

The Use of Twitter by America's Newspapers

Study Background

After several years of assessing the [general online presence of the top 100 U.S.](#) newspapers by circulation, this year we decided to produce a study specifically about how newspapers and journalists are utilizing Twitter as a way of reaching readers. The explosive growth of the micro-blogging site and the reeling newspaper industry's attempts to come to terms with and harness its power is too compelling a story to gloss over. But, as is often the case with technologies in transition, identifying and quantifying meaningful data proved somewhat daunting and problematic. So, we adapted the study to provide a "snapshot" of each paper's Twitter presence by analyzing three representative accounts for each paper (the main account and, generally, the two columnists/journalists/blogs with the most followers).

Among the things we look at in the study are whether newspapers link to their Twitter accounts from their website, how often and the manner in which the accounts are updated and whether newspapers are using their accounts to interact with readers or to simply promote their site content. While the study isn't perfect, the results provide a compelling jumping-off point for a debate still taking shape.

Methodology

As with our studies on newspaper websites, we decided to analyze the use of Twitter by the top 100 newspapers in the United States. We established the top 100 U.S. dailies using data [Wikipedia retrieved from the Audit Bureau of Circulations](#), which excludes some papers as a result of circulation disputes. The three Twitter accounts we analyzed for each newspaper were identified using a variety of resources in the following order of preference: the newspaper's website, [Twellow](#), [Twitter](#), [Muckrack](#), [Journalists on Twitter](#), and domain-limited Google searches. In the interest of reflecting the print edition's personality, accounts judged to be representing a section of the newspaper or variation on the main account, and those of administrative, editorial, technical or online-only personnel were excluded unless additional accounts could not be located. Staff Twitter directories were presumed non-existent if they could not be found from the homepage or through a simple Google search. Text links from the homepage were sought using the "find" function, and as such, textual images and buried text (in menus, etc.) did not qualify. Information from Twitter accounts was cut-and-pasted unless the URL did not lead to the paper's homepage, to which end an effort was made to link to an appropriate section (or search result) on the homepage.

All numbers were populated during an eight-and-a-half-hour period from midnight on Sunday, Sept. 20th, 2009 until 8:30am Monday, Sept. 21st, 2009 (EST). "Followers", "Following", and "Tweets" were lifted directly from the Twitter pages. For "Tweets/Day", "Primary Interface", "Replies to Followers %", and "Retweets Others %" data, we are beholden to [TweetStats](#). The remaining numbers "Interactivity %", "Balance", "Twitter IQ" and "Combined Twitter IQ" are measures we devised using the data we collected in order to measure what we consider to be an ideal Twitter experience.

Key Findings

Top Line Stats

- We were able to find multiple Twitter accounts for all of the top 100 newspapers using common sense searching techniques. However, **only 62% of the newspapers included links to at least one of their accounts from their website.** In many cases these links were buried on the site and difficult to track down. In addition, this means 38% of the newspapers are actively using Twitter, but haven't yet integrated their presence with their website in even a minimal way.
- **56% of newspapers maintained a directory of their Twitter accounts on their website.** [This directory from the Los Angeles Times](#) is a good example of the form these listings usually took. Many of these directories were quite extensive, listing dozens of accounts.
- Of the 300 Twitter profiles we looked at in depth, **the average account had 17,717 followers and followed back 1,470 other users.** However, if you remove the four accounts we looked at that had over 100,000 followers, the average number of followers drops to a much more modest 3,447 users.
- **The Twitter profiles of the newspapers send out an average of 11 tweets per day.** Tweet frequency varies from 1.1 (The Boston Globe's Big Picture, The Denver Post's Woody Paige, and The Akron Beacon Journal) to 95.5 tweets/day (The Boston Herald).
- **51% of Twitter accounts were updated primarily through Twitter's web interface.** The next most popular method with 28% was Twitterfeed, which is a service that automatically posts updates to Twitter accounts via RSS feeds. The remaining 21% of accounts were updated via random other Twitter tools such as Tweetdeck and Hootsuite. This indicates that the vast majority of Twitter accounts (around 70%) are updated by staff members as opposed to a simply being an automated feed.

Replies and Retweets

While these core statistics are interesting, we wanted to take things further and see how exactly the Twitter accounts were being used. Were the accounts simply linkbots highlighting newspaper content, or were they being used to by the paper to hold a conversation with its readers? Were newspapers simply talking, or were they listening, too? Some key findings on this front:

- Many of the accounts we looked at rarely if ever interacted with other users by replying to tweets. Indeed, **33% of the accounts we looked at replied to users in less than 1% of their tweets.** 15% of the accounts we looked at had never replied to another users tweets. This indicates that these papers are rarely reading or reacting to the updates of people they follow.
- On the positive side, **37% of newspaper accounts we looked at replied to users in more than 10% of their tweets.** 5% of accounts replied to other Twitter users in over 50% of their tweets.
- Similarly, many of the accounts we looked at rarely retweeted other users. **43% of the accounts we looked at retweeted others in less than 1% of their tweets.** 23% of the accounts we looked at never retweeted another user during the time period we looked at.

- 16% of the Twitter accounts we looked at retweeted other users in more than 10% of their tweets.

Twitter IQ

In an attempt to further measure the interactivity of the accounts, we developed a formula called Twitter Interactivity Quotient (or Twitter IQ for short). If tweeting, which consists of original tweets, responses to tweets, and retweeting others' tweets, is viewed as a conversation, then the tweeting is effectively "talking", while responses and retweets are evidence of "listening". And, while not every conversation is equally balanced for a variety of good reasons, it seems reasonable to propose that the best conversationalists are those who cultivate balance over time.

Working off that premise, we combined the percentage of replies and retweets (listening) and subtracted it from 50 percent (a perfect balance). We then subtracted that number from 100% and translated it into a real number between .5 and 1.5, establishing "1" as the ideal balance. Accounts registering a .5 only tweet, accounts registering a 1.5 only reply and retweet, but they are equally out of balance in different directions. The Twitter IQ is the difference between an account's "balance" and "1". As such, in an ironic flourish, the lower one's Twitter IQ, the better. The combined Twitter IQ employed in ranking the newspapers' is simply the sum of the three applicable accounts.

Below is a list of the newspapers who had the best Twitter IQ scores, meaning they had the best balance between listening and talking. Please note that these results should be taken with a grain of salt, as we didn't look at every single Twitter account for each newspaper, but instead just three representative accounts.

Newspaper	Circulation	Twitter IQ
1. The Sun	210,098	0.0921
2. Austin American-Statesman	152,691	0.2834
3. St. Paul Pioneer Press	192,342	0.4807
4. The Florida Times-Union	122,655	0.4909
5. The Detroit News	169,748	0.5213
6. Chicago Tribune	501,202	0.5997
7. Democrat and Chronicle	135,776	0.6075
8. The Buffalo News	173,925	0.6159
9. Orlando Sentinel	206,205	0.6617
10. The Commercial Appeal	192,631	0.6620

Here are the newspapers with the lowest Twitter IQ scores:

Newspaper	Circulation	Twitter IQ
91. The Press-Enterprise	140,079	1.3780
92. The Salt Lake Tribune	118,452	1.3813
93. Wisconsin State Journal	96,927	1.3875
94. Daily News	602,857	1.3944
95. Press-Register	106,793	1.4082
96. Las Vegas Review-Journal	175,439	1.4145
97. The Hartford Courant	155,540	1.4201
98. Boston Herald	150,688	1.4654
99. The Denver Post	371,728	1.4889
100. The Plain Dealer	291,630	1.4923

Lists

Following are some lists that highlight some interesting data from our study. Please note that we only looked at sample data from each newspaper so these rankings are from a limited data set and should be taken with a grain of salt.

Top Ten Most Balanced Accounts

The accounts below have the best Twitter IQ rankings of the data set we looked at, meaning they had the best balance between listening and talking with other accounts.

Rank	Twitter Account	Twitter URL	Twitter IQ
1	Alesha Williams Boyd	http://twitter.com/alesha_w_boyd	0.00000
2	Omar Gallaga, Digital Savant	http://twitter.com/omarg	0.00060
3	Sophia Ahmad	http://twitter.com/SophiaAhmad	0.00720
4	Julio Ojeda-Zapata	http://twitter.com/Jojeda	0.01300
5	Bethany Clough, Business Blog	http://twitter.com/BethanyClough	0.01380
6	Walt Mossberg	http://twitter.com/waltmossberg	0.01700
7	Michelle Deal-Zimmerman	http://twitter.com/suntravelblog	0.01730

8	Gus Sentementes	http://twitter.com/gussent	0.02360
9	MichMoms	http://twitter.com/MichMoms	0.03020
10	Los Angeles Times	http://twitter.com/latimes	0.03500

Top Forty Least Balanced Accounts

The following accounts all tied with the worst Twitter IQ rating. In all cases, these accounts never replied to or retweeted other Twitter users during the time period we looked at.

Rank	Twitter Accounts	Twitter URL	Twitter IQ
262	New York Daily News	http://twitter.com/nydailynews	0.50000
262	Elizabeth Benjamin, Daily Politics	http://twitter.com/ebdailypolitics	0.50000
262	Houston Chronicle	https://twitter.com/HoustonChron	0.50000
262	Woody Paige	http://twitter.com/woodypaige	0.50000
262	Newsday Top	http://twitter.com/Newsday_Top	0.50000
262	Todd Archer & Barry Horn, Dallas Cowboys Blog	http://twitter.com/dmn_cowboys	0.50000
262	Star Tribune	http://twitter.com/MN_news http://twitter.com/Startribune	0.50000
262	Robert Higgs	http://twitter.com/RHiggsPD	0.50000
262	Mitch Albom	http://twitter.com/mitchalbom	0.50000
262	Star-Ledger - NJ.com	http://twitter.com/NJ_News http://twitter.com/StarLedger	0.50000
262	Matt Barrows, 49ers Blog	http://twitter.com/mattbarrows	0.50000
262	Andrew Baggarly	http://twitter.com/extrabaggs	0.50000
262	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	http://twitter.com/PittsburghPost http://twitter.com/PostGazetteNow	0.50000
262	Dejan Kovacevic, PBC	http://twitter.com/dejan_kovacevic	0.50000
262	Columbus Dispatch	http://twitter.com/DispatchAlerts	0.50000
262	Arkansas Democrat-Gazette - ArkansasOnline.com	http://twitter.com/ArkansasOnline	0.50000
262	Las Vegas Review-Journal	https://twitter.com/reviewjournal	0.50000
262	Review-Journal Blogs	http://twitter.com/rjblogs	0.50000
262	Omaha World Herald - Omaha.com	http://twitter.com/omahawh	0.50000
262	Pilot on Politics	http://twitter.com/PilotOnPolitics	0.50000
262	Pittsburgh Tribune-Review - PittsburghLive.com	http://twitter.com/TribTotalMedia	0.50000

262	Your Cranberry	http://twitter.com/yourcranberry	0.50000
262	Rick Green	https://twitter.com/ctconfidential	0.50000
262	Boston Herald	http://twitter.com/bostonherald	0.50000
262	Jed Gottlieb, Guestlisted	http://twitter.com/jedgottlieb	0.50000
262	Auburn Gold Mine	http://twitter.com/AUGoldMine	0.50000
262	Daily Herald	http://twitter.com/DailyHerald	0.50000
262	Asbury Park Press	http://twitter.com/AsburyParkPress	0.50000
262	Providence Journal	http://twitter.com/projo	0.50000
262	Projo Blogs	http://twitter.com/projoblogs	0.50000
262	Press-Register - AL.com	http://twitter.com/PressRegister	0.50000
262	Akron Beacon Journal - Ohio.com	http://twitter.com/AkronBeacon http://twitter.com/ohiodotcom	0.50000
262	PatMcManamon, Beside The Point	http://twitter.com/PatMcManamon	0.50000
262	News Journal - DelawareOnline.com	http://twitter.com/delawareonline	0.50000
262	Arizona Daily Star	http://twitter.com/StarNet	0.50000
262	Capitol News Bureau Blog	http://twitter.com/AdvocateCNB	0.50000
262	Sarasota Herald Tribune	http://twitter.com/heraldtribune	0.50000
262	Wisconsin State Journal - Madison.com	http://twitter.com/WISTATEjournal	0.50000
262	Mark Pitsch	http://twitter.com/markpitsch	0.50000

Top Ten Most Retweeted Accounts

The following accounts were retweeted the most often during the time period we looked at.

Rank	Twitter Accounts	Twitter URL	Followers	Retweeted	Unique Retweeters
1	NY Times	http://twitter.com/NyTimes	1,856,482	1,478	1,214
2	Atlanta Journal Constitution	http://twitter.com/ajc	5,592	1,257	707
3	Los Angeles Times	http://twitter.com/latimes	38,845	1,224	888
4	WSJ	http://twitter.com/Wsj http://twitter.com/wsifree	91,763	1,129	812
5	Nicholas Kristof	http://twitter.com/nytimeskristof	613,280	553	471
6	USA Today	http://twitter.com/USATODAY	27,624	423	314
7	Austin	http://twitter.com/statesman	13,673	337	277

	American-Statesman				
8	Washington Post	http://twitter.com/washingtonPost	31,354	331	287
9	The Big Picture	http://twitter.com/big_picture	4,436	281	249
10	Detroit News	http://twitter.com/detnews	8,031	272	167

Top Ten Best Repliers

Following is a list of newspaper accounts ranked by the percentage of tweets that consisted of replies to other users.

Twitter Accounts	Twitter URL	Replies to Followers %	Retweets Others %
Heather Chapman	http://twitter.com/Mother_Tongue	73.44%	2.34%
Melissa Chang	http://twitter.com/Melissa808	70.97%	8.47%
Mark Bradley	http://twitter.com/MarkBradleyAJC	69.16%	0.05%
Bernie Miklasz	http://twitter.com/miklasz	65.50%	1.40%
Amber Watson Tardiff, Parental Guidance	http://twitter.com/jerseymomma	64.56%	6.54%
Bill Daley, The Stew	http://twitter.com/billdaley	61.94%	0.40%
Jaden Hair	http://twitter.com/steamykitchen	57.25%	6.78%
Jeff Finley, What Do We Believe?	http://twitter.com/jkfinley	56.63%	1.93%
Derrick Goold, Bird Land	http://twitter.com/dgoold	55.62%	10.20%

Recommendations: Newspaper Websites

The best way to understand a newspaper's relationship with Twitter is to review the paper's homepage. While some have fully embraced the microblogging site, featuring Twitter banners, icons, and links, others demonstrate little to no interest in even identifying their presence on Twitter. However, staffers have created accounts with references to their employer at virtually every paper we looked at, promoting the presence of those accounts seems unlikely to impact their bottom-line. With that in mind, we have a few suggestions:

PROMINENTLY LINK TO YOUR TWITTER ACCOUNTS: As mentioned in our key findings, while 62% of newspapers linked to their Twitter accounts from their websites, these links were often buried and difficult to find. We think more prominent links to the accounts should be included.

SORT YOUR STAFF: Create a staff Twitter directory page on the website. Such a page can easily be—and might most logically be—an “interactive” or “social networking” page with hyperlinks to all paper and staff accounts on the various social networking sites. In some cases, a stream of recent newspaper tweets is even included, promising the accounts are active.

UNCOVER YOUR ACCOUNT: Ensure plugging “Twitter” into the site's internal search function leads somewhere helpful, rather than solely to stories including the term.

TWEET YOUR BRAND: Maintain an identity for the paper. As media identities collide due to consolidation efforts, newspaper's names are becoming muddled on the internet. Whatever the economics of those decisions, as long as there are actual newspapers to sell, we suggest the name remain prominent in all Twitter—and non-Twitter—related web activity.

Recommendations: Twitter Accounts

The ease and immediacy of Twitter makes it nearly impossible to control, which is both the charm—and the drawback—of an image-conscious industry's involvement with the site. Employees can provide background and personalize or clarify their stories, expanding upon their articles, columns and blogs or responding to followers' inquiries. Followers can be tapped to participate in stories, suggest ideas for new stories, and provide tips. Unfortunately, employees can also tweet “news” that hasn't been properly confirmed or sourced. They can expose personal biases that could damage their credibility as journalists. They can post things that might embarrass the paper itself.

In such an environment, we recommend newspapers that haven't already done so develop Twitter policies encouraging a balance between the paper's professional image, its marketability, and the personalities of the people who produce it. Under such policies, any reservations a paper has about pointing its readers to Twitter accounts, as well as any doubts employees have about how to approach their newspaper accounts should be allayed. In that vein, we have some suggestions:

BRAND YOUR TEAM: Establish a standard, logical nomenclature for newspaper-associated accounts. The Times-Picayune, in particular, has done a good job with this, [identifying their staff accounts](#) by tacking a “TP” onto the account's name. In doing so, keep the paper's identity in mind.

BRAND BIOS: Include a clear reference to the newspaper's name (standardized) and the account holder's position at the paper in the “Bio”, thus simplifying the process of finding the account through web searches and directories like Twellow. Of course, this doesn't preclude reference to additional incarnations of the paper's online presence.

'FESS UP TO FEEDS: Clearly identify accounts that are not run, or checked, by humans. While there is clearly a demand—and several rationales—for “feed”-style accounts, full disclosure in the “Bio” ensures followers know what to expect.

SPECIFY URLS: Whenever possible, in the “Web” field, use a URL that links to the appropriate section, column, blog, list of stories, collection of photographs or staff biography. A link to the homepage defeats the “personality” of the Twitter account.

UTILIZE BACKGROUND: Create a background image for all newspaper-accounts, which, if not fully-standardized, at least includes some standardized masthead iconography. [The Richmond Times Dispatch](#), for example, has created detailed sidebar graphics for their staff, which list the places the account-holders work can be found, as well as contact information.

LINK BACK TO THE PAPER: Whenever relevant, ask staff to include a tiny URL, linking to the appropriate story, in their tweets—preferably the URL will point to the employer's paper.

SEPARATE PERSONAL FROM PROFESSIONAL: Ask staff to establish separate personal accounts for content unrelated to the newspaper, while encouraging personality and innovation in their staff accounts. In the alternative, ask staff to identify posts as “PROF” or “PERS” posts.

IDENTIFY WHO IS TWEETING: As you would expect, many of the accounts are somewhat generic in nature, meaning the account might be the for a paper's sports section. If this is the case and different users update the account, we suggest including the name of the person posting at the end of the tweet. This will help personalize the account.

Study Data

In order to encourage conversation, we have made all of our study data publicly available via Google Documents. Please feel free to use the data in the attached Excel sheet however you see fit, although we ask that you credit The Bivings Group when referencing the data.

- [Complete Study Data](#)
- [Top Newspapers as Ranked by Twitter IQ](#)
- [Top Accounts as Ranked by Twitter IQ](#)