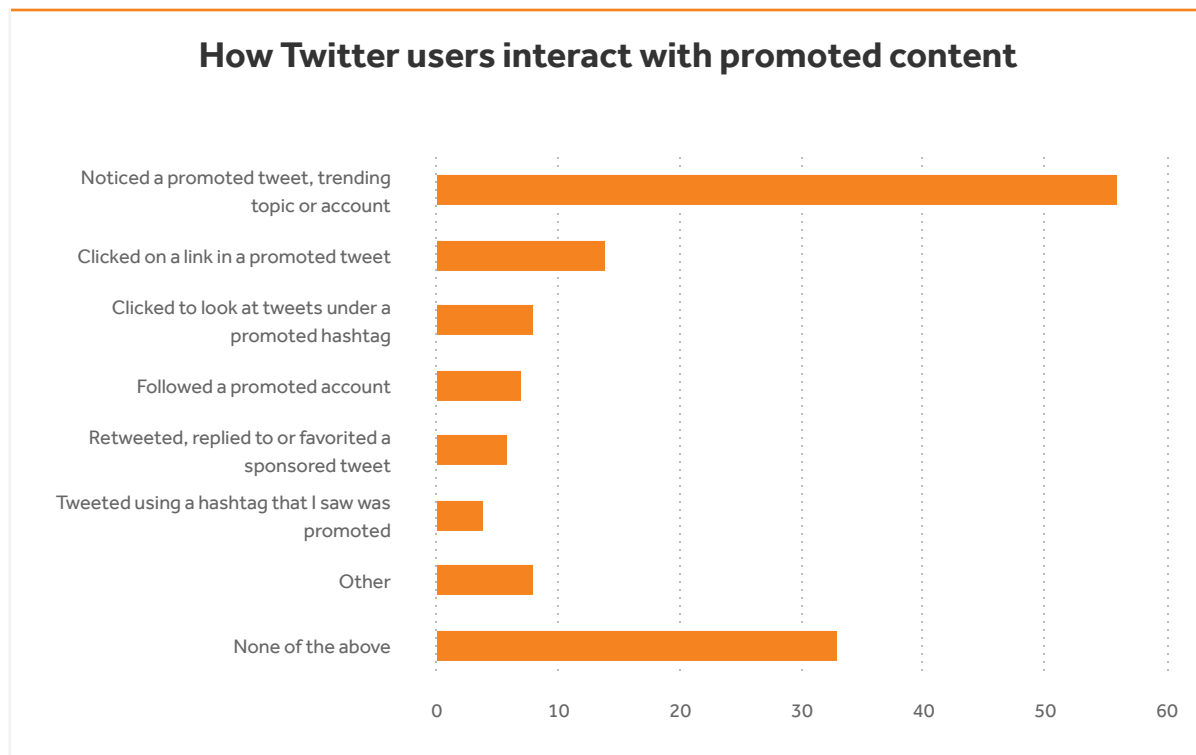
And what motivated people to take whatever action they did? Significance emerged as the number one reason. Fully 38% said they took whatever action they did because they thought the story shed new light on an important topic. That is more than twice the number (15%) who said they thought the story was unusual or amusing. Pathos was even further down the list. Just 8% said they pursued whatever their last news encounter was on Twitter because the story was a tragic one.



Data Source: Question: Which comes closest to why you decided to take the action you did? (Base: Twitter News Users N=3206)

Brands and promoted tweets

Most Twitter users (77%) have interacted with a promoted tweet in some way. The largest number, 56%, say they have noticed a promoted tweet, topic or account. Fifteen percent have clicked on a promoted tweet, 8% on a tweet under a promoted hashtag. Almost as many, 7%, have followed a promoted account and 6% have retweeted, replied or favorited a sponsored tweet. In addition, 4% have tweeted using a promoted hashtag.

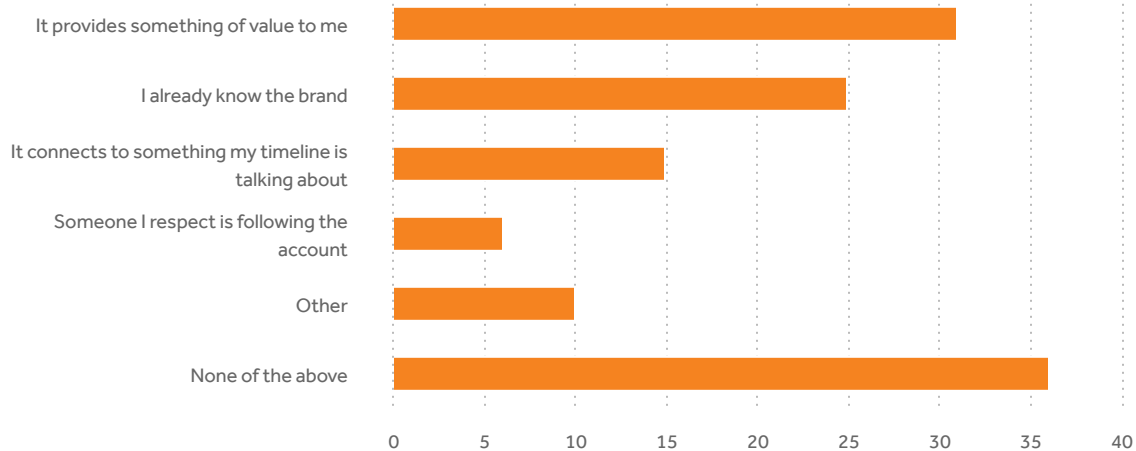


Data Source: Question: Twitter contains paid content called promoted tweets, topics or accounts. Please tell us when it comes to this kind of promoted content if you have done any of the following. Please select all that apply. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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The reasons for these interactions were also interesting. A third of those have interacted with a promoted tweet in some way (31%) said they had this interaction because the brand “provides something of value to me.” A quarter (25%) said they interacted with the promoted tweet or account because they knew the brand. A somewhat smaller number (15%) said they interacted or recalled the promoted account because it connected to something their “timeline is talking about.”

Reasons Twitter users interact with promoted content



Data Source: Question: When you notice or respond to promoted content, which of the following reasons best describe why you are inclined to do so? Please check up to two. (Base: Interacted with Promoted Content N=2301)

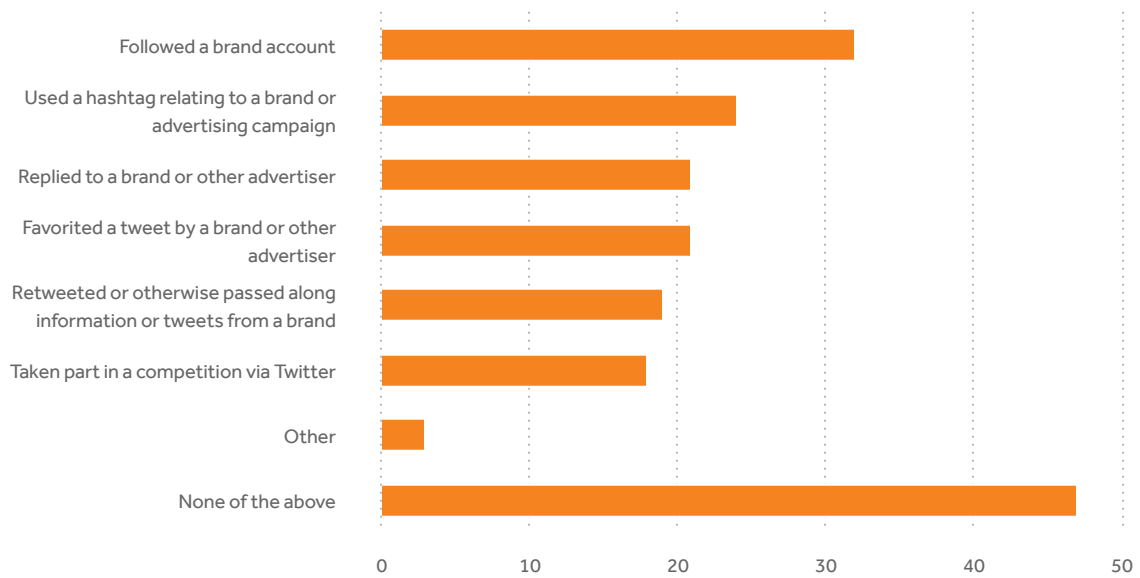
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Beyond noticing or interacting with a promoted tweet, Twitter users can take another step by interacting with a company itself on Twitter. Fully half of Twitter users (53%) said they had done this.

The largest number 32%, said they had followed a brand account. Almost a quarter, 24%, said they had used a hashtag relating to a brand or ad campaign and 21% had replied to a brand or advertiser on Twitter, while 21% had favorited a tweet by a brand or advertiser. Almost as many, 19%, had retweeted or passed along information in tweets from a brand and 18% had taken part in a competition of some kind set up by a brand on Twitter.

How Twitter users interact with brands directly

By percentage who have...

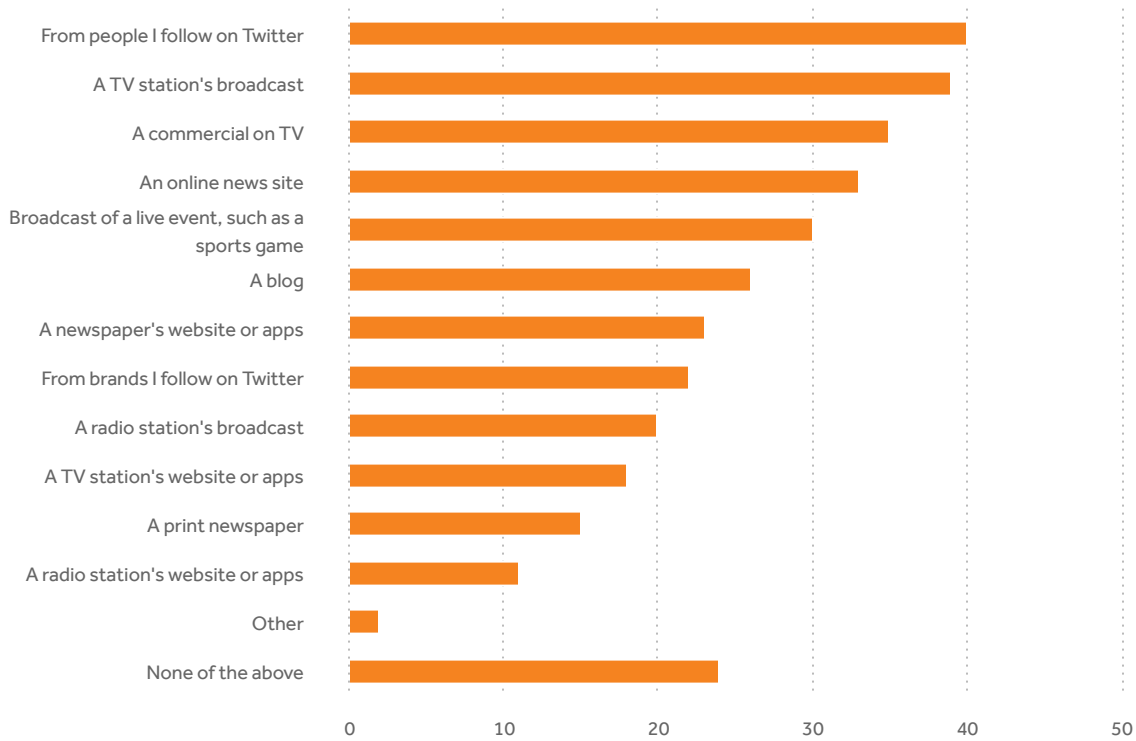


Data Source: Question: Some companies also use Twitter to reach users directly. Have you ever interacted with companies in the following way? Please select all that apply. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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The survey also asked people how they encounter advertising on Twitter. It came from a variety of means, with no single one standing out. The most common (40%) was hearing about it from people they follow and the same number (39%) from a TV station broadcast. Almost as many (35%) said they discovered a brand's tweets by hearing about them on TV commercials and (33%) from online news sites. Almost as many said they discovered them during live events such as sports (30%), from blogs (26%) and from newspapers (23%).

Where Twitter users see advertising involving Twitter accounts or hashtags



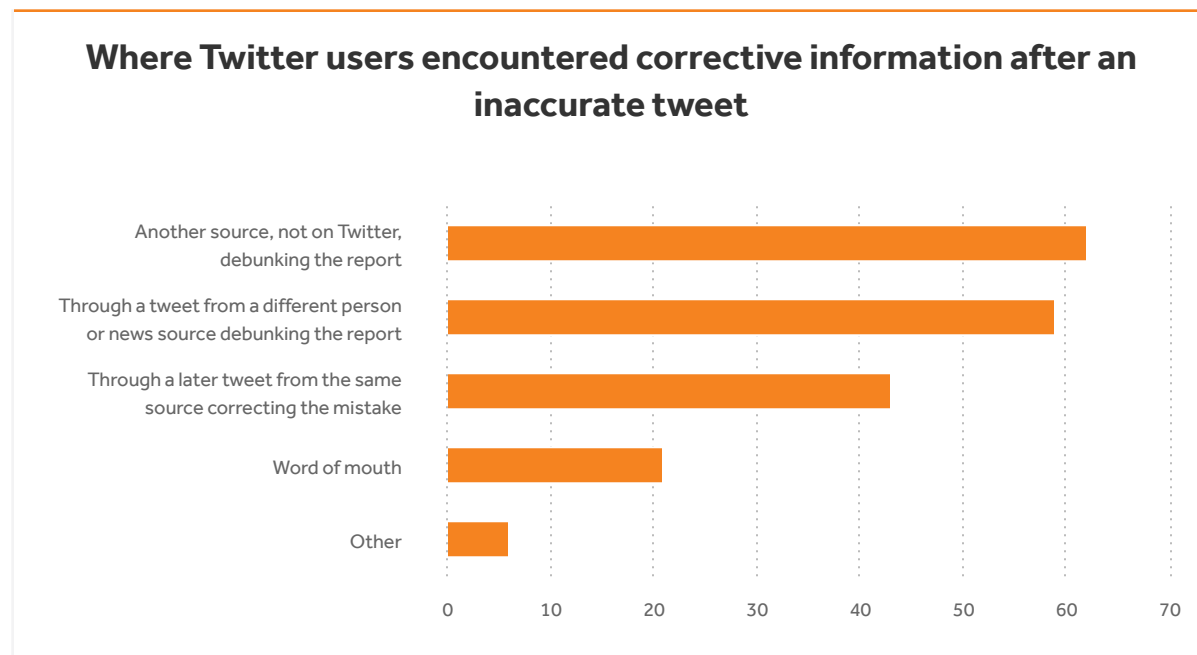
Data Source: Question: Thinking about the advertising you encounter that includes a Twitter account or hashtag, where have you encountered that information? Please select all that apply. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

False information on Twitter

One question some people have about the openness of the web, including social networks, is about navigating information that proves to be false. The survey probed Twitter users about that experience as well. The findings suggest that there is some self-correcting element to Twitter and to the web generally, born in part out of the multiplicity of information sources and also out of some degree of skepticism by Twitter users about the information they encounter.

In all, 64% of Twitter news users said they had encountered something on Twitter they later discovered wasn't true. Interestingly, relatively few people said they had ever passed those tweets along. Just 16% of Twitter news users said they had retweeted or posted a tweet they later discovered to be false.

There were various ways Twitter users said they discovered that something they saw was wrong, which gets to the multiplicity of the correcting nature of the platform. Sixty-two percent of those who encountered a false tweet said they discovered it from another source outside Twitter. Nearly as many, 59%, said they saw a tweet alerting them to the problem. Four out of 10, 43%, said they were alerted to the problem by a later tweet from the same source correcting their mistake. A much smaller number, 21%, said they heard about it from someone later through word of mouth. In other words, the web as a system and Twitter itself has some self correction to it.



Data Source: Question: Have you ever encountered a tweet that you later found out wasn't true? / Thinking about the last time you found out a tweet you had seen was inaccurate, how did you discover it wasn't true? Please select all that apply. (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

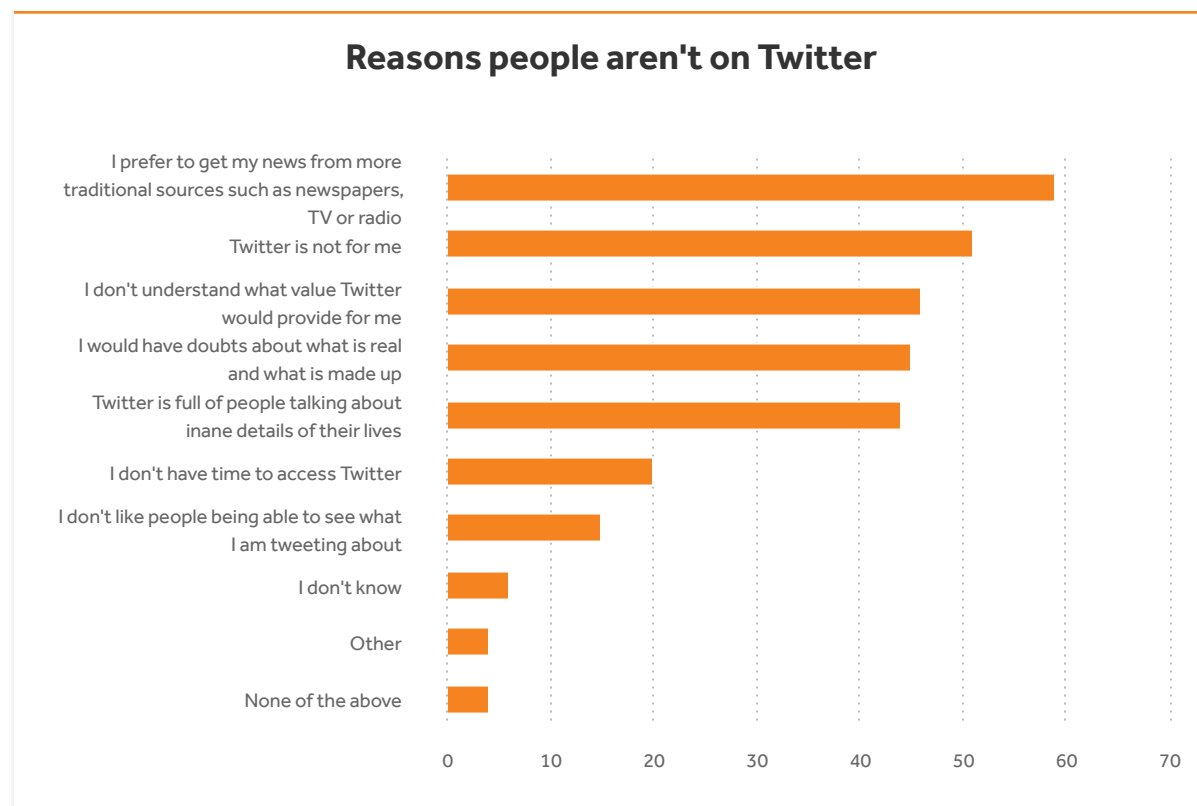
How non-Twitter users are different

The survey also probed non-Twitter social media users about why they don't use the social network for news. People offered a range of answers, with no one standing far above any other.

Perhaps the most striking result is that these are news consumers who feel they get sufficient news elsewhere. Indeed, the largest number of non-Twitter news users (59%) cited a preference for traditional news sources such as newspaper, TV and radio as the reason they aren't using Twitter as a news delivery platform.

Beyond that, however, no particular reason stood out as to why people don't use Twitter as a means of discovering news. The next two reasons cited fall into the category probably of being unsure or unfamiliar. About half of these non-Twitter news users (51%) cited a more general sense that "Twitter is not for me." Just under half (46%) of non-Twitter users said they aren't sure what Twitter would provide them. Similarly, about as many (45%) cited concern about knowing what is real and what is made up.

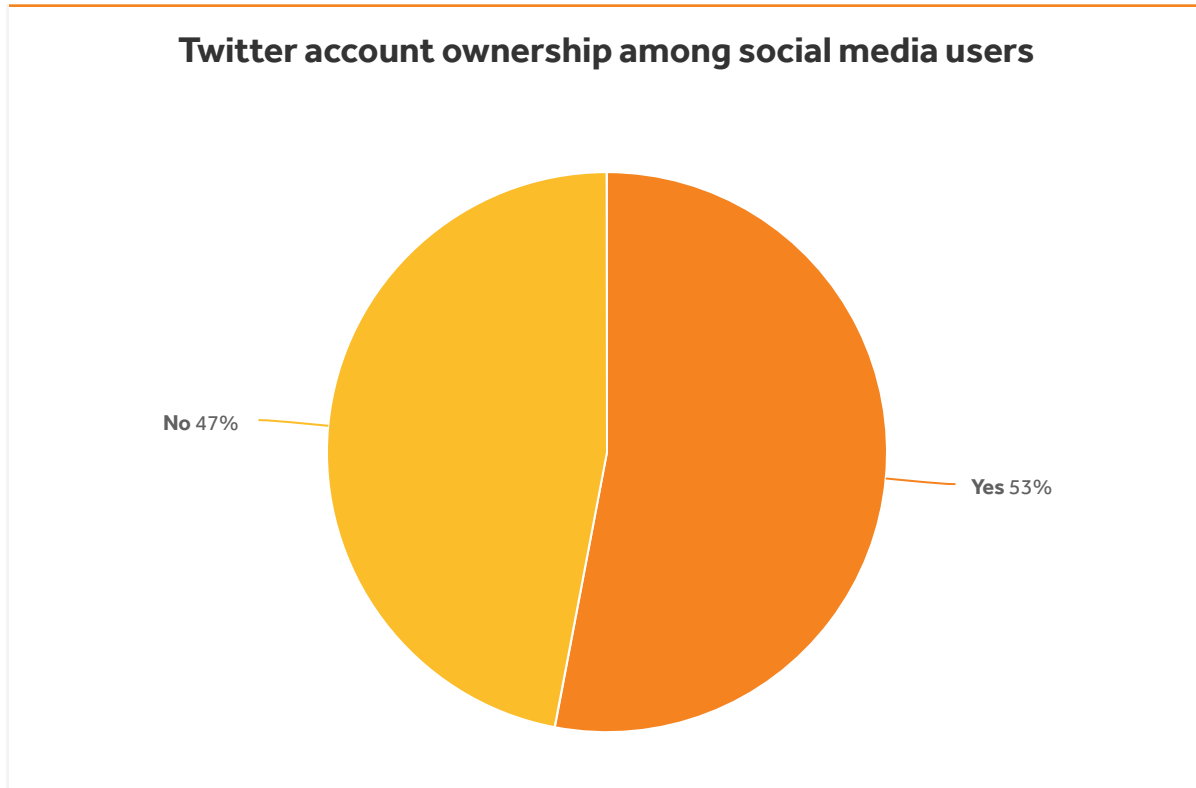
A roughly similar number (44%) said they thought Twitter would be made up of "people talking about inane details in their lives." One in 5 (20%) said they lack the time.



Data Source: Question: Thinking about the way in which you follow news stories in general, which of the following statements best describe why you wouldn't use Twitter as a source of news? Please select all that apply. (Base: Non-Twitter Users N=469)

Twitter and life

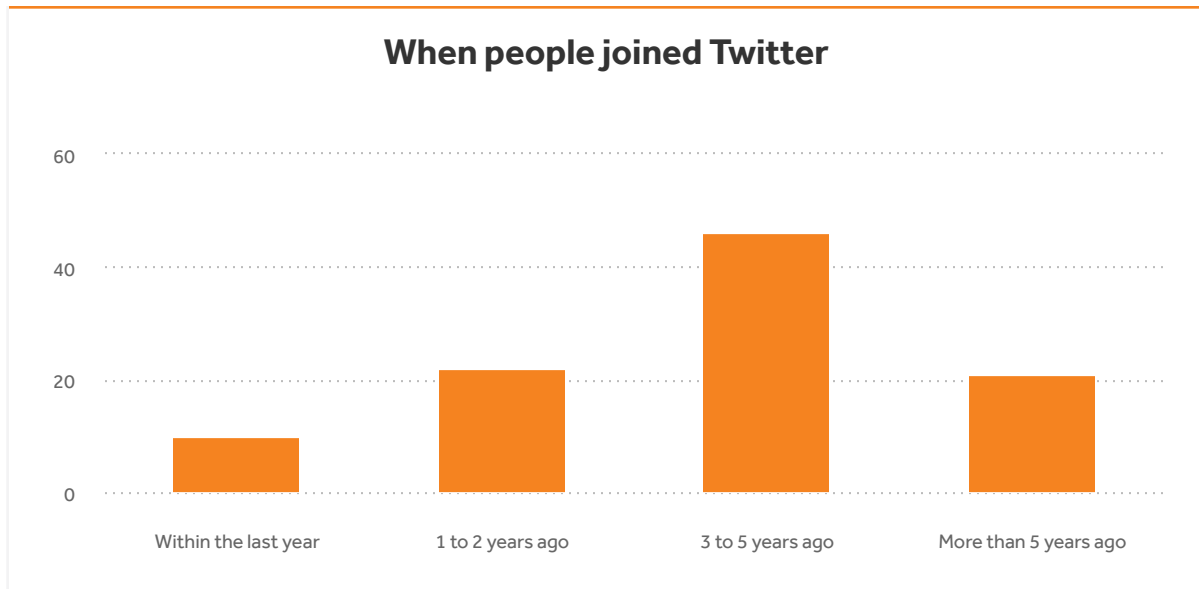
Just over half of social media users (53%) have a Twitter account and most (67%) have had it for more than 3 years, according to the survey.



Data Source: Question: Do you have a Twitter account? (Base: Social Media Users, N=1000)

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When people joined Twitter

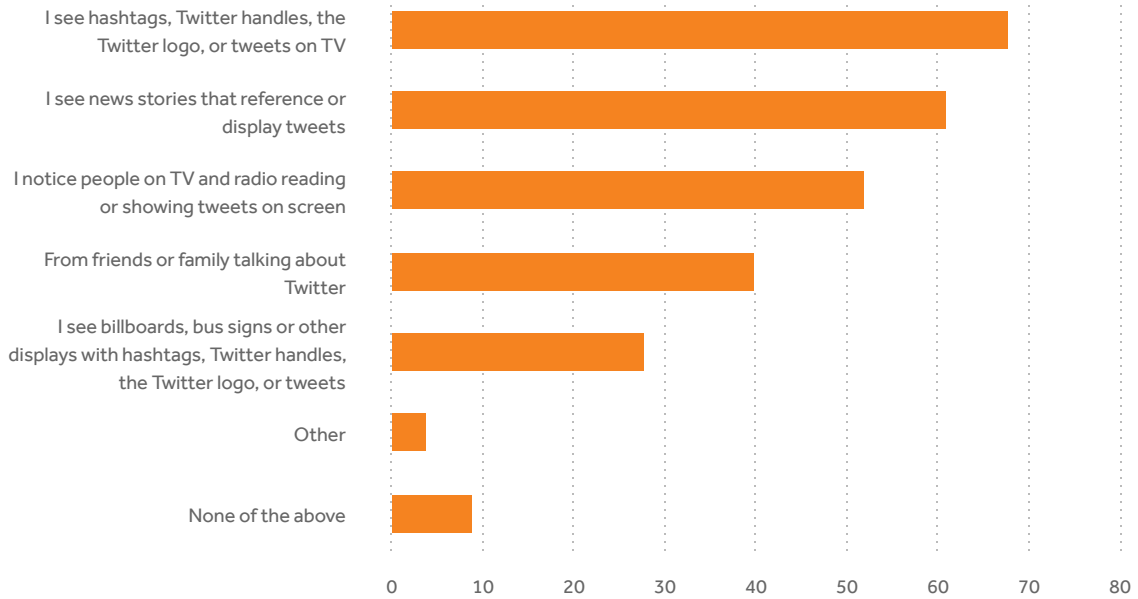


Data Source: Question: When did you first join Twitter? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713, asked between Nov. 23 and Dec. 15, 2014)

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An even wider world of people encounter Twitter without using it. Of all Twitter users, 68% see hashtags and Twitter handles or tweets displayed on TV, 61% in news stories, 52% from people reading tweets on TV. 40% hear about Twitter from friends and 28% on billboards, bus signs and elsewhere.

Where Twitter users see Twitter off the platform

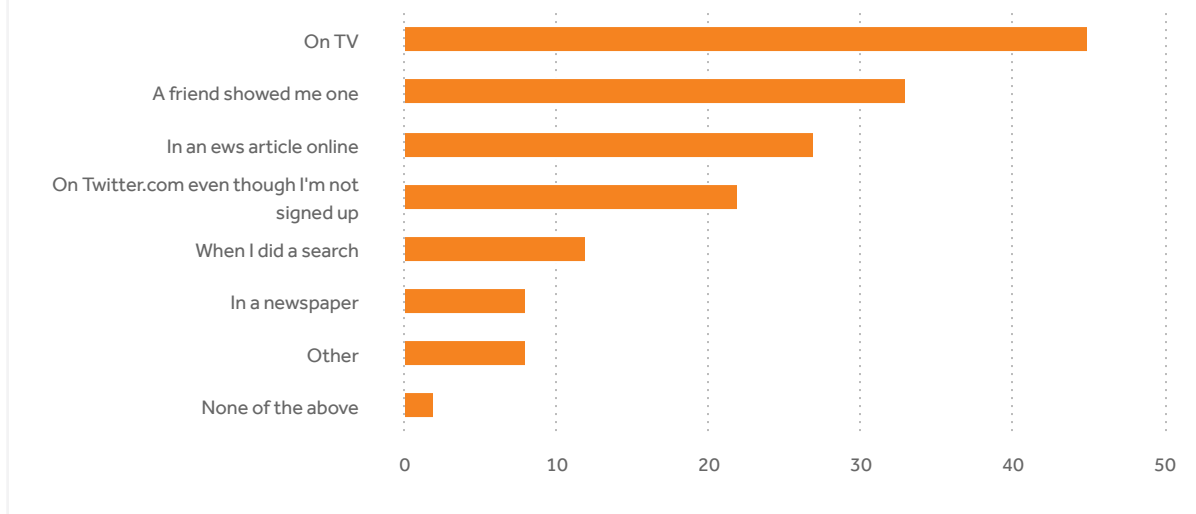


Data Source: Regardless of how you use Twitter yourself, which of the following ways do you come across references to or information from Twitter? (Base: Twitter Users N=3713)

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These are noticed by non-Twitter social media users too. Fully 51% of non-Twitter users have seen Tweets — 45% on TV, 33% from friends, 27% in news articles they read digitally, 22% from going to twitter.com without signing up, 12% from search and 8% in the newspaper.

Where non-Twitter users remember seeing tweets



Data Source: Have you ever seen a Tweet / Where do you remember seeing it? (Base: Non-Twitter Social Media Users N=469, Have Ever Seen a Tweet N=239)

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Demographics

Twitter users tend to be younger than the average social media user. The average age is 36, according to the study, while overall social media users are 46 (28% of Twitter users are between the ages of 18-24 years old vs. 10% of overall social media users). A quarter of the Twitter sample have children (22%), compared with 34% for social media users in the panel in general, which reflects the younger average age. The majority have college degrees (57%) compared with 40% of social media users generally in the panel.

How Twitter users compare to other social media users

	Twitter	Social media users
Male	53%	48%
Female	47%	52%
Average age	36	46
Single	49%	28%
Married	37%	46%
Have children under age 18 in household	22%	34%
Have a college degree or higher	57%	40%

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Twitter users are more likely to own smartphones (92% of those with cell phones have smartphones) than social media users overall (79%), but they are no more likely to own tablets (54% vs. 54%).

Recommendations for publishers

The results of this survey make clear an intimate connection between Twitter users and news, and suggest some ways in which publishers can take best advantage of the platform.

That connection comes through in various data points. Among them, nearly 9 in 10 Twitter users (86%) say they use Twitter for news, almost the same number (85%) say they click on news links on Twitter, and 81% keep up with the news daily. Twitter news users also are optimistic about technology's impact on news — 79% think news has become easier to get in the past five years and 61% get more news since joining the platform. In all these aspects, Twitter users are more engaged with news than social media users in general and non-Twitter news users.

What does this high involvement in news mean in the grand picture for publishers?

Although Twitter users make up a much smaller part of social media usership, data in this survey and elsewhere suggests Twitter's influence ripples beyond the platform. In the survey, nearly 7 in 10 Twitter users (68%) see hashtags and Twitter handles or tweets displayed on TV; 61% see them in news stories; 52% from people reading tweets on TV or radio. Even a majority of non-Twitter users (51%) have seen tweets.

85%

of Twitter news users say they click on news links on the platform.

There's also evidence that Twitter's users influence sharing and the spread of information. This is illustrated well in BuzzFeed's mega-traffic post of 2015, #TheDress. BuzzFeed founder Jonah Peretti reported that its post about whether an image of a dress was white and gold or blue and black received dozens of millions of views. By using a system to track sharing patterns, BuzzFeed found that almost 1 million of those views could be traced to the link in a single tweet, nearly a quarter of which were directly via Twitter and three times as many from other social networks and sites where people shared the link they saw in the tweet.

Distilling the findings from this research, the American Press Institute offers six broad recommendations for publishers to pursue in getting the most out of Twitter.

1. Get your journalists on Twitter

The data make clear Twitter news consumers discover new journalists and new news organizations on Twitter and then follow them elsewhere.

Three quarters of Twitter news users follow individual journalists, writers and commentators (73%) and nearly two thirds follow institutional accounts (62%).

Twitter users also are very likely to discover new journalists and writers, and importantly, then follow their work (67% have done so). Perhaps even more importantly, 50% of those who discover new journalists and writers to follow on Twitter also follow their work on other platforms besides Twitter.

2. Focus on the ‘right now’

Live events and breaking news are a time of discovery, when user behavior becomes more nuanced and users are most likely to discover new sources.

There were many findings pointing this way. When we asked Twitter users about the most important reasons they use it for news specifically, by far the top answer was “to get the news immediately, in real time” (70%). This greatly exceeds other motives like to discover new sources (47%), engage with journalists (27%), or follow trends and hashtags (19%).

Publishers should consider this when thinking about what content to promote on the platform. The data suggests that some journalism like breaking news or live events naturally fits users’ expectations.

Other content could be framed for time sensitivity. Features and trend stories can be tied to latest developments, and publishers may find success in framing of “what to know” at this particular moment. An example would be promoting a story about the Supreme Court in the context of “what to know ahead of Friday’s opinion” or resurfacing a feature about a Supreme Court justice when a relevant breaking news event occurs.

3. Focus on hard news

Twitter differs from other social networks in the types of news that users seem to be looking for. Many other studies and anecdotes have shown that on Facebook, the most successful content makes people feel strong emotions.

But we asked Twitter users to recall the most recent news story they interacted with on Twitter, and then why they did so. The top reason was that the story “shed new light on an important topic” (38%). This ranked much higher than emotional factors you would often see leading the way on Facebook: included that the story was amusing or unusual (15%); tragic (8%) or uplifting (5%); or might help someone (8%).

This suggests that users are interested in hard news or other content that adds perspective to current events. Interaction seems less based on emotion or practical help and much more so on the significance of the news content itself.

4. Sports and politics beats are particularly well suited to Twitter

We asked Twitter users what topics they are most passionate about following on Twitter. The answers were widespread with no clear majority, but a couple clear leaders.

Sports is the No. 1 topic for 25% of Twitter users, followed by politics at 21%. Both fit well into the “what’s happening now” behaviors of Twitter (each are tied strongly to scheduled events).

Next down is a close mix of technology, civil rights, and social issues at 11% to 14% each. Each of those is less tied to scheduled events, except in the case of breaking news or live events (such as an Apple announcement).

Because of this general behavior, news organizations would be wise to spend energy on sports and politics coverage on Twitter.

More specifically, the emphasis should be based around how the users follow this “passion topic” on Twitter. More than 3 in 5 Twitter users say they get news about their passion topic by following both individuals and news organizations that tweet about it. Consistency in coverage, as well as clarity that you do cover a specific “passion topic,” likely help make it easier for users to follow and engage with news accounts around topics they care about most deeply.

5. Save the hashtags for breaking news

Hashtags actually aren’t used that much for discovery – except during breaking news, when over half of users clicked a hashtag to follow up.

The large majority of people access news through Twitter by scrolling through their timeline (80%) or browsing tweets from people they follow (67%). In general usage, only about 3 in 10 Twitter users get news via search for keywords or hashtags or check trending topics. In breaking news situations, half look at hashtags and search.

Put another way, people seem more interested in diving deeper when something is happening in the moment. This coincides with findings from API’s Personal News Cycle research.¹

Diving deeply into breaking news on Twitter involves more than search and hashtags. In breaking news situations, 51% of Twitter users say they go to a search engine for more information after discovering the event on Twitter, and 2 out of 5 identified a news organization via Twitter that they later went to directly and repeatedly for updates.

In breaking news situations, hashtags and search help users know what’s happening and point them to more sources. 30% said they followed a new source during breaking news they saw on Twitter. In the more general circumstances, they appear to mainly add to the character count.

6. Tweet mobile-friendly content

The majority of Twitter users access Twitter on their phone (82%). The predominant way of using Twitter is through its mobile app (72%). If publishers want to reach this newsy and potentially influential userbase, they should keep in mind that traffic coming from Twitter will expect to arrive at a mobile friendly web experience.

This is particularly important if the “cascade” idea holds true, where content discovered on Twitter gets shared more widely to other sites and platforms. If Twitter’s mobile users have difficulty interacting with your site due to slow load times or difficulties in pinching and zooming, an extra roadblock exists between their finding your content and sharing it on other networks, reading it thoroughly, and more.

Looking forward

Some new developments will likely reshape how Twitter is used for news in the future.

Twitter behavior regarding news may change if Twitter in fall 2015, as reported in BuzzFeed, introduces its Project Lightning feature. Mat Honan’s reporting indicates this would be a major feature that would curate tweets around events and place it centrally in the app. Users would likely encounter more news in the app, and the prominence of users discovering news mainly through their timeline could subside.

In late summer 2015, Twitter added a “News” button in a central location for some users.

Twitter also introduced summary teasers for links, and earlier this year acquired live-streaming app Periscope.

That said, these new efforts still revolve around the “happening now” behavior that already drives Twitter, and so the platform should continue to serve largely the same purposes identified in this survey though in new ways.



Social interaction has always been at the heart of news



It’s also significant that Twitter users on average are young (younger than even the general social media user), and that Twitter usage is fueled by the growth of mobile. Publishers would benefit from engaging and understanding this young, mobile-savvy audience that is essential to their futures on all platforms.

Social networks are no longer a new door into news. They have become a primary pathway to it, one that will inevitably change because they are user driven. Social interaction has always been at the heart of news – from the coffee houses of the 17th century where newspapers were born to the arrival of social media in 21st – and understanding how people use and create that flow of information is central to survival of news operations in the future.

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1. API’s research with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found the youngest adults (18-29) are twice as likely to follow a breaking news story in-depth in the past week than any other general news story. Furthermore, the youngest adults followed breaking news in-depth at higher levels than any other age bracket (55% in ages 18-29 compared to 45% for those over age 60). ↩

Methodology

This study was conducted by DB5 using a 15-minute online survey among two groups:

1. General social media users (n=1,000) defined as those who used some sort of social media platform at least weekly. These individuals were recruited through an online panel of adults (18 years of age and older) across the U.S. who are nationally representative based on demographics (including age and gender). The 469 non-Twitter users included in this analysis originated from this group (identified through their responses to a question on Twitter usage).
2. Twitter users (n=3,713) who were prompted directly through Twitter to participate in the survey and confirmed through the survey to be weekly Twitter users. Again, this group included adults (18+) with a mix of men and women. Although the general social media user sample included some who said they used Twitter, the analysis of Twitter users was conducted primarily on this separate sample of 3,713 Twitter users. The initial invitation to participate in the survey specified Twitter usage generally, but not news.

All responses were collected between Nov. 23 and Dec. 15, 2014. Conducting studies on news is always subject to what might be making news at the time of the survey. In this case, events in Ferguson, Missouri were prominent in the media and are reflected in the responses to the survey. The survey was designed to be objective without any particular events in mind; the focus on any particular events is only in the responses and is related to the timing of the study.

The survey instrument was developed by a research team at API that included Tom Rosenstiel, executive director, Jeff Sonderman, deputy director, and Kevin Loker, program manager, and consultant Maria Ivancin.

DB5 consulted fully on the questionnaire, executed the survey and produced the topline: The team at DB5 included Nina Kjarval, strategy director, and Raquel Hamias, brand strategist.

Twitter funded the study but granted API researchers independence to develop the survey questionnaire. DB5 conducted the survey and tabulated results. API analyzed the data and produced this written report.

The topline results with questionnaire are available to the public for download.