SOCIALFLOW

Audience Analysis of Major News Accounts on Twitter

Executive Summary

Accounts We Studied:

Al-Jazeera English	@AJEnglish
BBC News	@BBCNews
CNN	@CNN
The Economist	@TheEconomist
Fox News	@FoxNews
New York Times	@NYTimes

Study Scope:

The study is based on bitly and Twitter data from over 20 million Tweets posted by some seven million users who follow these accounts on Twitter.

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SocialFlow Research and Development team:

Gilad Lotan, @gilgul
Devin Gaffney, @dgaff
Cherie Meyer, @cherplunk

ENGAGING NEWS-HUNGRY AUDIENCES TWEET BY TWEET

An audience analysis of prominent mainstream media news accounts on Twitter

Twitter has evolved from a novel way for people to publish brief updates about themselves to the primary way many around the world discover news, information and content. It has become a unique platform that allows publishers to both build an audience and distribute content to their followers. It provides engagement opportunities that simply don't exist in either traditional media or other types of online media.

With Twitter, it is possible to reach many at once, communicate 1:1 or 1:several. It supports dialogue. It moves very quickly and can be highly unpredictable. However, it can quickly and credibly spread messages to many people and build movements.

In the following research study of the Twitter audiences of Al-Jazeera English, BBC News, CNN, The Economist, Fox News and New York Times, we set out to understand the makeup, behavior, interests, similarities and differences between networked audiences.

Our research allowed us to look at interactions at a granular, as well as global, level. It revealed:

- **Engagement can be read in clicks**

  The Economist has a highly active and engaged audience in terms of both clicks/Tweet and Retweets/Tweet, suggesting a high level of alignment between content posted and attention users are willing to provide.

- **Audiences differ in their willingness to use and share information on Twitter**

  Al-Jazeera's audience is the most active in terms of publishing and Retweeting content on Twitter, while the Fox News audience generates substantially more clicks from its audience (even when normalized).

- **A large number of Followers doesn't necessarily translate into action**

  Despite being the largest account, the New York Times garners the fewest clicks per Tweet when audience size is normalized and earns many fewer Retweets when compared to accounts that are much smaller.

- **Timing and topical interest matter when earning attention and engagement**

  By identifying conversations taking place and how certain keywords drive clicks or Retweets, we were able to visualize, through topical network graphs, the link between content, topicality and actions on Twitter.

By the Numbers

28.7%

of those who follow The Economist also follow the New York Times. This is the highest intersection in terms of percentage.

19%

of those who follow Al-Jazeera English also follow the New York Times.

9.5%

of the people who follow either CNN or New York Times, follow both.

663 users

follow all six news accounts.

Take the Data on a Spin

Explore audience intersections yourself through an interactive widget on our website.

To try it out, visit:

blog.socialflow.com/data

THE TAKEAWAY FOR PUBLISHERS: TOPIC + NETWORK + TIMING

The elements of successful engagement and audience development on Twitter have become clear: **topic + network + timing = maximum potential engagement**. As in real life, context matters immensely on Twitter and interruptions are ignored. Audiences are very transient on Twitter. Knowing when an addressable audience is available, what topics they'd like to engage in, and when, is the key earning attention and engagement.

Further, businesses need to unlock the benefits of real-time insight. Unlike TV, radio, or even most channels on the web, the actions audiences take on Twitter have a measurable impact that can be tracked in real time. This data is extremely powerful and should be used to inform content development strategies, and marketing planning.

ABOUT SOCIALFLOW

SocialFlow is the world's first and only social messaging optimization platform that uses data science and analysis to deliver greater engagement on Twitter. SocialFlow AttentionScore™ optimization technology ensures that the Tweets it sends match the topics that an audience is most interested in at any given moment. The result is greater engagement in the form of clicks, Retweets, conversations, shares and likes, and a better audience. To learn more, go to www.socialflow.com.

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Engaging News-Hungry Audiences Tweet by Tweet

An Audience Analysis of Prominent Mainstream Media News Accounts on Twitter

STUDY DETAILS

Characteristics of engaged audiences:

Everyone wants an engaged audience, yet there are numerous types of engagement, and each comes with a potential consequence. Would you rather your audience always pay attention to your content, but never repost or share it? Or is it better to have followers that rarely click on your links, but constantly share your content with their networks? One drives traffic to your website, but the latter builds trust within your network. Retweets extend published content to new circles, building trust and brand awareness over time.

Our data shows that the larger an audience, the harder it is to maintain high levels of engagement, as seen in metrics such as clicks and retweets. Finally, we see clear content-based and behavioral differences between audiences: users choose to follow news accounts based on the type of content being posted by the account. Thus news media sites that surface similar type of content see a larger overlap within their audience.

Read on for more on what the data reveals about audience engagement, topicality and timing.

SEEING MILLIONS OF CONVERSATIONS AT ONCE

The image above is a network graph of topics discussed by the Twitter followers of Al-Jazeera English (@AJEnglish) over a period of an hour. Topics appear as larger nodes the more prominently they are being discussed, and are organized such that related topics appear closer together.

We see a highly sectional network with the top right largely dedicated to European topics, the top left African, the bottom left Mideast and North African, and the bottom right American. There is no one dominant topic but rather there are multiple conversations happening at the same time.

By zooming into the graph, we can see the specific regional topics of discussion. Here's a segment – from the bottom left – mentioning Tahrir square along with other terms related to the Egyptian revolution of January 2011.

If we move to a different section of the graph, we identify a Japanese contingent, focusing on the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in Japan, using Japanese words such as *jishin* (earthquake) and *genpatsu* (nuclear power plant).

And another part of the graph — top left — is also very different, focusing on Africa Day and the separation of Sudan.

Interestingly, the dominant topics that bubble up have to do with newsworthy events, both global and regional. However,

Understanding and reacting to the topics that move news audiences can have a great impact on their level of engagement with the news.

if we dig in deeper, we quickly find topics ranging from the latest Oprah update on the Schwarzenegger scandal to people's obsessions with poetry.

An audience is made up of many people having multiple discussions at any given point in time. The ability to see these discussions ebb and flow in real-time gives an individual the ability to better interact with said audience. We all build mental models in our heads, imagining the people who make up our audience, trying to gauge their interests and how to interact without spamming or boring them. However, as our audience grows in size and diversity, the sheer complexity is just too much to keep in one's head. Visualizations like the one above show a clearer picture of the conversation space as a whole, and let us zoom into specific sections.

COMPARING AUDIENCE GRAPHS

One of the most interesting characteristics of these graphs are the apparent differences between Fox News and Al-Jazeera's audiences. Al-Jazeera's network is indicative of a geographically broader conversation of news topics, prominently featuring terms like *Jan25, Pakistan, Africa*, while Fox News' graph is much more domestic in scope, featuring terms like *tcot, ObamaCare,*

Get these Graphics

All topical network graphs are available for download at blog.socialflow.com. Feel free to explore and use as visuals. But please remember to give SocialFlow attribution. Network graphs made with Gephi.

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and *fox25*. While one may assume that the audiences following these accounts are of a particular political frame of mind, it is important to establish this as a data-backed assertion.

Of particular interest is the lower-middle section of the Fox News graph - the change in edge colors and shading from orange to brown is indicative of a conversation that shifts away from topics and toward specific actors on the network. The accounts in this area, such as *JoeNBC, VotingAmerican, slkbrooke*, and *PL1776* are all established conservative accounts and command a fair amount of attention from Fox News' followers. By analyzing the relational hashtags surrounding each term, we can get a sense for the topics that influence and are influenced by the accounts. In this case, *#p2,* or *Progressives 2.0,* seems to be an ideal hashtag to use for targeting highly connected conservative accounts on Twitter. Adding the right hashtag at a given time increases the visibility of a Tweet to additional audiences who are searching on that tag. *#p2* is relatively underused, yet closely connected to major hashtags such as *#tcot* along with a number of influential Twitter accounts.

A tag cloud depicting the topics most clicked on reveals interesting differences in the interests of each media organization's audience.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT: CLICKS, RETWEETS AND ACTIVITY METRICS

People are enticed to click on content through many means, invited to explore a recent development relating to one's interest, a recommendation from a friend, or even a manipulation of language and words. By mapping out the top articles that users from each audience clicked on we see clear differences between the user groups. Below is a 'tag cloud' representation for four of the accounts featuring top keywords that drove the highest levels of traffic from Twitter to their website.

While there are overlaps between some of the accounts, the identity of each media outlet is evident through the data. The New York Times' audience enjoyed stories on sports and education this particular day, while followers of Fox News consumed content surrounding the Casey Anthony trial coverage. Some topical overlap includes the Joplin tornado, the IMF chief scandal and President Obama's UK speech. The Economist's audience clicks on content that is quite different from the others, including topics that tend towards the niche that the account serves.

What do the numbers look like?

Even though the size of The Economist's audience is less than a third of the New York Times', it is generating hundreds more clicks per shared link.

FIGURE 1: AVERAGE AND MEDIAN CLICKS PER TWEET POSTED FOR FOUR OF THE ACCOUNTS.

For every URL shared by The Economist on Twitter, we see more clicks on average, and a substantially higher median compared to the rest. Even though the size of The Economist's audience is less than a third of the New York Times', it is generating hundreds more clicks per shared link. This high proportion of clicks per Tweet is suggestive of a high level of attention paid to the content shared by The Economist from its audience. The lack of a major disparity between the median and average indicates that this high level of attention is relatively consistent throughout the data, rather than exposing a few highly-clicked, outlying Tweets driving up an average for a majority of underperforming Tweets.

Next we look at both clicks per Tweet and total Retweets normalized by audience size.

Trust and engagement are comparative to future investment in a brand; people who think highly of you will actively recommend you to their friends and colleagues.

FIGURES 2+3: AVERAGE CLICKS PER TWEET AND TOTAL RETWEETS (NORMALIZED BY AUDIENCE SIZE)

The Economist still has the most engaged audience in terms of content clicks and, relative to its size, Fox News is a close second. While Fox News does not have the highest nominal click rates, it is generating a substantial volume of clicks given its number of followers. One would expect an active Twitter audience such at Al-Jazeera's to click on content at a higher volume, yet in this case, Fox news performs much better.

This raises some interesting questions. Why do we see fewer clicks coming from an audience that is supposedly more advanced and passionate on Twitter? Perhaps Fox News has a better recipe for generating provocative titles and attracting the attention of their followers, while Al-Jazeera has a trusting audience that generally Retweets its content, but doesn't necessarily click links to the shared articles.

One is not necessarily better than the other. Trust and engagement are comparative to future investment in a brand; people who think highly of you will actively recommend you to their friends and colleagues. This is obviously productive over time. Yet, click-through metrics are clearly extremely important for most online publishers.

CLOSING

Historically we've used intuition to interact with our imagined audience, keeping mental models in our heads of what we think will be most entertaining and interesting. With the advent of social network spaces, we can leverage available data to power thoughtful decisions on ways to interact with an ever-growing networked audience. Rather than using simplistic measures such as audience size or randomly choosing topics, there's great potential in parsing real-time signals, identifying prominent discussion topics and getting to know an audience based on past actions - what they click on, Retweet and post.

Using real-time signals, publishers can make wiser decisions on what to post and when. We showed how topical network graphs can be used to identify different conversations taking place and how certain hashtags can be used to reach a certain audience. We also showed how click maps provide a reflection of oneself: what one's audience finds compelling out of the total content posted. Using these two approaches, one can identify existing opportunities to match content with an audience.

Using real-time signals, publishers can make wiser decisions on what to post and when.

Finally, it is important to think deeply about the significance of engagement metrics. While clicks bring immediate returns, Retweets and other forms of audience participation raise trust and brand awareness, both imperative for maintaining sustained growth. A high number of followers is not indicative of an engaged audience; a high click-through rate doesn't necessarily yield other engagement metrics such as Retweets and new followers. By paying attention to long established demographics, collective audience behavior and the mercurial and fickle moment-to-moment signals, we step away from conjectures, generalizations, and assumptions, and leverage the audience itself in determining how best to interact.

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416 West 13th Street
Suite 203
New York, NY 10014

www.SocialFlow.com
@SocialFlow

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