

A team has investigated what motivated social media use during Jan. 6 event

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The Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building gave two South Dakota State University School of Communication and Journalism faculty members an opportunity to examine what motivates compulsive

social media use during a breaking news event. However, they had to move fast.

"As I watched the live coverage (at home), it was so devastating and emotionally raw," said associate professor Jenn Anderson. Assistant professor Kathryn Coduto said, "I was in my apartment seeing tweets about something happening at the Capitol, turned the news on and then texted Jenn."

Anderson continued, "We decided within three texts what we had to do." Coduto, who had done other studies on compulsive media use, said, "I had all these measures that I could adapt—and I always wanted to test this with breaking news."

The researchers had the survey ready for SDSU Research Integrity and Compliance Officer Dianne Nagy to review based on Institutional Review Board standards for human subjects on Jan. 8. The survey received IRB approval later that day and the researchers began recruiting respondents via the School of Communication and Journalism's Facebook and Twitter accounts and directly emailing potential respondents. The researchers also recruited from their own personal networks.

"We gave Dianne a heads-up on Jan. 6 that this was time-sensitive and are thankful for the quick turnaround," Anderson said, noting IRB review typically takes a couple of weeks at most universities. The researchers gathered survey responses from 380 Midwestern college students within 48 hours.

"People wanted to share their experiences. They were extremely honest with us," Anderson said. "We captured people's authentic and early immediate responses to the event as well as accurate self-reflections about behaviors, such as why they logged on, what their motivations

were."

An analysis of the survey is published in the latest edition of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, a quarterly publication of the Broadcast Education Association. The research was funded by the School of Communication and Journalism.

Examining motivation

The survey showed that 66.1% of the respondents used social media to pass time, 63.2% for [social interaction](#), 53.9% as a source of information, 26.1% for its utility as a communication tool, 21.3% to share information and 16.8% to express opinions. Respondents were able to identify multiple reasons for using social media.

In particular, the researchers examined the motivation of those categorized as "having cognitive preoccupation with social media. They are thinking about social media when they are not on it," Coduto said. A question regarding which of 10 sites—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Weibo—the respondents regularly used allowed researchers to identify this subset of respondents.

The survey showed those already preoccupied with social media increased their [social media use](#), accessed a greater number of social media channels and were more actively engaged on those platforms during the breaking news event.

"One of the most interesting takeaways was the more compulsive they were in using social media, the more they were posting, commenting and engaging. Translating that into behavior is an impactful thing," Coduto said. Furthermore, the responses showed that those who use social media as a convenient means of finding and sharing information and of

expressing their opinions are more likely to be preoccupied with the internet during a breaking news event.

"Breaking news creates lots of uncertainty, so when technology is part of your every day, the more channels you are already thinking about, the more likely you are to get online and keep scrolling," Coduto said. Though the first tweets or Facebook posts are unlikely to be the most accurate, people would rather have incorrect or misinformation than no information.

Though reporters were already on the scene to cover the certifying of the election, Anderson said, "People wanted to see the feeds of those in and around the Capitol who were livestreaming, tweeting and sharing. It makes them feel like they are inside the story."

Coduto continued, "A lot of people do not trust any media. Because these feeds are unfiltered, they (social [media](#) users) feel better informed and able to decide for themselves." She recommends "balancing impatience and the need to know with waiting to let the facts emerge" and using fact-checking tools, such as the Poynter Institute's International Fact Checking Network and PolitiFact.

Impact on future research

In future studies, the researchers hope to be able to examine what [social media](#) users are posting and sharing. "Are they generating original content or sharing?" Anderson said. Coduto added, "Are they sharing without reading? Is the information accurate or is it misinformation?"

From a research perspective, Anderson said, "What we've done is a blueprint for how to put something together for breaking news." The survey can also be adapted for other breaking news events, but she cautioned, "You need to know the measures and what you want to do."

In addition, she recommended letting IRB officials know ahead of time. "If you can preapprove at least some of the measures and materials, then it will be more like an update (to an existing research protocol rather than a completely new one, when the [news](#) event happens)."

More information: Kathryn D. Coduto et al, Cognitive Preoccupation with Breaking News and Compulsive Social Media Use: Relationships with Online Engagement and Motivations for Use, *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2021.1972114](#)

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