

# Journalism and social media

How information networks help spread news

Things change overnight in the digital world, which makes it risky to monitor Internet trends in a book like this. (Anybody remember Napster? Or Pets.com?)

But in the pages ahead, we'll assume you're familiar with social networking, even if you've only used it to connect with your friends. After all, Facebook currently claims to have 483 million daily users — but that's "currently."

And in the digital world, nothing lasts forever.

So for now, this section will focus on two dominant social networks: Facebook and Twitter. They're billion-dollar businesses, yes, but they're terrific tools, too — digital delivery systems ideally suited for journalism.

## 7 REASONS WHY JOURNALISTS SHOULD USE SOCIAL MEDIA

Journalists have been slow to embrace social media. Many think it's a useless time-waster, a passing fad. But it's not. Here's why:

- 1 It's where your audience is.** People don't park themselves at news websites all day. But they *do* constantly monitor their social network accounts on their smartphones, tablets and computers. So if you want to stay on readers' radar, you've got to establish a social-media presence.
- 2 It's an easy, effective way to cover breaking news.** Just type a sentence, press a button and you've broken a story. It's a newshound's dream. Any technology that lets you file a stream of dispatches from any news event, anywhere, anytime, is a phenomenal reporting tool.
- 3 It directs traffic to your publication's website.** For ordinary folks, social networks offer a way to post birthday greetings and baby photos. But for journalists, the primary goal is to attract readers, either by linking to current stories or creating a buzz for what's coming up.
- 4 It extends the shelf life of the stories you produce.** Listen to James Bennet, editor of Atlantic magazine: "It's amazing to watch the way a story in a new issue — or in an issue published 20 years ago — will get discovered and passed around on Twitter. It is this wonderful, wonderful recommendation machine."
- 5 It helps you engage with your readers.** News organizations need to get better at listening. Conversing. Projecting a personality. When reporters continually interact with their community, like real people do, their followers are more willing to contribute and collaborate.
- 6 It improves your reporting.** Your readers are all out there, ready to share their expertise, shape your coverage, correct your errors and suggest new story ideas. (For more on this, see the next page.)
- 7 It improves your writing.** Nothing promotes tight phrasing as ruthlessly as a 140-character limit. "If a lead doesn't fit in a tweet, it's probably too long," says social-media guru Steve Buttry. "It really helps me write better leads on my blog and columns."



## USING TWEETS TO DELIVER NEWS

Suppose you're a typical Twitter user (or "tweep"). You've chosen to follow tweets from a variety of news sources. Here's what you'll see:

**Bugle-Beacon** @buglebeacon  
Mayor Gribble announces he won't seek re-election next year: "It's over," he says. [bitly.com/zXvdPk](http://bitly.com/zXvdPk)  
2 minutes ago

**Bugle Football** @buglesports  
Wildcats QB Pierce Deere injured his leg during practice today. He's been rushed to Mercy Hospital in an ambulance.  
11 minutes ago

**Local 7 News** @local7news  
Police find a pound of marijuana in Mayor Gribble's briefcase. [bitly.com/zUcDxw](http://bitly.com/zUcDxw)  
54 minutes ago

**TV5 Weather** @TV5weatherguy  
Band of heavy rain moving in from the coast tonight, with winds gusting up to 70 mph. [bitly.com/wlqk7b](http://bitly.com/wlqk7b)  
1 hour ago

**Ella Vader** @ellavader  
We're trying to find "The Worst Job in Town" for an upcoming Labor Day report. Do you qualify? Know somebody who does?  
1 hour ago

**Walter Mellon** @waltermellon  
RT @buglebeacon: A new survey reveals that 75% of Americans have used their phones in the bathroom. [bitly.com/A6ZJEM](http://bitly.com/A6ZJEM)  
2 hours ago

**Local 7 News** @local7news  
School board outlaws skateboarding on #CityHigh [bitly.com/z12SIV](http://bitly.com/z12SIV)  
3 hours ago

**Bugle-Beacon** @buglebeacon  
A new survey reveals that 75% of Americans have used their phones in the bathroom. [bitly.com/A6ZJEM](http://bitly.com/A6ZJEM)  
4 hours ago

**MonkeyPoo** @monkeypoo  
BOOYAH!! Wildcats kick butt!! AWESOME!!!! Woo-HOOO!!!

Unfamiliar with Twitter? Notice how the most recent tweet is on top. And the entire message is limited to 140 characters, max.

This is the simplest, most basic type of news tweet: a concise summary of an event, posted from a reporter's cellphone.

Here, a reporter has just finished a story and posted it online. This link takes you to it. (Special software rewrites Web addresses to make them shorter.)

A local weathercaster alerts us to an approaching storm by directing us to a National Weather Service bulletin.

Here, a Bugle-Beacon reporter uses Twitter to crowdsource a story. Ideally, her followers will reply and retweet this to their friends.

A retweet (RT) lets users forward this Bugle-Beacon tweet to their followers — who, in turn, might retweet the message even more. That's how stories can attract thousands of readers.

To label tweets by topic, you add a *hashtag* — a keyword preceded by the pound sign. Clicking this link calls up all the tweets that share this hashtag.

Here's the original tweet that was retweeted by Walter Mellon, above.

Unfortunately, news tweets constantly compete with noisy distractions like this.

## HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR STORIES

### BEFORE YOU WRITE A STORY

- ◆ **Monitor your community's conversations.** Social media provide a window into the trends, topics, activities and obsessions that are foremost in your neighbors' minds.
- ◆ **Monitor the movers and shakers in your community.** Postings from the politicians, public officials, artists or athletes on your beat can suggest fresh story angles.
- ◆ **Monitor your competition.** And if they beat you to a local story, their tweets will help you catch up pretty quickly.

### WHILE YOU'RE WRITING A STORY

- ◆ **Tweet live coverage of news events:** Elections. Disasters. Sports. Controversial public meetings. Courtroom dramas.
- ◆ **Locate eyewitnesses or participants** in local news events.
- ◆ **Crowdsource your stories** — i.e., use the wisdom of the crowd — to test story ideas, suggest fresh sources, answer questions and contribute photos, videos and anecdotes.
- ◆ **Search Twitter and Facebook** for people, topics and breaking-news content you won't find through Google.
- ◆ **Conduct online surveys** with Facebook's easy-to-use Questions tool.

### AFTER YOU PUBLISH A STORY

- ◆ **Promote content on your publication's website** by linking to stories, photos and videos as soon as they're published. You can publicize upcoming events and projects, too.
- ◆ **Host Facebook chats** where you encourage the community to ask questions or interview experts on topics of interest.
- ◆ **Share behind-the-scenes photos, videos or commentary.**



◆ **Explore more advanced storytelling options.** For instance, Storify software lets you assemble tweets, Facebook posts, photos and other snippets into a timeline that recaps how a story unfolded. (You can add commentary, too.) And by creating a Facebook group like the one above, you can post updates, reach out to readers and encourage participation in topics of special community interest.

The Tallahassee Democrat set up a Facebook group to help uncover the truth about a local student's controversial death.

## THINK BEFORE YOU TWEET: SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS

**YOUR ONLINE IMAGE** The moment you start posting content for any news outlet, you become its online representative. And as the social media policy for the Scripps newspaper chain advises: "Everything you post could have a potential influence on your reputation and the company's. Your social media activities, even at home or on your personal time, can affect your work life forever. Don't do things in social media spaces to embarrass yourself."

Students, as we all know, love to act up and goof around. Just remember, though, that all your readers (and future employers) can view the photos of you acting up and goofing around, too. *And they are not amused.*



**WRITING POSTS & TWEETS** The most effective tweets and posts are often expressive. Humorous. Conversational. But relaxing your writing style doesn't mean relaxing your journalistic standards. The same level of fairness and accuracy should apply to every item you post, whether in a tweet or a news story.

- ◆ Social networks are rumor mills; bogus accounts are everywhere (and easy to create). So fact-check everything, including links, before you hit "send." Verify the identities of all your online sources before you attribute any quotes, facts or photos to them.
- ◆ Avoid posting anything that might seem sexist, racist, vulgar or politically/religiously biased. Write with voice and personality, but as the Washington Post's online guidelines advise: "Remember that voice is not opinion."
- ◆ Write complete sentences. Avoid cryptic fragments and tweet-geek jargon. Use all 140 characters if that helps; studies show that longer tweets generate better responses.
- ◆ Correct mistakes immediately with a follow-up post or tweet that explains your error.

**OTHER COMMON ISSUES** ◆ **Breaking news:** Some news organizations encourage their reporters to tweet news alerts the minute something happens, then file a fuller story later.

Others forbid it, like the Associated Press, whose guidelines state: "Don't break news that we haven't published, no matter the format."

Policies keep evolving, so be sure you keep abreast of your own newsroom's guidelines.

◆ **Comments and criticism:** Engage with readers who criticize or complain about your work, but keep conversations calm and civil. Avoid what the AP calls those "protracted back-and-forth exchanges with angry people that become less constructive with each new round."

And don't publicly correct or bad-mouth your colleagues and competitors. If you find they've made a mistake, notify them privately.

◆ **Retweets:** When you forward material from another source, be sure your retweet doesn't read like an endorsement. So instead of this —

RT @goaliegan: Coach Fox is a jerk — attribute your tweet more clearly, like this: RT @goaliegan: Angry goalie calls Coach Fox "a jerk"