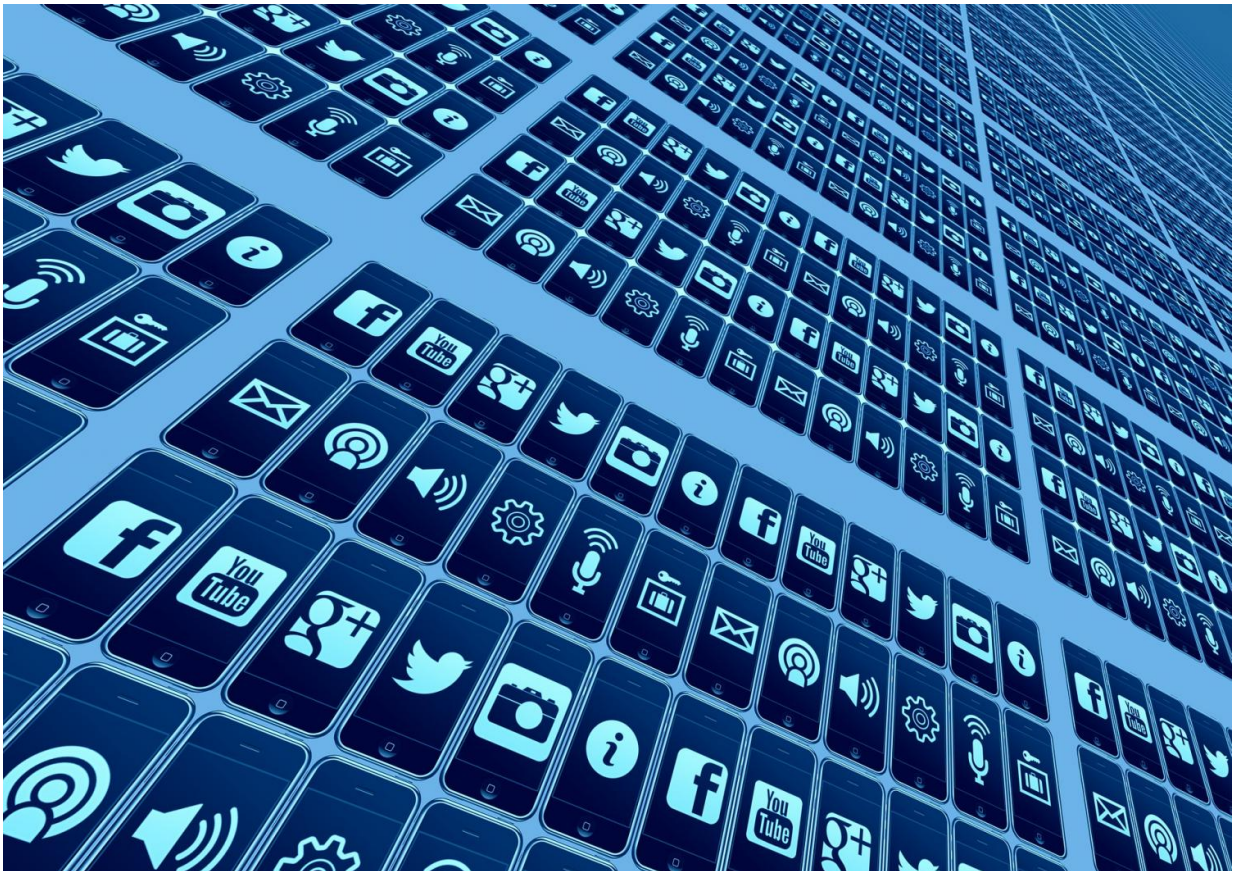


Research shows social media is no substitute for local news coverage

September 14 2017, by Jaigris Hodson



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Once, when discussing our changing habits online, [Mark Zuckerberg told his colleagues](#), "a squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant

to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."

This memorable though insensitive quote suggests that [social media](#) platforms are optimized to support local news over international coverage. In other words, the events that are most relevant to people are likely the ones closest to home, rather than those that happen to distant people far away.

Does this assumption hold up to closer scrutiny though? I decided to test this idea, along with fellow communications scholar, [April Lindgren](#). We decided to look at the way the 2015 federal elections [were covered on one social media platform](#): Twitter. What we found may surprise Zuckerberg. It definitely surprised us.

Local news as important as clean air

Recent research has revealed the [importance of local news](#) for civic and political participation in Canada and across North America. And the Knight Foundation has noted the [availability of information "is as vital to communities as is clean air](#), safe schools, good hospitals and public health."

Yet, despite the civic benefits to communities in Canada and around the world, the news industry is currently at a crossroads. A recent report by Pew Research shows that [advertising revenue to the U.S. newspaper industry is declining sharply](#).

Classified ads, once a cornerstone of the newspaper business model, have become almost obsolete due to sites like Craigslist and Kijiji. Squeezed on both sides —by declining subscribership and declining advertising revenues —local news outlets struggle to make enough money to keep the lights on, let alone make money for shareholders.

Many think social media, and particularly Twitter, which is used frequently by journalists to find and share news, can help bridge this gap. Research has shown that [journalists rely on Twitter as a news source](#) and [news often breaks on Twitter before it does on traditional news outlets](#). But how does Twitter compare to the local news outlets that are on the decline?

Can Twitter bridge the gap?

We scraped all available tweets for the month leading up to the 2015 Canadian federal election for the two most popular election-related hashtags: [#elxn42](#) and [#cdnpoli](#). We used a combination of software and human analysis to examine keywords, influencers and other trends. And then we filtered the data to identify the tweets associated with smaller communities across Canada.

The communities we examined were all different with respect to their geographies, demographics and access to print, radio and television news. We looked at what kind of news coverage was available through Twitter in each community, examining influencers, trends and the quality of coverage.

We found a [significant difference in locally-relevant news coverage on Twitter](#) compared to the presence of local news in a local daily newspaper. Also, the coverage on Twitter tends to be of varying quality. A large proportion of tweets are partisan in nature and offer opinion rather than facts.

News announcing local events, such as debates or rallies, was widely circulated on Twitter. However, news about actual election related issues or policies was difficult to find or entirely absent. Many links shared on Twitter were to websites set up only for the purposes of influencing the election and did not lead to what might be considered objective news.

Local news did not seem to travel on Twitter and, generally speaking, the election news that was shared did not hold up to the standards of more [traditional media outlets](#).

Interventions are necessary

So what can we do? Greater public awareness, media and digital literacy education and government policy interventions are needed in order to ensure that we do not have to rely solely on platforms like Twitter for local news.

It is also clear traditional business models supporting local news no longer work. Reasons for this vary, including the explosive growth of [social media platforms](#) for news-sharing. For these reasons we need to consider new ways to support the local journalism that is so vital to Canadian communities.

On the policy front, the government could recognize the public good served by [local news](#) outlets. For example, they could make monetary contributions or donations to these organizations tax deductible.

On the education front, college and university level journalism programs could equip students with entrepreneurial skills, in the hopes that future graduates will be able to find new and innovative ways to share [news](#).

Social media sites like Twitter [make money by selling advertising on their feeds](#). They can monetize this way because people use these sites to share content. A [growing proportion of that content is news](#). Canadians should therefore find ways to hold them accountable for the quality of information being shared there.

Social media sites already [employ algorithms to filter content](#) in ways that serve their advertisers. They should also be responsible for filtering

content in ways that best serves local communities.

Social [media](#) can be used to highlight locally relevant information but it's up to all of us to demand that it be used in this way.

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