

Study shows a tale of two social media platforms for Donald Trump

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Truth Social was more effective at driving news attention toward Donald Trump during the 2022 midterm election cycle than Twitter (now known

as X) was during the 2016 primary election season, a pattern driven mostly by partisan media on the left and the right, according to a new paper by a University at Buffalo communication researcher.

But that success had limits.

Journalists covered Trump's [social media](#) use differently during those times and across those platforms, directly embedding his Truth Social posts into their stories far less frequently than was the case with his tweets in 2016.

The findings published in the [Journal of Information Technology & Politics](#) advance knowledge about social media's influence as a political instrument, changing journalism practices and the role of alt-tech social media platforms, popular with those at the political extremes, in the rapidly evolving digital media environment.

"Our study reveals that Trump's ability to attract news attention through social media is not predicated on a specific platform, but on his ability to engage social media users," says Yini Zhang, Ph.D., an assistant professor of communication in the UB College of Arts and Sciences and the paper's lead author.

Zhang says she used the comparable periods of 2016 (when Trump was a candidate) and 2022 (when he was out of office, but still politically active), rather than introducing any 2020 election data, to avoid the heavy news coverage generally afforded to a sitting president.

"There are really two sides to this story: Truth Social's effectiveness as a news driver for Trump and the areas where it's not as effective as Twitter," Zhang says.

Zhang says Trump's removal from Twitter in 2021 (his account has been

reinstated but remains idle) and his subsequent launch of Truth Social in 2022 raised questions about harvesting attention through an alt-tech platform.

But why the differences in efficacy?

For one, Zhang says Truth Social has only a small fraction of the activity seen on X. It remains a niche platform today, but in 2022, only about a fourth of Americans knew of its existence.

"Despite its small size, news outlets across the spectrum still track it," says Zhang. "The fact that the [positive relationship](#) between Trump's engagement on social media and the entire media system's attention to that activity holds for both Truth Social and X speaks to the center of gravity that Trump retains in American politics.

"This paper suggests that the 'alt-tech' label was outweighed by what journalists saw as the 'newsworthiness' of Trump's statements," she says.

This could, however, be a ceiling for Trump rather than generalizable to others, according to Zhang.

"Trump has capitalized on his political and [economic power](#) to adapt to the evolving media landscape," she says. "It's unrealistic to expect others to have the same results, but Trump's actions might provide a playbook for other candidates."

The limited effectiveness for the potential of alt-tech might also be tied to shifting editorial priorities. The number of embedded posts for Trump dropped from 4.93 per day in 2016 to .43 in 2022.

"This change may indicate that journalists and publishers are more aware of the consequences of indiscriminately amplifying social media posts

and thus more reluctant to embed posts directly," says Zhang.

More information: Yini Zhang et al, Trump, Twitter, and Truth Social: how Trump used both mainstream and alt-tech social media to drive news media attention, *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/19331681.2024.2328156](https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2024.2328156)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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