

**WHO  
RETWEETS  
WHOM?  
HOW DIGITAL  
AND LEGACY  
JOURNALISTS  
INTERACT ON  
TWITTER**

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day's major news event and reasonably mimic "normal" Twitter activity. In our analysis, we found that our sample of tweets included one major news event (the end of the October 2013 shutdown of the federal government), but as major news events such as this occur with some regularity this further enhanced the normalcy of our selection. The tweets were analyzed within two weeks of the data being downloaded, ensuring that our use of real-time data was likely to mimic what was online when the tweet was originally posted.

For each tweet, we recorded several qualities. First, we copied the URL of the tweet; if the tweet was a so-called "manual" retweet (i.e., appeared as "RT @ [tweet]" rather than a direct representation of the original tweet with "Retweeted by [journalist]" at the bottom of the tweet) we attempted to base our analysis on the original tweet as sent by the account being retweeted. We then recorded the identity of the account being retweeted. This identity fell into one of six categories: traditional, hybrid, or digital news organization; or traditional, hybrid, or digital journalist, which we classified as individuals who self-identified as employees of an organization with the organization's category serving as the deciding factor for the journalist. For those who did not work for a media organization, we used "other." Thus, a *Washington Post* employee would be classified as a traditional media journalist, while a tweet from Salon's Twitter account (@Salon) would be classified as a new media organization. We also recorded the number of retweets each tweet received, as well as whether the retweet was by someone in the same organization to which the retweeter belonged. In all cases, we used the Twitter account's bio section as the final arbiter: Whichever organization an individual identified as her primary employer in the bio was used as her primary occupational identity.

For the traditional media organization, we selected the *New York Times*. While there are well recognized problems with basing an analysis of U.S. journalism off perhaps its least representative case, our interest here was not in being representative, but in tracing the vanguard. As such, the *Times* is widely seen as having a forward-thinking digital strategy for a tradi-

tional U.S. media organization.<sup>18</sup> To determine which of its political reporters were the most followed on Twitter, we used the online tool Muckrack, which aggregates the Twitter feeds of journalists by a number of categories, including their employers. As noted above, the *Times* employees with the most followers were rarely politics reporters; it was necessary to venture 23 slots down on Muckrack's list—past bloggers, media critics, columnists, and technology writers—before reaching a political reporter's account. The five *Times* journalists admitted to our sample were Jonathan Martin, John Harwood, David Leonhardt, Nicholas Confessore, and Declan Walsh.

For a new media organization, we selected BuzzFeed. Since 2011, BuzzFeed has built a sizable stable of political reporters, beginning with its hire of blogging wunderkind Ben Smith from Politico. Since then, the site has added a number of other well regarded reporters (like McKay Coppins, who moved from *Newsweek*) as well as up-and-coming digital journalists (like Rosie Gray). As its politics section lists only 11 staffers, we examined each reporter's Twitter account (listed, sometimes alongside their IM name or even phone number, on the BuzzFeed Politics homepage) and identified the five with the highest number of followers. These were Andrew Kaczynski, McKay Coppins, Rosie Gray, Chris Geidner, and John Stanton.

Finally, for our hybrid media organization, we picked Politico. The outlet publishes a print product up to five times a week while Congress is in session and once a week while it is in recess, distributing copies for free in Washington and Manhattan. As such, its print circulation was around 40,000 as of 2012, while its organizational Twitter account (@Politico) is followed by over 600,000 users and its website receives over six million visitors per month. We consulted the Politico masthead for a list of its editorial staff and cross-referenced this with Twitter to find the five with the highest number of followers. As a result, we examined the Twitter accounts of Mike Allen, Blake Hounshell, Maggie Haberman, Alex Burns, and Dylan Byers.

We should note, with regret, that only two of the reporters we examined were woman. Additionally, no one in our sample appeared to identify as a person of color, or at least did not do so in the public statements we observed. We very much rue this paucity of underserved voices in our analysis, and would only note that this mirrors the low number of female and minority employees in newsrooms. That few members of these populations showed up in our sample of the five most-followed journalists at three of the most prominent media organizations in the United States primarily reflects a flaw in hiring practices, rather than our sampling method. These organizations are not hiring or promoting women or people of color into the most visible positions, especially in the “prestige” realm of political reporting. (The journalists from the *New York Times* included in our sample, for instance—all male, all but one white—have fewer Twitter followers than a number of colleagues who are female, gay, or Asian- or African-American, but these journalists work in areas such as business, technology, health, fashion, or for the *New York Times Magazine*.) As our concern here is with the nature of journalism as a practice, we must regrettably reflect the primarily white and male nature of news work in the present cultural and historical context.



## Who Retweets Whom?

The results of this preliminary analysis both confirmed and confounded our expectations. As has been widely reported in the past, traditional journalists' online interactions primarily focus on others from their professional sector. *Times* journalists retweeted traditional media organizations and journalists 63 percent of the time, while retweeting digital journalists and organizations in only 10 percent of cases, and hybrid in 8 percent. Reading through these traditional journalists' tweets felt a little like listening in on newsroom chatter—reporters kibitzed about sports, complimented one another's work (almost everyone retweeted a laudatory *Times* review of a colleague's book about the George W. Bush administration), and traded commentary about political events. While there was certainly some reaching across publications, this was limited to places like the *Washington Post* or ABC News. It would appear, then, that for traditional political journalists, little has changed: they are primarily interested only in other high-prestige, traditional reporters.

**Table 1: Whom journalists from traditional, hybrid, and digital media organizations retweet**

| Type of journalist/<br>organization being retweeted | Type of Journalist |        |         | Overall |
|---|--------------------|--------|---------|---------|
|   | Traditional        | Hybrid | Digital |         |
| Traditional   | 63%                | 40%    | 32%     | 45%     |
| Hybrid  | 8                  | 19     | 6       | 11      |
| Digital   | 10                 | 24     | 45      | 26      |
| Other   | 19                 | 16     | 16      | 17      |

**Note:** Both traditional journalists and digital journalists mostly retweet journalists from their own sector, while hybrid journalists retweet journalists from other sectors. Traditional journalists retweeted other traditional journalists in 63% of cases, and 45% of digital journalists' retweets were of other digital journalists. Only 19% of hybrid journalists' retweets were of other hybrid journalists. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**Source:** Authors' calculations based on the Twitter accounts of 15 journalists observed on October 19, 2013.

This was manifestly not the case, however, for digital journalists. In the past, digital journalists primarily took their cues from the mainstream media. In our data, however, the trend has reversed. Digital journalists most frequently retweeted other digital journalists, and while they did so at a lower rate than traditional journalists retweeted one another (45 percent versus 63 percent for traditional), this still represents a marked turnaround from previous trends. BuzzFeed reporters retweeted mainstream journalists around a third of the time, and hybrid only 6 percent, an indication, perhaps, that there was an interest in keeping the energy within their own sector. The talk here felt considerably more focused than it did for the *Times* reporters: While there was still a decent amount of cross-talk (jokes about pictures of coworker McKay Coppins, for instance, were frequently retweeted), even the casual talk seemed more angled toward creating a consistent image than gratifying their own needs. Compare, for instance, this retweet from the *Times*' most-followed political reporter, Jonathan Martin, of *Weekly Standard* reporter Stephen Hayes:



**Jonathan Martin** @jmartNYT 1h  
RT @stephenfhayes: Anyone know a good bar/sports bar in Athens, Greece that will be showing the #Packers game tmrw night? #askingforafriend

To this retweet by BuzzFeed's Andrew Kaczynski:



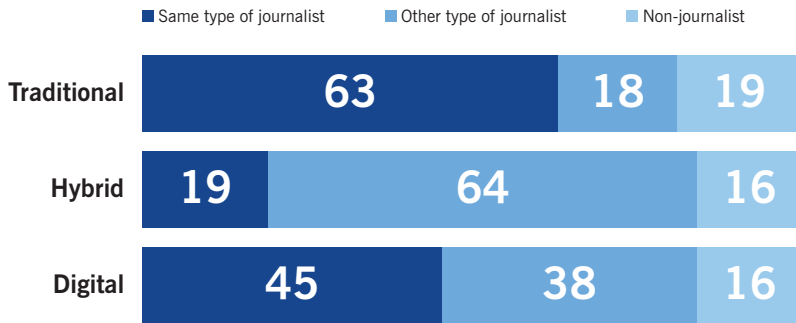
**Andrew Kaczynski** @BuzzFeedAndrew 4h  
Rocking with Internet here with Verizon. YOLO RT @BuzzFeedNews: Time Warner's Internet is down for much of the NE. [pic.twitter.com/tG2nWJr8Ea](http://pic.twitter.com/tG2nWJr8Ea)

Martin's tweet is a chummy, old-boys-club sort of socialization across media organizations, suggesting an image of himself and his fellow reporters as still grounded in a populist American culture (the Midwest, football, drinking) while traveling the world, reinforcing the mid-century ideal of journalists as blue-collar intellectuals. Kaczynski's tweet, on the other hand, makes a joke grounded in Web (and youth) culture ("YOLO") while retweeting his own organization. It sends the message that a tweet about an Internet service

provider from BuzzFeed’s own account is of interest to followers of political news, and that being *on the Internet* both in the literal and cultural sense is vital to BuzzFeed’s brand of political reporting. Where Martin’s reinforces the old, Kaczynski’s is intensely insular, insisting on a new idea of what good political reporting consists of: not being in Greece, but being online.

What emerges is a portrait of a professional sector trying assiduously to assert itself and its particular set of values and norms. For those who get their news online, to follow BuzzFeed reporters is to see a world where digital journalism is the primary source of information. And to be a news worker on Twitter and follow BuzzFeed reporters is to see a professional domain where digital journalists collaborate, interact, and praise one another—when they’re not engaging in robust professional feuds. The virtual newsroom depicted through digital journalists’ retweets is populated by very different people than the one depicted by Times *political* reporters’ feeds.

**Figure 1: Percentage of journalists’ retweets that are of journalists from their own sector, journalists from other sectors, and non-journalists**



**Note:** Both traditional journalists and digital journalists mostly retweet journalists from their own sector, while hybrid journalists retweet journalists from other sectors. Traditional journalists retweeted other traditional journalists in 63% of cases, and 45% of digital journalists’ retweets were of other digital journalists. Only 19% of hybrid journalists’ retweets were of other hybrid journalists. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**Source:** Authors’ calculations based on the Twitter accounts of 15 journalists observed on October 19, 2013.

**Who Retweets Whom? How Digital and Legacy Journalists Interact on Twitter**

This is reinforced by our analysis of how many retweets went to members of the same organization. While traditional journalists primarily retweeted other traditional journalists, they were the least likely to retweet those in their own organization: Only 21 percent of their retweets of journalists or news organizations (i.e., all but “other”) went to fellow *Times* reporters, or the *Times* itself. For digital journalists, however, over a third of their retweets of news workers or organizations went to fellow *BuzzFeed* employees. As a traffic-generating strategy, this is a bad idea: Retweets of coworkers received, on average, 18 retweets total, while those of other organizations received 45 total retweets, on average. But as a strategy to simultaneously build professional and organizational prestige, it seems to have merit.

**Table 2: How often journalists retweet accounts associated with the organization at which they work**

| Being retweeted        | Type of Journalist |        |         | Overall |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------|---------|---------|
|                        | Traditional        | Hybrid | Digital |         |
| Same Organization      | 21%                | 25%    | 36%     | 23%     |
| Different Organization | 79                 | 75     | 64      | 77      |

**Note:** Columns show digital journalists are more likely than other types of journalists to retweet members of their own media organization. While 21% of traditional journalists’ retweets were of their co-workers, this was true of 36% of digital journalists’ retweets. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

**Source:** Authors’ calculations based on the Twitter accounts of 15 journalists observed on October 19, 2013.

Hybrid journalists displayed a pattern that would seem to justify the hybrid appellation. They retweeted traditional journalists and organizations more than digital journalists did and less than traditional journalists did (43 percent), and vice versa for digital journalists and organizations (24 percent). They sat between the existing and emerging professional sectors and, as it were, bridged the gap. They do not seem tremendously interested in growing the prestige of their own sector, however: While hybrid journalists retweeted hybrid journalists and organizations more than any other journalists did (19 percent), this was still far less than other journalists’ attention to their own sectors (63 percent for traditional, 45 percent for digital).

In part, of course, this is because there are relatively fewer hybrid media organizations to retweet. But it makes sense with our understanding of this emerging media model. Their interest is not in forging something new, but borrowing the economic advantages of digital media while maintaining the status of traditional media.

## Digital Journalists May Be Forming Their Own Circles of Attention

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Our findings suggest that digital journalism, as a professional realm, may have entered a new phase. Previous work concluded that digital work was dependent on broadcast and print journalism for everything from content to career advancement. In our preliminary analysis of digital news workers' Twitter activity, however, we saw two clearly separate realms emerge. No longer are digital journalists trailing behind mainstream news outlets' stories or looking to prestigious journalists for leadership. Instead, sites like BuzzFeed have formed their own separate professional network, albeit one that also incorporates selected mainstream journalists with strong online presences, especially bloggers at outlets like the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and ABC News. At the same time, however, traditional journalists have not gone very far in embracing the new wave of online journalists, preferring primarily to interact with others in their sector. While digital journalism is undoubtedly innovating, those innovations are, for the journalists we observed, staying mainly within the digital sector.

What stands to bridge the gap between these two sectors are a group of publications we call hybrid media organizations. Outfits such as Politico publish a small-circulation print product but have an online audience nine or more times higher than their offline audience. Journalists at these organizations behave as if they have one foot in the traditional sector and one foot in digital journalism, retweeting journalists from other sectors more so than they do their own. As more media companies move into this realm, it may prove to

be an important area of innovation. Yet our findings suggest less change than evolution: Hybrid organizations' journalists, despite their larger online presence, still pay more attention to traditional than digital publications.

Indeed, despite the heartening finding that digital journalists have become more independent, our reporting suggests other ways in which the promise of online journalism is not being fulfilled. Some have suggested that digital journalism represents not just an alternative to traditional journalism, but a fundamental challenge, one toward which traditional journalism must adapt. We see little evidence that this is occurring. While traditional media companies are incorporating online ventures into their portfolios, these seem to remain walled off from the professional environment of traditional reporters. Instead, they use Twitter in much the same way as other journalists do: to publicize the stories of their colleagues and comment on what others have said. And despite the robust history of collaboration in journalism, little of this seems to be occurring on Twitter, at least not through retweets.

Nevertheless, the overall picture that emerges from our research is a positive one. The history of journalism shows that establishing any area as a separate professional domain has been difficult. If digital journalists have managed to do so only two decades after the form came into existence, this is no small achievement. While vanguard practitioners will undoubtedly continue to make innovations, the question of whether digital journalism can be self-sufficient no longer seems to be up in the air.





## Endnotes

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