

10 Good Practices for News Organizations Using Twitter

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Today, participating in social media has become an obligation for all news organizations. Among these, Facebook and Twitter play central roles. Nevertheless, different reports show that, at least in Spain, several media outlets use these 2.0 tools with a 1.0 mentality. Thus, despite the wide potential that Twitter provides for mainstream media, most broadcasters underuse the technology by only posting news headlines or using it for self-promotion while failing to adequately engage with their audiences or link to external content. In order to shed new light on the proper use of Twitter, this paper presents a collection of some inspiring and valuable practices. To illustrate and enrich the analysis, screenshots are included.

Keywords: Twitter; Traditional Media; Social Media; Good Practices

Introduction

In less than five years, Twitter has become one of the most popular services on the so-called Web 2.0. Its versatility can be explained in part by adding up the advantages of previous forms of communication:

Twitter shares some similarities with other forms of communication. Like the telephone, it facilitates a real-time exchange of information. Like instant messaging, the information is sent in short bursts. But it extends the affordances of previous modes of communication by combining these features in both a one-to-many and many-to-many framework that is public, archived and searchable. Twitter allows a large number of users to communicate with each other simultaneously in real-time, based on an asymmetrical relationship between friends and followers. The messages form social streams of connected data that provide value both individually and in aggregate (Hermida, 2010a)¹.

Such versatility has been noted by people in many disciplines who wanted to take advantage of this new form of communication. By its very nature, journalism could not lag behind², and after an initial phase of skepticism³ and observation, more and more media outlets and journalists are now joining Twitter. Even so, according to the results of some recent research (Rindfuss, 2009; Herrera & Requejo, 2010; Blasingame, 2011; or Ferguson & Greer, 2011), media outlets are still using Twitter in a very basic way. Despite the wide potential that Twitter provides for traditional media, many media outlets use the technology exclusively to spread information or for self-promotional purposes without adequately engaging with their audiences (Messner, Linke & Eford, 2011) or linking to external content, causing them to miss opportunities for their own contributions to be enriched. Basically, the mainstream media use a 2.0 tool with a clear 1.0 mentality.

The aim of this paper is to describe some of the best practices of media outlets on Twitter. To do so, we have reviewed the most outstanding academic research on this field. During the last few months, we have also observed the official and thematic Twitter accounts of important media outlets, such as *The New York Times*, the *BBC*, *The Washington Post*, *National Public Radio*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, to name just a few. Before presenting the results, we will briefly introduce Twitter as a 2.0 application.

The Potential of Twitter for News Organizations

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to send and read short texts, called “tweets”, with a maximum length of 140 characters. These messages can be sent from the Twitter site, mobile phones, instant messaging programs, or even from third-party applications like TweetDeck, Twidroid, Twiterrific, HootSuite, Tweetie, Twinkle, Tweetboard and Nanvú, or social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn and

Google+. Updates are shown on the user profile page, and are also immediately sent to other users who have chosen to receive them. For this reason, Twitter is also a major component of social networking sites.

Twitter was created in California in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams. Since its inception, its popularity has increased rapidly, due not only to its advanced handling capabilities for reporting what is happening in real time, but also for its utility in sharing interesting material.

Companies and institutions can also use Twitter in diverse ways. Therefore, experts recommend that users take their time to define and understand the objectives of the service in order to develop a successful strategy. This exercise seems essential for choosing what content to tweet and for using the application in an optimal way.

In terms of best practices for news organizations on Twitter, experts (Harbison, 2010; Ingram, 2011; Kanalley, 2009a, 2009b; Orihuela, 2009, 2010b, 2011a; Sawyer, 2011; Vargas, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) recommend providing permanent and updated information, including their names in their bios, along with the country and URL of the organization, using lists, following a considerable number of twitterers, interacting with the audience, e.g., doing RT, taking part in Follow Friday (#FF)⁴, conducting surveys, broadcasting live events, offering alerts in real time, and providing evidence when they report⁵.

Scholars also suggest being authentic⁶ and brief, providing useful material⁷, creating community gradually⁸, listening more than talking⁹, participating more than spreading, continuously linking information, being very selective with sources, not being overly didactic, providing novelty, and being patient. In short, media outlets must stop trying to apply the same old patterns to this new platform, and embrace new behaviors that match this emerging paradigm:

A first media strategy, as unfortunate as usual, has consisted in replicating old content and old pre-digital dynamics into new platforms. Well, now we know that it does not work and that we have to try something new. Social networks are not another channel of distribution. They are not either a new mechanism to drive traffic to their sites -or feedback on their productions. Media need to understand social networks as new areas for informative approaches. They have to count on users to define the agenda and to elaborate information, they must adapt the information content to the language and culture of each platform, they have to reorganize newsrooms and they need to open media to the people (Orihuela, 2010).

Matt Eltringham, Social Media Associate Editor at the *BBC*, insists that media must turn their audiences into communities. To do so, they must increase what Americans call *community engagement*. “Community engagement = News orgs make top priority to listen, to join, lead and enable conversation to elevate journalism”¹⁰ (Buttry, 2011). To facilitate community engagement, Mayer (2011) proposes that journalists adopt the following three modalities:

- Community outreach¹¹
- Conversation¹²
- Collaboration¹³

In this sense, media organizations should not limit their activity on Twitter to spreading information or self-promotion¹⁴. In addition, they should not ignore their audiences, ignore external content or avoid a differential approach for Twitter by automatically programming the same headlines or updates already posted on Facebook.

Good Practices for News Organizations on Twitter

From a more concrete perspective, media outlets that understand Twitter's potential make use of a human voice, retweet and mention other users not necessarily related to the medium, and link to external content if this enriches their own contributions. They also listen to their users and talk with them, provide useful information, and conduct surveys. In addition, they promote the most relevant content in an appealing way, use hashtags in an effective and creative manner, add multimedia value to the updates through links to pictures, videos, audio files or graphs, or link to other networks where the media might have a profile.

They Have a Human Voice

The media voice on Twitter has to be credible and reliable (Thompson, 2010)¹⁵, but also personal and human. For this reason, from time to time, media organizations could publish updates that might not have much informational relevance, but could help humanize the medium:

With Twitter we can be more transparent and, basically, more human to connect with the audience. For instance, a very active BBC correspondent posted a tweet on a Sunday morning telling that he was bathing his dog. One might think that this is not journalism and he should not do it. However, I think that this message has also a value, because a reader may think: "Oh, that journalist likes dogs, like me, and I also bathe my dog on Sunday mornings" and can create some connection with the audience, something that is particularly difficult on television. Thanks to the mix of personal and professional content on Twitter, journalists can not only involve their audience in what they do, but also they can tell them who they are. And this is what leads to connection (Hermida, 2009).

In similar terms, Vargas (2010a) states that above all journalists are people, and therefore relatable. Therefore, she suggests avoiding an impersonal or authoritarian tone and being willing to apologize for mistakes (Vargas, 2010a). An example of this human voice can be found in the following update, where CBC celebrated a Friday¹⁶, likely reflecting the feelings of many of its followers.



As Johnson (2009) points out, "The social warmth of all those stray details shouldn't be taken lightly". This was actually one of the changes that The New York Times was trying in late May, 2011. According to Roy:

The automated feed simply culls headlines from the front page and links users to the related articles, which can lead to a pretty dry feed. Human management of a Twitter feed means wit can shine, making tweets more interesting and users more likely to interact with them. Fascinating and poignant details that weren't included in the headline can be applied to make a link more clickable. Personality is a major driver for popular Twitter feeds; without it, your account is little more than a RSS feed (Roy, 2011).

The following updates also exemplify social warmth:



They Retweet and Mention Other Users not Related to the Medium

Media outlets that make good use of Twitter acknowledge the valuable content that others provide. Selfpromotion, states Vargas (2010c), is legitimate and unavoidable; but media organizations should not ignore the quality inputs that other people offer:

Social media works when you are generous. There is nothing wrong with self-promotion, but things really take off when you give others praise or a moment

in the spotlight. The rise of retweeting -real retweeting, not spammy retweeting- shows how far giving credit to others can go in social spaces (Sherman, 2009).

This generosity is illustrated by the following two updates:



They Link to External Content to Enrich the Self Contribution

The results of some recent research verify a common situation: Traditional media outlets seem to have mechanically transferred conceptions of their own roles in the mass media to Twitter, as if it was just another on-line newspaper or radio station. They do not see it as a tool for horizontal conversation, let alone a forum for exchanging information. Twitter ends up being merely a space where they broadcast to a passive audience that reads and never responds (Marticorena, 2010). Thus, as pointed out at the beginning, a 2.0 tool is used with a 1.0 mentality. In a new scenario that is not yet under their control, media prefer to be cautious, prudent and conservative and to reduce their activity to reproduce what they have always done for fear of losing users from their websites.

Thus, the policy of linking to external content can be seen as an openness indicator, because it puts information usefulness before direct achievement:

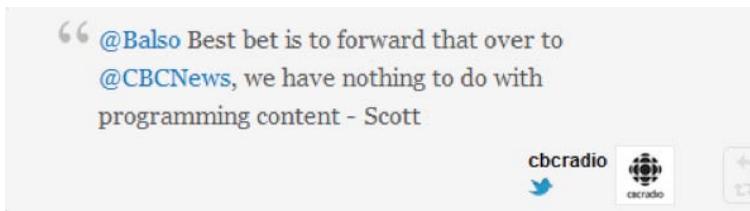


They Listen to Their Users and Talk with Them

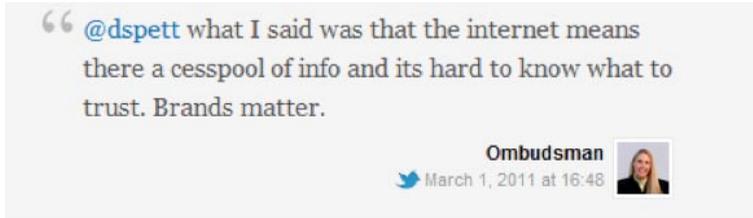
According to Sherman (2009), the early Internet experiences of major companies illustrate the importance of providing timely responses to any kind of feedback from users:

The burden of response can be great, but it can be lessened by using the right tools and crowdsourcing answers. A quick response is more important than ever, and thanks to search tools, alert apps and other services, it is possible to achieve. Don't be a dam in a conversation flow (Sherman, 2009).

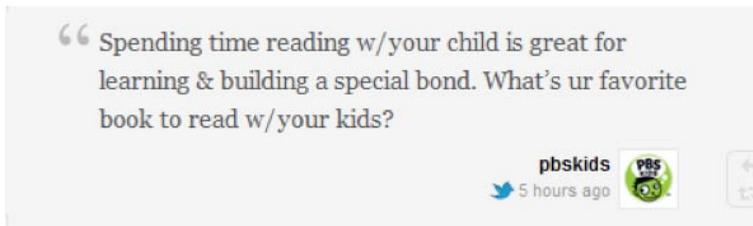
For media, this task is not always easy¹⁷, although Twitter can also serve as an extremely fast and flexible tool for responding to user requests, which can easily be obtained using the mentions system or the search engine provided by the application. We found example replies in the following messages:



Media with ombudsmen can also take advantage of Twitter as a personalized communication tool:



Media can also propose new topics for conversation:



Twitter can be used by media outlets to learn more about the preferences and needs of their followers...



to request ideas about how to better interact with them...

“ Morning show producers are listening to a social media presentation. How can your local morning show get more interactive?

cbradio 
February 9, 2011 at 9:32

“ Doing a social media presentation for IDEAS next week. How do you think it could use social media? - AC

cbradio 
February 4, 2011 at 11:01

or to increase informative resources:

“ @AaronFuhrman may we use some of your skills tonight on our broadcast?

ABCWorldNews 
May 23, 2011 at 18:01

“ 500-acre fire forces evacuations in Burnet County. Send us your fire photos via @statesman or email mypix@statesman.com

statesman 
statesman.com

They Provide Useful Information in an Appealing Way

Media organizations can also use their Twitter accounts to provide interesting and attractive information. Adding value is an essential concept at this point. According to Sherman, this should be another of the 10 golden rules in social media:

Add Value. Enter any online conversation with the aim of adding value. Before posting a message as a new participant in a forum, ask yourself: How is this providing value to the conversation? To the community? In some circles, talking about your product or service can be considered valuable, but in most, it is unwelcome and intrusive (Sherman, 2009).

The following updates provide useful and attractive information:



On this matter, Thompson reminds us that the classic precept of providing attractive information still applies in the social networking era:

Core journalistic skills are still crucial. You can acquire as many multimedia and programming skills as you want, but if you are unable to tell a story in an accurate and compelling way, no one will want to consume your content (Thompson, 2010).

They Conduct surveys Among Users

Media organizations may also use their Twitter accounts as fast and effective ways to solicit their followers' opinions by using tools such as Twtpoll, Poll Pigeon, Poll Your Followers, or by linking to polls already posted on their websites. By doing so, media outlets can harness new opportunities to seek views among their followers, a traditional practice that adds value to the information and opinions of their professionals. The following tweet is a great example:



They Promote the Most Relevant of Their content in an Attractive Manner

It is logical that media organizations would want to take advantage of Twitter to promote content. Anything else would be inconceivable. However, the strategy should focus on promoting only the most relevant content in an attractive way, giving priority to the most interesting and useful material for the audience:



They use Hashtags in an Effective and Creative Way

Hashtags are tags preceded by the # symbol and are used to highlight keywords or topics in the messages, so that their spread can be amplified and expanded beyond the own network. They were organically created by the Twitter community¹⁸, and according to Fahri (2009), they are "just one of the tools that bring coherence to what can seem like Twitter's tower of Babel". Hashtag use is a clear example of the power of Twitter; it is an extraordinary tool for information retrieval and allows organizations to expand visibility beyond their own networks. In addition, the most popular or "trending" topics can actually be seen as a new modality for agenda setting (Orihuela, 2011b). Despite their usefulness, however, they are not widely used, at least in Spanish media. Effective hashtags were used in the following tweets:

“ Ask YOUR #tax question. You could save #money on your #IncomeTax return. Answers, video tips from expert, @bizrpt <http://to.pbs.org/eKjTbd>

PBS 
11 hours ago 

“ Do you home school your children -- if so, why? @foxnews is taking a look at America's #education system. <http://fxn.ws/h33tTo> #homeschool

foxnews 
February 9, 2011 at 9:49 

They Add Multimedia Value to Their Updates

Media outlets that make good use of Twitter add multimedia content to their updates. There are many applications for doing so, including, for example Yfrog, Twitpic, Plixi, Twitprix, or Twicsy for pictures; Bubbletweet, Pickhur, Tvider, Screenr, or Twitcam for video; and Audioboo, Twaud.io, Tinsyong, Tweetmic, or Chir.ps for audio. Each of these applications has its own particularities (Lisogorsky, 2010) but all can help bring media organizations closer to their followers:

“ Put some faces to names/voices: I've uploaded a photo gallery of our network show hosts to our Facebook Page: <http://on.fb.me/f53oCW> -AC

cbcradio 
February 24, 2011 at 14:00 

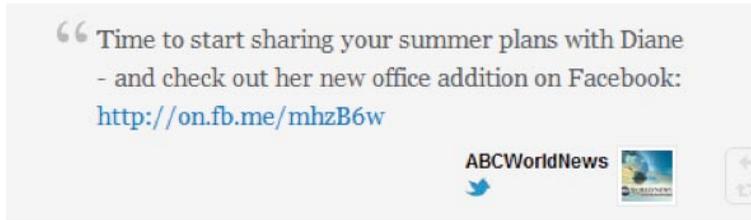
“ VIDEO: Egypt's prime minister resigns <http://bbc.in/heqrMM>

BBCWorld 
3 hours ago 

They Link to Other Networks Where Media Might Have a Profile

Finally, media outlets that realize Twitter's potential synchronize their profiles with other networks, not automatically, but using a holistic approach, with an awareness of

each network's unique characteristics. Thus, the approach is much more complete and comprehensive. Here are some examples:



Conclusion

Having a human voice, retweeting and mentioning users not necessarily related to the media, and linking to external content when it enriches a contribution are some of the best media practices on Twitter. Media organizations that understand Twitter also listen and talk with the audience, provide useful information, conduct surveys among users or promote its most relevant content in an appealing way. They also make a creative use of hashtags, add multimedia value, or link to other networks where media might have a profile.

Note on Contributors

Susana Herrera is a Journalism Professor at the University Carlos III de Madrid (Spain). She got her Ph.D. from the University of Navarra (2002). Recently, she has been researching at the University of Texas at Austin on how mainstream media can best embrace social media to improve the quality of journalism.

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Notes

1. On the contribution of Twitter for journalism, Hermida (2009) or (2010b) can also be consulted.
2. "Media are gradually adapting to this new scenario because they have realized this is not a passing fashion but a profound change in the way society generates, consumes, shares and

evaluates information” (Orihuela, 2010b). See also Rusbridger (2010).

3. According to Biz Stone, one of the cofounders of Twitter, “it feels like journalism as an industry was somewhat - what’s the word?- I don’t want to say afraid, but skeptical: Who are these guys now? Are these Internet guys who are going to make all the money but not share any?” (Kurtz, 2010).
4. This is a widespread practice. On Fridays, users recommend subscribing to other users by using the #FF hashtag in their updates. See <http://support.twitter.com/articles/352810-el-glosario-de-twitter>
5. See Vargas (2010b, 2010c).
6. “Be Real. Authenticity is the secret ingredient behind any good and valuable social media marketing campaign. If you know your audience, locate them online, listen, add value, respond, refrain from spamming and just be yourself, you’ll have far better and more long-lasting positive results than if you try to be someone -or something- you’re not” (Sherman, 2009).
7. For Sherman (2009), “doing good things” is one of the ten golden rules for social media: “This goes beyond adding value online. It means fundamentally changing your business model from a single bottom line -profit- to a triple bottom line - people, planet, profit - and then perpetuating this social responsibility to all you do in business, including online marketing and selling”. She also mentions “share the wealth” as one of the other 10 golden rules: “When I used to talk about the Internet around the world, one key that I repeated almost every time was to share the wealth. ‘If you’ve got it, share it, spread it around’, I’d say, but I wasn’t only talking about money. I was talking about time, information and knowledge. In social media, sharing is the fuel of the conversation engine”.
8. In her proposal on the “10 Golden Rules of Social Media”, Sherman (2009) also includes respecting the “Spirit of the ‘Net’”: “Since 1995, I’ve been writing about and talking about what I call the ‘Spirit of the ‘Net’. The Internet was not meant for marketing and selling but for communication and connection to people and information. Understanding this, even today, can flip your marketing and selling strategy on its head, but you’ll have far more success respecting the spirit of the ‘Net, rather than throwing money at hard-sell tactics”.
9. “Listening thoughtfully gives you a better sense of not only what people are saying but also how they are feeling. In virtual spaces where there are no visual cues, good listening skills become a powerful asset. Listening also helps you map out your current social media footprint and measure your marketing campaigns over time. The key to successful social media marketing is listening” (Sherman, 2009).
10. In his proposal, Buttry describes each of the key concepts of his definition. On conversation, he states: “Lecturing and one-way reporting may have their place, but engagement is a multi-directional conversation, where you listen to people, pass along their knowledge to others, ask thoughtful questions and provide thoughtful answers. Conversation is human and personal (sometimes fun, sometimes sad, sometimes angry, sometimes rejoicing). Conversation requires a friendly voice” (Buttry, 2011).
11. “Outreach includes efforts to share ourselves, our expertise and our content with our community. It involves: Taking the content to the audience, rather than hoping they’ll find us. Identifying information needs, catering our products to meet them and distributing them in a way that makes sense. Being willing to participate in the community as individuals, building connections and personalizing our brand. Inviting the community to get to know our people and our processes. Enriching our community, sharing our own

- knowledge and supporting other community enrichment efforts” (Mayer, 2011).
12. “Being in conversation with our community means listening as well as talking, and adjusting what we do and cover based on what we hear. It involves: Hosting discussions in person and online on topics that matter to the community. Participating in conversations we’re not hosting, both in person and online. Valuing how a continuing dialogue can make us better journalists and improves the journalism. Using web analytics to better understand what people are showing us they value in what we do, and basing at least some of our decisions about content and staff resources based on what we’re seeing. Recognizing that journalism is a process, not just a product, and involving more voices in the process means more diverse journalism” (Mayer, 2011).
 13. “Collaborating with our communities, the highest form of engagement, means we have a shared investment in and influence over our journalism. It involves: Soliciting and relying on user contributions. Soliciting and using user input about what we should cover and how we should allocate our resources. Valuing the role the users play in reacting to and sharing our content. Recognizing that we can accomplish things with the cooperation of the community that we could not do alone” (Mayer, 2011).
 14. “Don’t spam: There is also an ugly surge of spamming in social media, today’s equivalent of unscrupulous email marketers who inundated our email boxes with garbage and left a bad taste in our mouths for email marketing. On Twitter, I’m finding it a daily chore to delete people I’m following who send out spam messages, but I just don’t have the time, interest or bandwidth to tolerate the ‘Get Lots of Followers on Autopilot’ spam” (Sherman, 2009).
 15. According to Thompson (2010): “You are your own brand - brand yourself online! I’m not talking bylines here –you need to build yourself an online persona, one that earns you a reputation of trustworthiness and one that allows you to build fruitful relationships with your readers and contacts. You can no longer necessarily rely on having a good reputation by proxy of association with your employer’s brand”.
 16. TGIF is an acronym that stands for “Thank God it’s Friday”.
 17. “Media on Twitter face a very similar dilemma to the one of celebrities, and sportsmen: the difficulty or even the impossibility to develop their conversations on social networks. The big difference is that media should foster the tracking and monitoring of users conversations related to their contents” (Orihuela, 2011).
 18. See Twitter glossary (2012). Retrieved from <http://support.twitter.com/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary>

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