

Research Article

New Opportunities For Diversity: Twitter, Journalists and Traditionally Underserved Communities

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Abstract This study explores the opportunities offered by Twitter for news organizations seeking to connect with communities often underrepresented as both sources and as audiences for news. A recent study by Pew Research Center found that minority Internet users are nearly twice as likely as white Internet users to utilize Twitter, and that young Internet users are also significantly more likely than older Americans to adopt the social network. Through in-depth interviews, this study examines how young people and minorities are using Twitter and evaluates its potential to allow news organizations to reach and engage younger and minority audiences. For many, it is not only a site used for entertainment and connection with like-minded others, but also for keeping up with news and giving them a voice on national or local issues they did not previously perceive they possessed.

Keywords Twitter, diversity, minorities, media, news

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Introduction

Twitter use continues to grow, with the social network currently attracting 18 percent of American Internet users (Duggan and Smith, 2013). African American Internet users are nearly twice as likely (28 percent) as white Internet users (16 percent) to utilize Twitter. Young Internet users ages 18-29 are also significantly more likely than older Americans to adopt this social network (Duggan and Smith, 2013).

This paper explores the hypothesis that Twitter represents a new opportunity for news organizations to connect with underrepresented communities as both sources and audiences for news. As newspaper readers and viewers of national television news broadcasts age (Project for Excellence in Journalism State of the Media Report, 2013) and the nation rapidly diversifies (Ortman and Guarneri, 2010), it is essential that journalists attract a new generation of loyal audience members to survive.

Research has found that Twitter may be especially well suited among social networks to offer a venue for the purveyors of news and information. More so than Facebook, where people go primarily to connect with their friends made offline (Steinfeld et al. 2007; Urista et al. 2009), Twitter users find the site especially valuable as a source for news and information (Johnson and

Yang, 2009; Hermida, 2010; Naaman, Becker & Gravano, 2011). Pew Research reported that 52 percent of Twitter users get news on the site, dwarfed only by Reddit at 62 percent and followed by Facebook at 47 percent (Holcomb, Gottfried & Mitchell, 2013).

Minorities also appear more likely than whites to identify social media as an important way to keep up with what is going on in their neighborhoods (Smith, 2010). Minority adults are also significantly more likely than whites to believe that government outreach using social media “helps people be more informed about what government is doing” and “makes government more accessible” (Smith, 2010). Finally, African American and Latino Twitter users show more interest than other groups in using social media tools to connect with public figures, which includes celebrities and athletes but also politicians and other civic leaders (Smith, 2011).

Through in-depth interviews with Twitter users between the ages of 18-29, this exploratory study examines opportunities for journalists to use Twitter for reaching and engaging underrepresented communities. Subjects were recruited from a diverse population and results analyzed by race/ethnicity and other variables. This study shows how Twitter has become an emerging source of news and information for young people, and explores whether Twitter can foster greater engagement and participation in the news process. It also examines how Twitter affects credibility and the level of engagement users have with mainstream news organizations.

Literature Review

Twitter is a social network that allows users to broadcast information to others using just 140 characters, interact with each other publicly or privately, and “follow” other users. Unlike Facebook, reciprocity is not required on Twitter; users can follow others even if others do not follow them in return. As it and other social networks have boomed in popularity (Duggan and Smith, 2013), numerous studies have explored who is using these sites, how they use them, and what motivates them. Most social networking studies are aligned with the active audience paradigm of mass communication theory, in which people actively shape meaning from media instead of passively consuming it. This body of theory is particularly relevant to social media, given its interactive nature, and the relative ease and low-cost of amateur media production (Ito et al., 2010). Within this paradigm, uses and gratifications has often been applied to the study of social networks, seeking to understand how audience members use media and the fulfillment they get from their media choices (Wimmer and Dominick, 2003). Uses and gratifications theory is relevant for journalists as a way to understand and target their audience’s needs, ultimately ensuring the best return on investment with social media.

Twitter Uses and Gratifications

Research on Twitter uses and gratifications has found people are using Twitter as an important source of news and information, even though social needs are also an aspect of user motivation (Johnson & Yang, 2009). Johnson & Yang (2009) reported that subjects had less fun using Twitter than they expected upon signing up, and that their primary gratifications ultimately came from its ability to serve as a “one-stop shop” for obtaining information. They also said that Twitter served as a filter, allowing them to easily access information recommended by friends or trusted contacts. Aberran et al. (2010) found similar results among Latinos. When young adult Latinos singled out uses of Twitter from Facebook and MySpace, Twitter emerged as the clear leader for accessing news and information.

Other studies have found that Twitter is an especially potent information source during big events or breaking news such as natural disasters, traditionally a key mission of local news (Brown, 2012; Hughes, Lee & Palen, 2009). Naaman, Becker and Gravano (2011) described Twitter as a “social awareness stream” that is especially valuable for local information; most users are connected to a significant number of people from their geographical region. Hughes, Lee, and Palen (2009) also examined Twitter use during major news events or crises, with a content analysis of tweets from the Republican and Democratic National Conventions as well as Hurricanes Gustav and Irene. Their findings indicated that during a crisis or major event, Twitter users are more focused on informational needs than connecting with others, including broadcasting information themselves.

Numerous studies have confirmed that the dominant use of social networks more generally is for communication with others and maintaining or developing personal relationships (Nyland,

2007; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Sheldon, 2008; Stern, 2007; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Urista et al., 2009). Especially where Facebook is concerned, more relationships move offline to online rather than vice versa. Study after study finds social networks provide a convenient and immediate way to maintain contact with family and friends and facilitate weak-tie relationships with acquaintances (Albarran, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Urista et al. 2009). Users of social networks also utilize them to explore shared interests and build relationships among others with similar hobbies or passions (Ito et al., 2010). While this use of social networking is less relevant to news organizations, it suggests users of social network sites are conditioned to engage with others and build relationships, not just passively consume broadcasted messages. As a result, niche communities have congregated around particular interests within social networks that may be tapped as sources or consumers of certain types of news stories.

Johnson & Yang (2009) noted in analyzing their results that Twitter appeared to take on some characteristics of both an interpersonal and a mass medium. Indeed, social networks have become key drivers of traffic to Websites through shared links. Half of Twitter users report getting news from the site, often using mobile devices, even as they are the least likely of other social network users to turn to local or cable news (Holcomb, Gottfried & Mitchell, 2013) Facebook passed Google News as a driver of traffic to news sites in early 2010 (Hopkins, 2010.)

Another use of social networks relevant to news organizations is creative production, or the desire to share information with others to gain visibility, establish a reputation, or simply for enjoyment (Ito et al. 2010). Creative production includes posting self-created articles, essays, blog posts, photos, video, or other media. Urban youth (40%) are somewhat more likely than suburban (28%) or rural (38%) to be media creators, and young women, especially teens, are more likely to engage in creative production than young men (Jenkins et al., 2006). Brown (2012) found that one of the key uses of social media during severe weather was to contribute information to the social stream, with photos among the most popular forms of content to create and share. A study of Latino youth's social network use found high levels of uses and gratifications around sharing music and video content, both personally and professionally made (Alberran et al., 2010). This content can be tapped by news organizations as sources or news tips or republished with permission.

Twitter and Diversity

A number of studies have examined the demographics of Twitter, revealing relatively large segments of users who are typically underrepresented as news sources and consumers. As previously noted, in its recent study, the Pew Research Center found that minority Internet users are more than twice as likely as whites to use Twitter; additionally, Twitter use spans income levels (Duggan and Smith, 2013). Fifteen percent of Internet users with middle-class household incomes between \$54,000 and \$74,999 use Twitter, slightly less than those with less than \$30,000 in household income (17%). In addition, urban residents (18 percent) are considerably more likely to use Twitter as their rural counterparts (11 percent). Women and men use Twitter at similar rates, as do people of various levels of educational attainment (Duggans and Smith, 2013).

Much of the rise in Twitter use may be part of a broader trend of more diverse and widespread Internet and broadband adoption, as well as the proliferation of mobile technology that makes tweeting easy. Between 2000 and 2010, the proportion of Internet users who are African American or Latino nearly doubled, from 11% to 21% (Smith, 2010). Additionally, African Americans are more likely to own a mobile phone (93 percent) and a smartphone (64 percent) than whites, among whom 90 percent own cell phones and 53 percent smartphones (Brenner, 2013). Twitter's 140 character limit is a result of it being conceived as a text message service, and today it remains closely connected to mobile technology for many (Ellison et al., 2010; Webster, 2010), with a proliferation of applications available for smart phone users and lower technology options for regular mobiles.

A limited number of studies show that generally, minorities use social networking sites in similar ways as whites. For example, maintaining friendships and connecting with others is the primary use (Albarran et al., 2010; Raacke & Bonds Raacke, 2008). Edison Research/Arbitron data indicate African-American Twitter users may be using the medium more conversationally

than other racial/ethnic groups (Webster, 2010). In addition, racial, ethnic, and income stratification between sites such as MySpace and Facebook has been observed (Hargittai, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Hargittai (2008) suggests users from different racial and ethnic groups may be drawn to different social networking services given the real-life stratification between these groups and the power early adopters to shape who comes after them on social networking sites. Although Twitter users are more diverse than those on other social networks, some have speculated self-segregating occurs within the service itself, with many people only choosing to follow or interact with people of a similar racial or ethnic or income background (O'Brien, 2010). Hargittai (2008) warns each social network is different and making generalizations across them are difficult, which is why this study examines Twitter specifically to see how diverse communities use the service. It is also important to note a number of factors, including gender, context of Internet use, and online experiences all shape the level of each individual's intensity of engagement with social network sites, further confirming the difficulty of making generalizations in the study of social networking uses (Hargittai, 2008).

The popular and industry press have described and debated about what some call "Black Twitter," a term that has engendered its share of controversy. Slate magazine's Farhood Manjoo (2010) argued that young African Americans use Twitter differently, forming tight clusters who follow each other and engage in more conversation and message amplification through replying and retweeting others' messages. He suggests this allows them to more easily dominate the trending topics with popular hashtags, sometimes called "Blacktags," that often comment on race, love, sex, and stereotypes of black culture (Manjoo, 2010). In his piece, Manjoo offers the caveat that these hashtags are popularized by a subgroup of African Americans on Twitter, are not representative of black culture more generally, and clearly not all African-American Twitter users are participating in these tags. His piece sparked controversy (Sanders, 2010) with others arguing there is nothing unique about how African Americans use Twitter, and questioning the impetus to look at uses of Twitter through a racial or ethnic lens. For example, Jessica Faye Carter (2010) wrote "the tendency to focus on ethnic heritage as the definitive aspect of a person's identity presents a major challenge to discourse on culture and social media, because it ignores the layered existences in which most people reside." She argues that people replicate memes for a variety of different reasons, and that people focus on blackness in the rise of some popular memes because they mirror stereotypes about blacks, even though whites, most notably the large Justin Bieber fan base, also propagate memes in similar ways (Carter, 2010).

The academic literature in this area remains thin, but most studies have revealed that when looking at social networks generally, the tendency for relationships to move from the offline world to the online one means groups that limit their interaction with others in the real world will continue to do so online (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). However, some have suggested that highly engaged Facebook users "crystallize relationships that might otherwise remain ephemeral (Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007, p.20)," facilitating greater interaction with people from different backgrounds (Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007; Steinfeld, Ellison & Lampe, 2008). Writing for the Atlantic, Jackson (2010) argued that in fact, social media in some ways allows us to escape these large demographic groups because they allow people to organize around interests instead. Interesting studies by Yardi and Boyd (2010) and Boyd, Golder and Lotan (2010) found that Twitter conversations are unique in that people often do not come into a discussion intentionally but rather witness a conversation and get drawn into it. If indeed densely connected groups of Twitter users from previously underrepresented groups have the ability to raise the popularity of certain hashtags globally, it could follow that important issues neglected by the mainstream media could be surfaced via Twitter. This happened in January 2011 when an Ohio mother was convicted of a felony for falsifying her residency to get her children into a better, safer school district (Wise, 2011). Propelled in part by Twitter and other social networks, the story spread widely and made headlines around the country, attracting the attention of national outlets like the New York Times. This is one case of a story that might not have spread without the amplified reactions via social networks of lower-income groups, who are most affected by struggling schools.

In terms of gender, few studies have identified significant differences between men and women in use of social media, although women generally have larger networks and spend more time communicating with others (Acar, 2008).

Twitter and Journalism

Although journalists have often historically exhibited a complacent or conservative attitude toward change and are risk averse (Sylvie and Witherspoon, 2002), they have often experimented with new technologies and were not unwilling to change (Boczkowski, 2005). However, when they do change, they often do so in a way that clings so heavily to legacy traditions and routines that they are doomed to fail (Boczkowski, 2005; Robinson, 2011 “Beaming Up.”) For example, newspapers made substantial investments in Videotext in the 1980s, but they came too late to the realization that rather than passively consuming what is available to them, users were attracted to interactivity. “In retrospect,” Rodger Fidler, a member of the Viewtron team, told researcher Pablo Boczkowski, “the interviews and usage data clearly revealed that access to databases of general news, information, and advertising was less exciting to subscribers than the ability to easily communicate with other subscribers. But that was not what anyone was prepared to hear at that time” (2005: 28).

A few studies have explored the ways in which Twitter could benefit news organizations and the growing journalistic efforts on Twitter, though many of them show that newspapers are once again underestimating the potential for engagement. Many reporters and editors from numerous organizations from CBS News to the New York Times have Twitter accounts they use regularly. However, while individual journalists and news organizations have embraced Twitter (Ahmad, 2010; Farhi, 2009), efforts at taking advantage of its capacity for interactivity are in their infancy, instead hewing more to a broadcasting model (Messner & Eford, 2011). Shovelware, or content lifted from news organization’s websites with little customization, dominates (Messner & Eford, 2011). For example, a content analysis of tweets from local television news accounts found that most stations are primarily using it to broadcast news updates with few interactions with users; researchers found a positive relationship between interactivity and the follower count, but noted that engaging did come at a cost of fewer overall tweets (Ferguson & Greer, “Using Twitter for promotion and branding,” 2011). A similar study of radio Twitter accounts also found that news stations were mostly offering their followers a feed of traditional news (Ferguson & Greer, “Local radio and microblogging,” 2011). A study of Twitter use by business journalists also found that few were using it beyond broadcasting for other journalistic tasks such as finding sources or story ideas (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009).

Twitter provides one opportunity for traditional news organizations remain viable among young and diverse communities. According to the State of the Media Report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, young people and minorities are significantly less likely than older people and whites to consume mainstream news sources (2010). For newspapers, the youngest age bracket had the lowest readership levels; fewer than two out of three 18-34 year olds said they had read the previous day’s daily newspaper. Twenty-six percent of Latinos, 32% of Asians, and 37% of African Americans reported reading the newspaper, compared to 44% of whites. And readership numbers across all age groups, races and ethnicities dropped between 2008 and 2009. Similarly, the report found network television news is failing to attract younger viewers; the median age in 2009 for viewers was 62.3. These media consumption trends dovetail with a population that is rapidly diversifying. Recently released Census data show about 48% of Americans born last year were members of minority groups (Tavernese and Gebeloff, 2010).

Twitter offers journalists opportunities to reach out to people of color, not just by sharing links to news stories, but also by engaging in dialogue (Chuang, 2010b). “In a multicultural society, people pay attention to media that pay attention to them,” as professor of journalism and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California Félix Gutiérrez said (Chuang, 2010a). If journalists can join the conversations going on in communities of color online, it may “not only improve the quality of dialogue about tough subjects, but also provide news organizations with a much-needed infusion of new audience members who reflect the America we’re becoming,” Chuang (2010b) wrote.

Methodology

This study consisted of 19 in-depth interviews conducted with regular Twitter users ages 18-29 at three universities. Interviews are a useful methodological tool for an exploratory study, allowing researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of how people use Twitter (Yin, 2002). Students selected for these interviews utilize Twitter on a daily or near-daily basis, outside of

any specific requirements for university coursework. Therefore, their responses can be used to ascertain the motives of frequent Twitter users, as opposed to those who may have an account but use it rarely. Interviews sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the uses and gratifications of Twitter for people ages 18-29? Is Twitter used as a source of news and information?
2. Are there any differences in motivation in terms of how whites and minority groups use Twitter?
3. Do younger and minority audiences find that journalists who use Twitter to share information and engage with users are credible?

Interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes and began with general open-ended questions about how the subjects use Twitter, allowing the subjects to describe their uses in their own words rather than utilizing pre-determined categories. Answers were then probed to elicit greater detail, and subjects were asked for more specific details about when they use Twitter, how often they utilize specific functions, such as replying to or retweeting messages of others, what kinds of technology or applications they use to access the service, how many people they follow (and who follow them) that they know offline, how often they engage in conversation with others on the service, whether (and if so, how) they use the site for news and information and if they ever interact with reporters or news organizations.

The three participating schools were the University of Memphis, the University of Tennessee, and Lehigh University. These schools vary not only in geographic location but in demographic composition as well. Memphis is a public, urban commuter school in western Tennessee with 22,000 students; about 46% of those students are racial/ethnic minorities and 40% are African American. University of Tennessee is a large state university on the other side of the state with 29,000 students, about nine percent of which are minority. Lehigh is a small private school with 6,000 students in a city with a 31,000 population; about 13% of those students are minorities. Though researchers chose these schools primarily as a matter of convenience, their demographic variation allows for insightful comparisons to be explored between respondents.

When the data was collected, researchers utilized analytic induction to scan the transcriptions for themes and categories. The emphasis was on thematic and category construction rather than enumeration. The study's results focus on theme description and variations within the emergent categories, with relevance to the uses and gratifications framework. Participant identification is denoted alphabetically, with city university participants A – F, state university participants G – M, private liberal arts university participants N – S (see Appendix A).

Results

In-depth interviews revealed a number of key themes in how young people ages 18-29 utilize Twitter and the potential for journalists to use the medium to reach new audiences.

To begin, this study supports industry data regarding young adults' use of mobile devices. All study participants reported utilizing their mobile devices as their primary source of social media due to the tool's portability and convenience. Laptops and personal computers were also used, but to a lesser degree.

R1: What are the uses and gratifications of Twitter for people ages 18-29? Is Twitter used as a source of news and information?

Social tool for informal communication

The majority of those interviewed claimed their primary use of Twitter was for informal communication with others and networked amusement. Among this sample of regular users, many reported engaging in nearly constant conversation throughout the day, especially during the evening hours, both by replying to others and by updating their followers on the minute developments and observations of daily life. For example, participant R states:

It's mostly my university name friends. So I like to post what I'm doing and keep up with friends during the day, or when we're at different parties. Most of my posts are where I am,

what I'm doing, or making funny comments during classes. My friends and I, we all reply to each other when a class is going bad and it's funny. It keeps me entertained in classes. I feel like it's a good way for us to be together even when we're going about our days.

Inherent to the student's response is the notion the tool is for 24/7 usage, or as illustrated by participant E, so long as the phone is within reach:

I Tweet a lot, so I'm on there the majority of my day, because it just gives, me, I don't know, it's enjoyment, but it's informational, and I love that I can interact and talk with people all day about common interests and common viewpoints all day, so I'm generally on there all the time, sharing thoughts, and you know.

Many participants, and particularly the African American students interviewed, reported that, as the literature has found for Facebook, they know the majority of their followers and people they followed offline, indicating that Twitter may be used in similar ways to the larger social network for some students, a way for young people build and maintain relationships with friends. Indeed, some students suggested that while they also used Facebook, Twitter had become the preferred outlet for connecting with others they know. Of course, it is important to recognize that this finding represents a subset of social networking population that has enthusiastically adopted Twitter and probably does not represent younger people more broadly.

While many participants cite Twitter as a means to continue and enhance previous relationships, others claimed the tool helped initiate new relationships away from their hometown and strengthen dynamic bonding with individuals involved in their daily collegiate interactions. For example, participant R responds:

Twitter seems like a big party to me with my friends, sometimes several parties at once. I like how we talk about serious stuff, silly stuff, and it reflects a lot of my daily life I get with my friends. I think it has deepened my friendships, especially with my friends in the BSU (Black Student Union). I've gotten to know them as thinkers and as people. We trade reading lists and ideas on there and it has really opened my mind up a lot. The BSU is a group that has a lot of haters here. Whites hate it because they don't think university name has a race problem. And some of my black friends don't want to be associated with it because it's controversial with whites. So the BSU group is pretty tight and Twitter has helped me reach out to them and get to know them I guess.

Although some students seem to use Twitter within this collegiate subculture, bonding within a supportive minority environment, several participants said this was not necessarily intentional, noting that any segregation on Twitter was simply a mirror of that in the real world. For example, participant S notes, "I don't not follow white people because of a race thing or anything. It's just because Twitter is really my close friends and that's it."

With few exceptions, all communicated primarily with a similar demographic in terms of age. Many expressed reservations about parents or other family members joining Twitter and/or following them. Typical replies to questions about their connections are illustrated by participant A, "I have 256 followers. I probably know maybe 50 of them, or about 25 or 30 percent;" participant C, "I just reached about 600-something, and out of that, I'd say I know about half of them;" participant E, "I know, generally, about 90 percent of the people I follow, and that makes it better, that makes it easier to communicate, you know;" and participant M, "I probably know about half of the 150, and probably half of those are people from home. Probably about 50 are from here and the others are in different parts of the U.S."

Many participants voiced their desire to be part of a social network that allows users more anonymity than more popular platforms, such as Facebook, and the ability to talk only with their friends rather than a larger circle of acquaintances, family members, and authority figures that now use Facebook. For instance, according to participant N:

My family doesn't know I'm on there and I don't tell them. I talk about a lot of stuff that probably would freak them out if they knew. A lot of our hashtag chats are about drugs or sex and they wouldn't like it.

Similarly, participant P notes, "My friends and I like it a lot. I haven't told my non-university

name friends about it so I don't know what they'd think. I don't want my parents to see it. That's what Facebook is for."

Several individuals claimed to have an affinity for categorizing elements of their posts via hashtag, either for whimsy's sake, such as participant N (first), or for curating specific information and fostering conversation,

I'm a hashtag all-star. I love the ones that my friends start to use a lot. Lots of inside jokes.

My favorite one lately was #sidechickgifts and my bros and I were joking about things we'd get our imaginary side chicks for Valentine's. I use them to joke around, pretty much, and only after my friends have started using them.

Participant M demonstrates also informal communication with her example:

I tweet songs more than anything else. Song lyrics. I love music and if I'm feeling some way I'll tweet a song lyric. But it's also like a diary for me, because if anything happens and I can't write it down I'll just tweet it. And my phone has a twitter app so I'll just tweet from it. I tweeted once, when financial aid was making me mad, that I was going to blow up the financial aid office. That might have gotten me in trouble if something would have happened. (But) people were like, they're going to blow it up, too. So it wouldn't have just been me (laughs).

While participant M cited her moment of fictitious civil disobedience as one tinged with possible danger, she mentioned another friend's Twitter activity to explain how using Twitter as a form of self-expression can also connect you to others:

My best friend goes to Howard and she has like 2,000 followers and 100,000 tweets. I think she's a celebrity. She pretty much says everything she's thinking, she doesn't have a filter. But people enjoy that, when you're free to say everything you feel or think. Because they're probably thinking it but don't want to say it. And she says it, so it's like, "oh my god, she said what I was thinking, but I'm not going to say it because it's kind of vulgar or provocative.

Fun and entertainment

Many of the participants reported using Twitter just for fun and to consume entertainment in a participatory environment where they could also interact with what they were hearing or watching. Many reported following one or more celebrities, and several, such as participant L, describe their ability to directly interact with celebrities as a benefit of Twitter's communication democracy:

Initially I got it two years ago because all the celebrities are on twitter and I wanted to stalk them. The first celebrity that I followed was Trey Songz because I'm like in love with him. And it's like you get to see another side of him, because he like tweets things that my best friend would say and I'm like, "Oh my god, you're not supposed to say that, you're a celebrity." So it makes him more human, I guess. I try to mention them so they can mention me back. One time I tweeted something about Dawn Richards from Dd Dirty Money's new song and she retweeted me, and I'm like, "Oh my god, she retweeted me." The other day my best friend, it was his birthday, and he is like the biggest Brandi fan ever. And she tweeted happy birthday to him and he almost fell over.

In addition to the absence of traditional celebrity gatekeeper, numerous participants, such as participant Q, mentioned aspects related to Twitter as an agent of authenticity:

I feel like I understand famous people more. Their Twitter is really real, you know? They don't have their thoughts being edited by the media so you have like access to their thoughts and their mind. I find myself caring more about what's going on with them and thinking about things from their point of view so I think Twitter has taught me a lot about what famous people go through. My friends, I feel like it's more of a way to keep up with them than get to know them. Although I have learned some really interesting and embarrassing things about them.

Many of those interviewed said they often Tweeted about what they were watching on television or what music they were listening to, and often engaged in conversations with others about the shows, combining traditional passive entertainment with the interactive capability to

discuss it with their friends: “It’s a lot of random stuff, just basically what’s going on, if it’s a TV show, like tonight is a big show that everyone watches, so it’s, you know, tune in tonight at 9 o’clock at this channel,” said one participant.

Professional networking

A subset of participants used the site to develop contacts and learn about their future careers. The distinction between the personal and professional are best illustrated by participant L’s separate responses:

If I’m going to use it for professional reasons I want to make sure that my tweets are professional. So if I’m going to follow professional leaders I’m going to make sure that my tweets are professional. So if I’m going to follow professionals I’d like professionals to follow me back and then respect what I put on Twitter.

The participant subsequently noted:

But with Twitter, my friends and also athletes just post what they’re doing nonstop. I think because you can do it from your phone, it just makes it easy to say you’re eating a bowl of cereal or running to Kroger or whatever. And it’s very self-centered, so it’s very this is what I’m doing, this is where I am, this is who I’m with.

Perhaps an equally reflective example is participant M, who manages the Twitter account of a student organization focused on women’s issues. The participant reported she tweets professionally from the organization account, then uses her own account for personal interaction.

Some participants within this subcategory discussed their transition from personal to professional Twitter uses, and thus, their current use reflected elements of both. For example, participant P noted:

All my brothers are on Twitter because we all joined after a Tech House seminar on Twitter and marketing. So it took off for us and it’s like we haven’t left college. For me though Twitter is different than it used to be because I’m connecting with a lot of other people who weren’t in that original circle of friends. I’m studying for my master’s in engineering and so I’m following a lot more grad students in engineering all over the world now. I went to a conference to present research last summer and was surprised at how many people doing engineering were finding Twitter useful, so I just started following people like crazy. So I used to use Twitter for guy talk more but now it’s all kinds of stuff, including conversations with people about education and things going on in my field. I also think I’ve had to tone it down a little bit because I’ve realized that the way I used to use it, with lots of inside jokes and sex humor and stuff, wouldn’t make me look good to people I might want to hire me.

Yet for others, such as participant B, thinking about future employment figures into their maintaining authenticity to their Twitter content:

There’s a really popular Twitter account, been trying to get them to follow me since July, and they finally did, after I posted a video. Last week, it was really late at night, and I noticed there were not that many people on Twitter. So thought it was a good time to reach out to some people I wanted to follow me. There is a big record company in Pittsburgh that I really want to be signed with. So I Tweeted “If I don’t get signed by @ThatCompany, I’m going to quit rapping. And they actually responded to me and said don’t give up and stuff. And so I sent them a link to my stuff, and they even DMed me and asked if I had thought about sending them a demo, and I said I hadn’t. Now I’ve been tweeting every day, sign with them or die.

Information

Although for these participants news and information was a less important use for Twitter than connecting with others, it did emerge as one of the ways young people use this social network. Twitter users seek out information specific to their interests, general and local news, and a hybrid of the two. Participant Q (first) illustrates uses related to interests, participant D (second) exemplifies news uses and participant E (third) embodies hybrid gratifications:

I use it to stay connected with my friends and people who care about some of the

things I care about. I got involved early on from a university name friend who's active with me in the Black Student Union, and so most of my friends early on were people who were working with me to promote events and things. I felt like I made some great friends and they were all on Twitter so it was a natural place to go.

People retweet the traffic in the morning. I've clicked on several links, several from Katie Couric, and I'm like, this is really cool, it's instant, it's right there in my face, so I don't have to try to find a television or a radio station if I've got my Wi-Fi and my computer everywhere. I've got it right here, in my hand, what I need, even the Egypt stuff, it was constant, so I got an update, I knew what was going on.

Um, it's just random things, you know, what's going on on campus, at the UC [University Center], there may be a meeting about, you know, whatever, so I'll be like, okay, I want to go to that.

R2: Are there any differences in motivation in terms of how whites and minority groups use Twitter?

It is important to note that no generalizations can be made from this small sample, but the interview data allows us to examine in greater depth whether any of the differences between how different racial and ethnic groups use Twitter, as discussed in the popular press, are valid.

Some participants said they didn't notice any differences in how racial or ethnic groups used Twitter, but also noted that many of the people they follow or who follow them tended to be primarily people of same racial or ethnic group. Several others, for example participant N, noted a distinct difference in how different races utilize its functionality:

My new followers are different. They don't play with hashtags or just post whatever's on [their] mind. Most of them are white, but some of them are adults too so they always posting news links. I feel like my non-black friends on there are really serious sometimes and don't know how to just mess. I feel like when I'm on Twitter I'm hanging out with my friends, but I don't think my white friends do that. It feels like they always have a reason they're on there, does that make sense? Like they're always trying to accomplish something or get something done. They don't chill enough.

Participant Q further articulated this dissimilarity by citing authenticity of use:

I feel like black folks are more real on Twitter, maybe? But in a different way. Like they're talking about what's going on in life, and white folks are usually trying to post deep thoughts or news they think is important. I don't like it when people try to act all smart on Twitter.

Minority students interviewed also appeared more likely to be part of dense networks of Twitter users who know each other offline than white students. For example, one minority student described meeting new people and asking them if they were on Twitter and exchanging user names instead of phone numbers.

Perhaps the most illuminating difference in usage pertained to hashtags, which all African American participants reported using to some extent. The variety of examples illustrated a collective cultivation of creative input, which produced trending topics intended to both amuse and bemuse. In nearly a half dozen cases, groups of friends attempted to create topics that might manifest an indelible 24-hour blip on the Twitter trending topics. Participant L's example lends context to this collaborative contest:

I know it's kind of weird, but I see the black community here as like a family and we all kind of each lunch together and we'll all go in on a certain trending topic or we'll make our own. We'll just come up with a trending topic and start tweeting. Like there's a song called "Shake Life," and about two or three weeks ago we were sitting there and we made #UTKshakelife and we talked about the party life at UT. And then other schools started making their own, like #MTSushakelife. I eat at the UC about three days a week and those three days we talk about Twitter. But they're always funny. I've never participated in a serious trending topic. It's all goofy.

R3: Do younger and minority audiences find that journalists who use Twitter to share information and engage with users are credible?

While the majority of participants did not mention news as their primary use for Twitter, several individuals did suggest that they do get news from the service and that journalists who engage with audiences and share stories via Twitter could see their audience and credibility get a boost. For example, participant D (first) and participant C (second), said:

It would be a little more effective (if journalists engaged with people more on Twitter instead of just publishing links to articles) and built relationships, instead of that person just throwing out articles.

I know some people who haven't picked up a newspaper in years, so I think if they [journalists] were to get on Twitter, it would help keep news alive. Journalism is kind of dying. If people did that more often, people would feel like people had a closer relationship with the person that is delivering the news.

Others noted that they sometimes use hashtags to find news and information relevant to them that may not be as likely to be available through mainstream sources:

There's a #universityname Diversity tag that people post to every once in a while when something bad happens on campus that is race related. So I read that. I like hashtags in general because they let me follow certain discussions I'm interested, and I see them pop up in a friend's posts and they are interesting at times.

Discussion

While it is important to reiterate that results of this exploratory study cannot be generalized to all of minority youth Twitter users, these in-depth interviews allow for a deeper exploration into the motivations and gratifications for using this social network than a survey would allow, and offer a number of insights for journalists and news organizations seeking to attract more diverse audiences and sources by tapping into a social network that has proved to be especially popular among minorities (Duggan and Smith, 2013).

Of most interest to journalists, this study found that although news and information was not the primary motivation for participants using Twitter, it was an important one, corroborating findings from previous research (Holcomb, Gottfried & Mitchell, 2013; Johnson and Yang, 2009). Therefore, any journalists who are still not using Twitter at all are missing an important opportunity to attract more views and shares of their work. Several participants said that it was a convenient way to stay updated on the news, making it easy to quickly scan a headline. Most said they followed at least a few news accounts or journalists, and that they occasionally posted news links or read news links posted by others. Many said they rarely sought out news through traditional media such as a printed newspaper or by going to a news organization's website, but enjoyed having the news come to them through their feed, provided it wasn't dominating messages from their friends. For example, participant C said:

I also use it as a news source because I realize that the older I get, the less interested I am in watching the news, because sometimes I find it can be a little depressing. And so, what I can do, I can follow different media outlets like Fox 13 or New York Times and get little, like, quick feeds and just by reading the little 140 characters. If I read something that sparks my interest, then I can click and read more, but if it's one of those things where, uh, I really don't want to read about that, I just keep going down my timeline. But I definitely see it as a source of news. I read newspapers every now and then, but I kind of stray away from those too, so I believe Twitter can be used as a good news source for people who want to – as a filter I guess you could say, for what they want to read and what they don't want to read.

Another participant, L, said she used Twitter to stay connected with hometown news while at college:

Well I follow some news stations from back home to get news from home, since I can't watch the news from home, so I can see tweets. Like when the 90 girls were pregnant in [local high school] or wherever, I saw that on [trending topics] before I read the articles and stuff... I retweeted the pregnant girls one, because a lot of the people I'm friends with here

are from [my home town]. So I retweeted that one and the big storm that hit them, I retweet those so that everybody knows, or like that.

The primary use of Twitter by study participants, however, was not for news and information, but to connect with others and to build and maintain relationships. While this use of Twitter may seem less relevant at the outset to journalists, participants expressed openness to news mixed in with their interactions with friends, and also noted that they expected more engagement and a conversational tone in this space. This suggests that the way many legacy media outlets are using Twitter, as primarily another broadcast medium (Ferguson and Greer, 2011), misses an opportunity to attract a larger and more engaged audience. If journalists can develop a greater capacity to drive engagement on Twitter, it could avoid previous pitfalls news organizations have faced in their adoptions of technologies like Videotext (Boczkowski, 2005), in which adherence to traditional practices led to missed opportunities to meet people's needs and give the audience what they are looking for.

Celebrities, athletes, music, movies, and television programs were popular entertainment-related topics of discussion on Twitter, respondents said, with Twitter serving as the proverbial virtual water cooler where they could discuss what they were listening to or watching with their friends. Since many traditional media outlets have often included lighter fare among their news offerings, this is another area beyond breaking news in which they could tailor some of their content for users with this motivation. For example, one participant noted that after she and several female friends Tweeted about how they were watching *Craigslist Killer*, a movie on Lifetime, they got several of their male followers to turn on the show, and soon a wide-ranging discussion was ongoing on Twitter during the rest of the show, especially during the commercials.

News organizations have now ceded their role as the primary gatekeepers for celebrity news, especially as more famous people take to Twitter and other networks to communicate directly with their followers. However, this appetite for not only entertainment information but also interaction around it could be an opportunity for enterprising news organizations that could help to initiate conversations around popular local shows or events, such as concerts or festivals. Twitter discussion can also be useful for feature reporters to tap a wider breadth of perspectives by tapping the chatter around local personalities and popular events. Of course, some journalists, particularly in broadcast, are local celebrities in their own right, and respondents indicated that hearing more intimate details from celebrities and even the possibility of interaction with them deepened their sense of connection, loyalty, and trust with these individuals. Twitter thus can be a vehicle for journalists to develop and maintain a trusted personal brand.

This study offers a detailed snapshot of how some minority youth between 18 and 29 who are heavy Twitter users utilize the service, and suggests that it may differ from what previous research shows about how the majority of people taken as a whole use the service. As Hargittai (2008) and others have found, real-world racial and ethnic stratification plays out online, although in the case of Twitter, instead of occurring between two different social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, its occurring within the service itself. Many of the respondents said they used Twitter to communicate within their large but tightly knit real-world groups of friends. Minority respondents described how they post their own Tweets, respond to others, and read their entire feed regularly throughout the day and into the evening, joking around, sharing what they are doing in a diary-style manner, and participating in existing hashtags or working with their friends to get their own to become popular or even trend locally or nationally. Given that these users are historically underrepresented as sources or consumers of news and a growing part of the overall population, journalists would do well to better understand these usage patterns in order to develop better ways to engage them.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This small exploratory study is limited in its generalizability and overall scope. Future research should examine a larger sample of young minority Twitter users using a variety of methodologies, including survey or experimental designs. Additional studies are needed to more closely examine how Twitter users evaluate the credibility of journalists' use of this social network and what kinds of Twitter news practices are most effective for engagement.

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APPENDIX A

Demographic profiles of interview participants

Participant	School City university: CC State university: SU Private university: PU	Sex	Race African American: AA White: W Mixed race: M	Age
A	CU	M	AA	27
B	CU	M	AA	19
C	CU	M	AA	22
D	CU	F	AA	21
E	CU	F	AA	20
F	SU	M	AA	26
G	SU	F	AA	22
H	SU	M	W	20
I	SU	M	W	22
J	SU	F	M	22
K	SU	F	W	20
L	SU	F	AA	22
M	SU	M	M	22
N	PU	M	AA	22
O	PU	F	W	20
P	PU	M	AA	24
Q	PU	F	W	22
R	PU	M	AA	22
S	PU	F	AA	21