

Join The Conversation: How Spanish Journalist Are Using Twitter.



As part of their professional routine, journalists are gradually joining the ranks of active users of social networks like Twitter o Facebook.

Following some on the fly strategy or just winging it, and fully putting into practice the idea that “one must be where the people are,” they distribute information coming from their own media, viralize information from other users/media, editorialize as they go, sum up daily life or shoot the breeze about a variety of topics.

This paper presents the results of an in-depth survey conducted with 50 Spanish journalists with active professional profiles on Twitter. The aim of the survey was to find out how they are using this social media at work, how they feel about it and what their expectations are.

Abstract

THE UNEASINESS IN JOURNALISM

The world of journalism is experiencing troubled times, as is common in transitional moments. The Internet has brought about radical changes in the quasi-monopoly of mediation (and of “aggregation”) that the press and the rest of the so-called “old media” or “legacy media” boasted of for nearly the entire 20th century.

Disintermediation means that many other intermediaries have entered the scene, devoted in principle to “direct traffic” and not to “making cars” (although some of them have begun to focus on creating content). Google, Yahoo, Twitter, Facebook, Apple, YouTube...these are the new metagatekeepers.

Journalists are among those suffering the consequences most directly. The constant disruptions caused by the dizzying pace of technological innovation, the radical reduction of entry barriers to the Internet, the decline of

advertising revenue, the drastic readjustments of staff, the loss of readers, and even, in some ways, the loss of credibility and social relevance of a journalism that mainly relies on institutional agendas that do not necessarily prioritize public interest, are key factors.

A recent report for Columbia University’s Tow Center for Digital Journalism¹, pondered the magnitude of the change: “The monopoly or oligopoly that most metropolitan news organizations enjoyed by the last quarter of the 20th Century meant they could charge high rates to advertisers, even if their audiences had shrunk (...) The move to digital delivery has transformed not just the business of news, but also the way news is reported, aggregated, distributed and shared (...) If the old formula of “adjacency” -selling ads and commercials alongside content- is fading, what will replace it? There are many possibilities,

¹ Bill Grueskin, Ava Seave and Lucas Graves (2011): The Story so Far. What we Know About the Business of Digital Journalism, Columbia Journalism School: http://www.cjr.org/the_business_of_digital_journalism/

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but few are likely, on their own, to provide the stream of dollars that advertising and circulation once did”.

More than six years ago (an eternity in “Internet time”), on May 23rd, 2005, in an article published in The Wall Street Journal titled “How Old Media Can Survive In a New World”, it was asserted: “There’s no question: Traditional media businesses are struggling. Newspaper publishers, book publishers, movie studios, music companies, ad agencies, television networks -- they’re all trying to figure out how they fit into a new-media world. Their old way of doing business isn’t as profitable as it used to be, but they haven’t found a new way that’s as profitable, either.” It seems that the search for El Dorado is still ongoing more than five years later. On numerous occasions, we have heard the death knell sound for the printing press, tempered by the fact that, up to now, advertising revenue has come essentially from the printed newspapers, while the perception of Internet as a source of advertising revenue for the news media is summed up in a

laconic and resigned “trading dollars for dimes”. At the same time, against this somber backdrop, the consumption of online news has grown steadily over the last years: “People are spending more time with news than ever before, according to Pew Research Center survey data, but when it comes to the platform of choice, the web is gaining ground rapidly while other sectors are losing. In 2010, digital was the only media sector seeing audience growth”².

In this scenario of paradoxes and constant change, a kind of structural transience and the system of “trial and error” are holding the reins, along with a string of miracle recipes that stubborn reality takes it upon itself to ruin: paywalls or no paywalls, massive audiences or audiences with a high degree of involvement, the “specialize or localize” dilemma so often repeated that at present appears to be beginning to faint, from skepticism and contempt to social media as a panacea....

If we had to summarize in one sentence the complex situation of the journalistic media today,

² Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism: “The State of the News Media 2011” <http://stateofthemedias.org/>

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we could do it in quasi-Marxist terms: news media on the Internet have ceased to control the means of production and the distribution of their product and have gone on to be “renters.” They are the new tenants of Twitter, Google, Facebook, Apple, YouTube, etcetera.

The overwhelming rise of Internet has to a large extent modified the very concept of information and the relationship of audiences with the news media, and requires journalists to adapt to this new situation on different fronts: content, genres and narrative forms, the relationship with audiences and interaction with users in a medium that incorporates large-scale feedback as one of its distinctive features and, of course, the business of on-line information, all without forgetting the *raison d'être* of journalism, its foundations and its essential link to the proper functioning of a democratic system. But the keys to this adaptation are still uncertain. All that seems clear is that the old patterns are not working well in this new environment.

Having overcome the apocalyptic skepticism that many journalists expressed in the early days of “online journalism,” the main risk at present is that the wound might not heal properly, taking for granted that journalism’s transition toward the digital environment is complete, or on the way to being so, merely because a journalist has a blog or an account with Twitter or Facebook and chats with users and because the news media have widely joined the participatory hype (essentially as a way to measure audiences). But not even in its most pragmatic aspect, as a potential source of revenue from the sale of audiences to advertisers, the management of the participation is, for the moment, producing the results expected from the powerful tools of web analytics and from the hypersegmentation of audiences that the Internet facilitates.

In this context of transition and adaptation of journalism to the new media environment that the Internet has created, citizen participation made possible by Web 2.0 and its tools, and which

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currently finds its maximum expression in social networks, blogs, forums or different forms of the so-called “citizen journalism,” has become one more instrument for capturing new audiences (one of journalism’s pending subjects, since long before the appearance of the Internet), and of course for the distribution and viralization of contents. The last episode of the “reinvention of ties” with audiences by the news media is precisely the presence of journalists in social networks, often without a defined strategy for the use of these instruments. The frenzy of social media has caught them by surprise and they have to navigate this new landscape without compass or guide. Once more, the main question is whether, in general terms, journalistic specificity is being exploited as an incentive for participation. What news media offers to users, on the media site or in social networks, is usually the same formulas of participation used by non-journalistic media, without exploring specific formulas of participation framed in more comprehensive strategies for

creating and editing contents, renewing the informative agenda, redeveloping the concept of service applied to journalism or creatively exploiting the Internet’s ability to segment audiences.

A well-known example with a certain “sill” in an on-line scenario characterized by a virulent theoretical obsolescence is that of “citizen journalism”. It is one of the most successful coinings as an attempt to acknowledge journalistic implications of interactivity. Though, it is difficult to overlook the fact that the spaces supposedly devoted to “citizen journalism” in news media are in most cases subject to a kind of “cordon sanitaire” which prevents a productive convergence with the journalistic process. This ultimately breaks the natural chain of feedback between journalists and citizens.

It seems urgent to lay the foundations to develop spaces for citizen participation adapted to news media, as well as new content that allows for the exploitation of journalistic specificity and the

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consolidation of the much-needed renewal of the “spectatorial link” to certain audiences, especially young adults. They will be the ones who decide the future of journalism in the most immediate way. Up to now, they have not really been taken into account by journalists. News media, feeling secure for decades in their almost monopolistic mediation, did not bother so much about their audiences. In this sense, Internet has widened a gap that already existed: the inability to connect with an important sector of the public -young adults, active users of the Internet and, especially, of social media- that is vital to the future of the profession, online and offline as well: “Nearly three quarters (73%) of online teens and equal number (72%) of young adults use social network sites (...) the growth in online news consumption cut across age groups, but the growth was fueled in particular by young people”³.

In summary, if news media want to “get more customers,” and there seems to be little doubt that this is their wish, they should perhaps listen to

Edward Bernays, who wrote in his classic “Propaganda”: “To make customers is the new problem. One must understand not only his own business—the manufacture of a particular product— but also the structure, the personality, the prejudices, of a potentially universal public.” Easier said than done, sure. But to take the best advantage of interactive tools such as social networks one needs to have some idea of exactly whom one is addressing. While there is no doubt that journalists know their business better than anyone else, it is doubtful that all the sophisticated analytic tools available are being engaged for the purpose of understanding “the structure, the personality and the prejudices” of the public. We share the conviction that journalism must offer the user much more than topics to discuss or items to viralize through social networks. It must offer dynamic platforms for interaction, participation in a process-in this case, the journalistic process- and spaces for the collaborative creation of content. In one of the many definitions offered up about

³ Amanda Lenhart, Kristen Purcell, Aaron Smith, Kathryn Zickuhr (2010). Social Media and Young Adults” Pew Internet & American Life Project: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>

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social media, we intuit the reasons for the centrality which journalism continues to occupy in the “new” arena of social media: “Social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media.”⁴ We may wonder where much of this “shared” information comes from: “More than 99% of the stories linked to in blogs came from legacy outlets such as newspapers and broadcast networks. And just four—the BBC, CNN, the New York Times and the Washington Post accounted for fully 80% of all links. Twitter, by contrast, was less tied to traditional media. Here half (50%) of the links were to legacy outlets; 40% went to web-only news sources such as Mashable and CNET. The remaining 10% went to wire stories or non-news sources on the Web.”⁵ In many ways, and although it might seem to be an anachronistic assertion in the midst of the

polyphonic mood that has invaded the discussion about the “new media,” we continue to find, at the beginning of the communicative process, a small number of media/emitters (the “digital divide” seems to apply to social media too⁶) which continue to be the ones being “talked about”. Among them, news media still play, in a significant way, the role that Gabriel Tarde attributed to newspapers at the beginning of the 20th century: “Journals have ended up running and shaping opinion almost at their whim, since they impose on the speeches and talks most of their everyday issues”.⁷ The fact remains that, at this moment in time, journalism still provides much of the fuel that powers the viral machinery of social media. It is hard to deny that social media are substantially changing the ways in which journalists relate to their audiences. Yet it remains to be seen whether Twitter will become an innovative tool for

4 Lon Safko & David K. Brake (2009). *The Social Media Bible: Tactics, Tools, and Strategies for Business Success*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons

5 “Pew Research Center. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010). “New Media, Old Media How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from Traditional Press”. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1602/new-media-review-differences-from-traditional-press>

6 “Conventional wisdom tells us that the Internet is leveling the playing field and broadening the diversity of voices being heard, (...) But my findings show the Internet is actually reinforcing the socio-economic divisions that already exist, and may even heighten them, which has all sorts of implications as more of civic and economic life moves online.” Statements made by Jen Schradie, author of the article “The digital production gap: The digital divide and Web 2.0 collide” *Poetics*, 2011; 39 (2): 145-168

7 Gabriel Tarde (1899/1986). *La opinión y la multitud*. Madrid: Taurus

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reporting, fostering a better knowledge of the public and their journalistic interests or whether eventually the “public relations” look shall prevail. Leaving aside the problematic issue of “monetization”, currently Twitter seems to be much more a means of recycling and viralizing information than a means of gathering raw material for subsequent reporting. In short, we must ask ourselves some questions: In which ways is the so praised “art of community” fostering an improved media coverage of events and public issues? Are journalists and news media taking advantage of these tools or are they allowing themselves to be swept away by the relentless pace of innovation, losing in this race against time some of what are supposed to be their hallmarks? Are they acting or reacting? Are they simply engaged in the mist of confusion, auguries and multitasking, in an almost heroic struggle for survival in an unfamiliar environment, burdened by tradition? Are journalists using Twitter to build new stories, to cover new topics of

public concern, are they getting closer in an unprejudiced way to those “new audiences”? It requires first and foremost to get rid of a lot of a priori assumptions and preconceptions. And this is not only a question of “giving the audiences what they want”, because as Steve Jobs once said, “a lot of times people don’t know what they want until you show it to them,” but it has to do with being responsive to their social, cultural, political and economical environments.

HOW SPANISH JOURNALISTS ARE USING TWITTER

Social media, especially Twitter, are being increasingly used by Spanish journalists as part of their daily work, allegedly to connect with sources, engage with audiences and get closer to their interests. In practical terms, Twitter is being used to disseminate information through mentions or replays taking advantage of the viral potential of social networks, or to build the so-called hyped “personal brand”, trying not to “miss the boat”.

At LABàPART (www.labapart.org), a research group of the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid devoted to analyzing the impact of social media on journalism, we have been conducting an in-depth survey among 50 spanish journalists with an active profile on Twitter, in order to find out in which ways they are using this social platform in their work. We have also compared the way they are using Twitter with their acknowledged use of other

social media like Facebook, LinkedIn or YouTube. The survey “Journalism and Social Networks” is a part of a research project about the state of participation in the Spanish “infosphere”. It has been sent to a selected sample consisting of journalists coming from different legacy media (El País, ABC, El Mundo, RTVE, Cadena Ser, La Vanguardia, La Sexta, Público...) and others coming from “online-only” news media (lainformacion.com, cuartopoder.es, 360grados.com...) in early April 2011 and was available from April to May 2011 to facilitate its completion.

The average age of the respondents was 38, having been working as journalists for an average 15 years. The survey was structured and designed on the basis of 169 items, divided into 126 four point Likert scale questions, one multiple choice question and 42 single-answer questions.

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The test was validated by expert judges: 5 senior journalists with a deep knowledge of social media tools and processes.

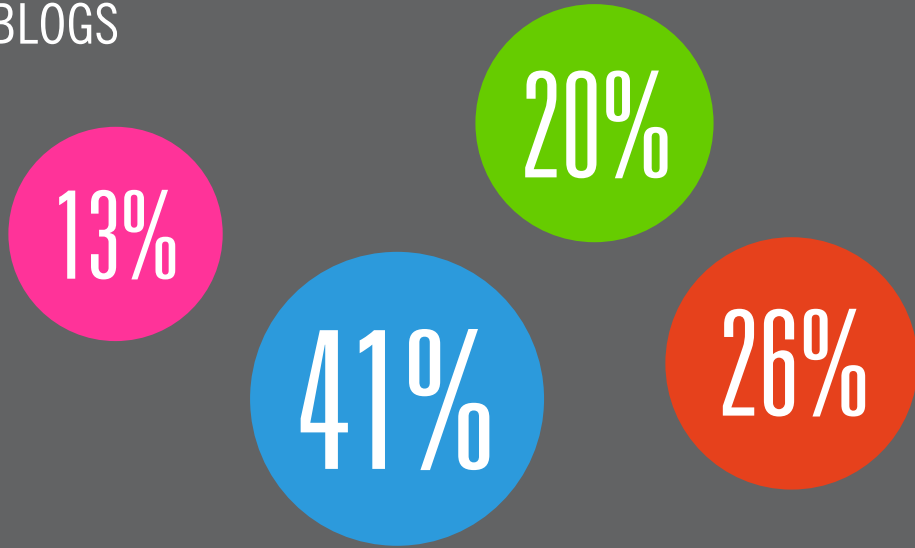
To calculate reliability we used the test-retest method. We obtained a reliability coefficient (Kappa index) of 0.76.

Some of the key findings of the survey are graphically summarized below.

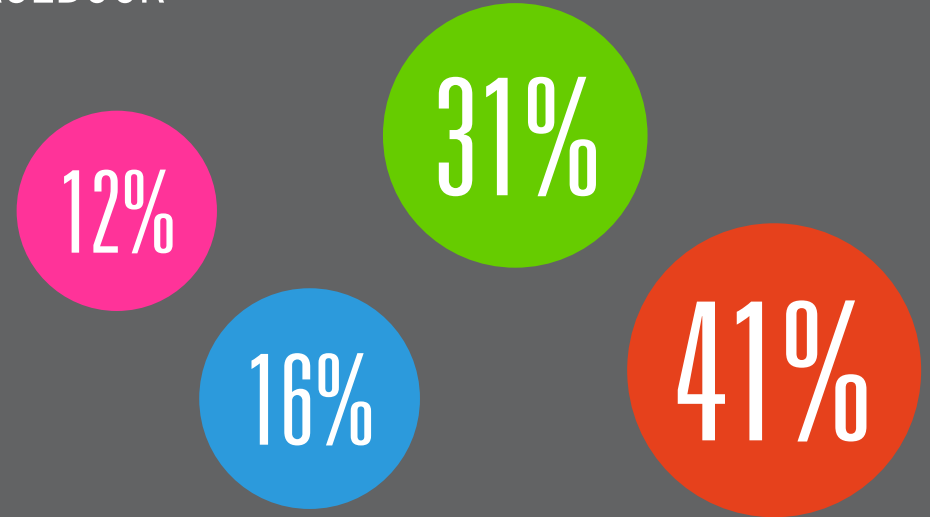
01 / MOST USED SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUBLISHING AND DISTRIBUTING INFORMATION.

NEVER QUITE A LOT
SOMETIMES HEAPS

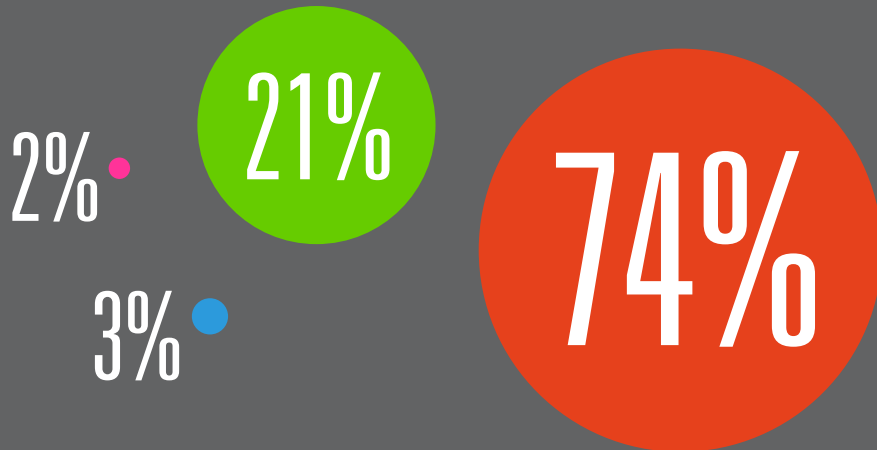
BLOGS



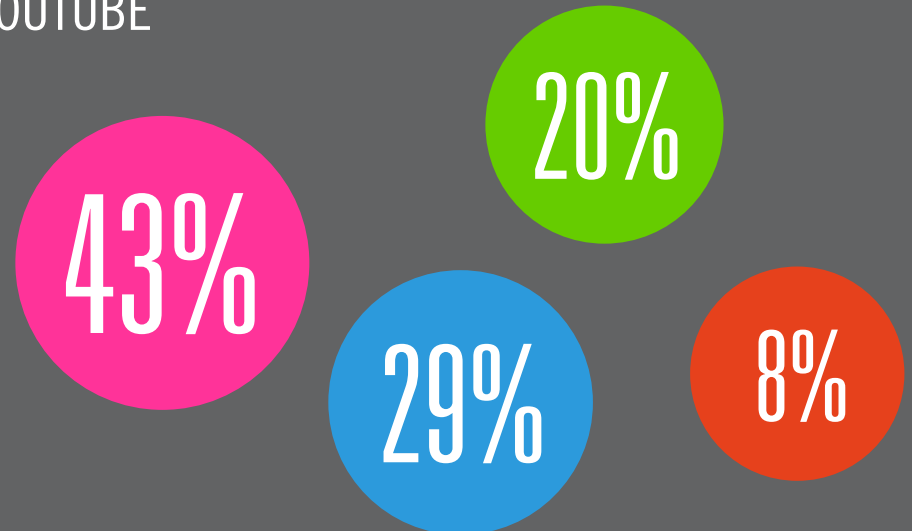
FACEBOOK



TWITTER



YOUTUBE



VIRALIZING INFORMATION OF THEIR OWN NEWS MEDIA

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

82%

66%

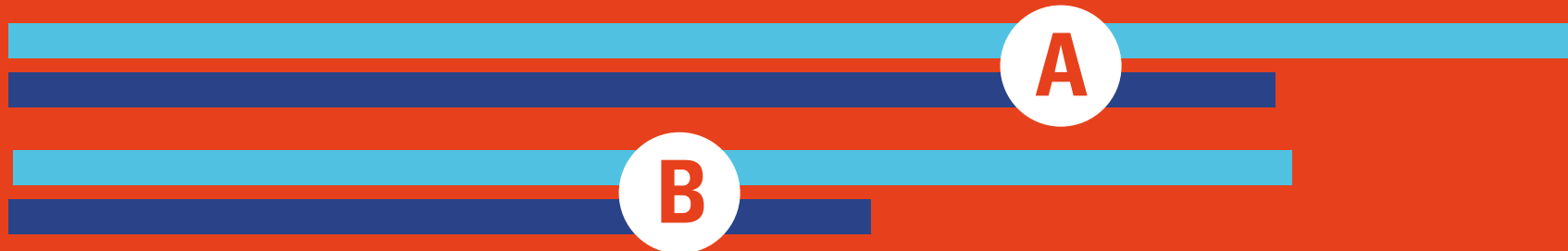
VIRALIZING INFORMATION FROM OTHER MEDIA SOURCES

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

67%

45%



BREAKING NEWS

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

56%

27%

INFORMATION SEEKING

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

82%

38%



CONTACT WITH INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

42%

18%

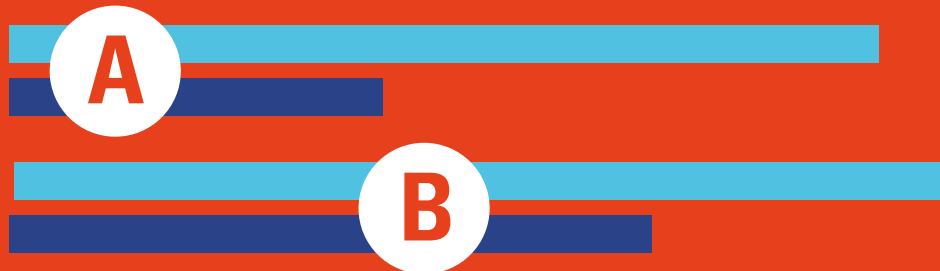
CONTACT WITH CITIZEN SOURCES

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

45%

31%



IDENTIFYING EMERGING TRENDS

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

86%

47%

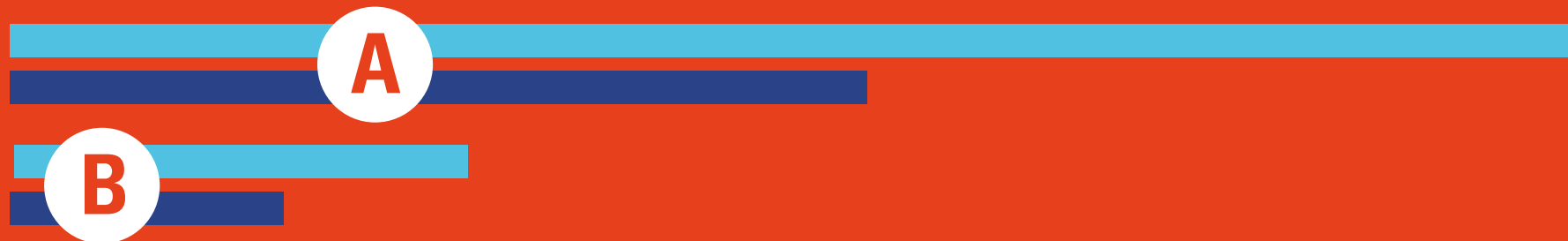
INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

25%

15%



ENGAGING YOUNG AUDIENCES

 TWITTER

 FACEBOOK

51%

47%

DEVELOPING AUDIENCE LOYALTY

 TWITTER



 FACEBOOK

78%

58%



07 / MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL MEDIA TO SEEK INFORMATION AND CONTACT SOURCES.

 SEEKING INFORMATION
 CONTACTING SOURCES

BLOG

76%



56%



TWITTER

93%



90%



FACEBOOK

38%



41%



LINKEDIN

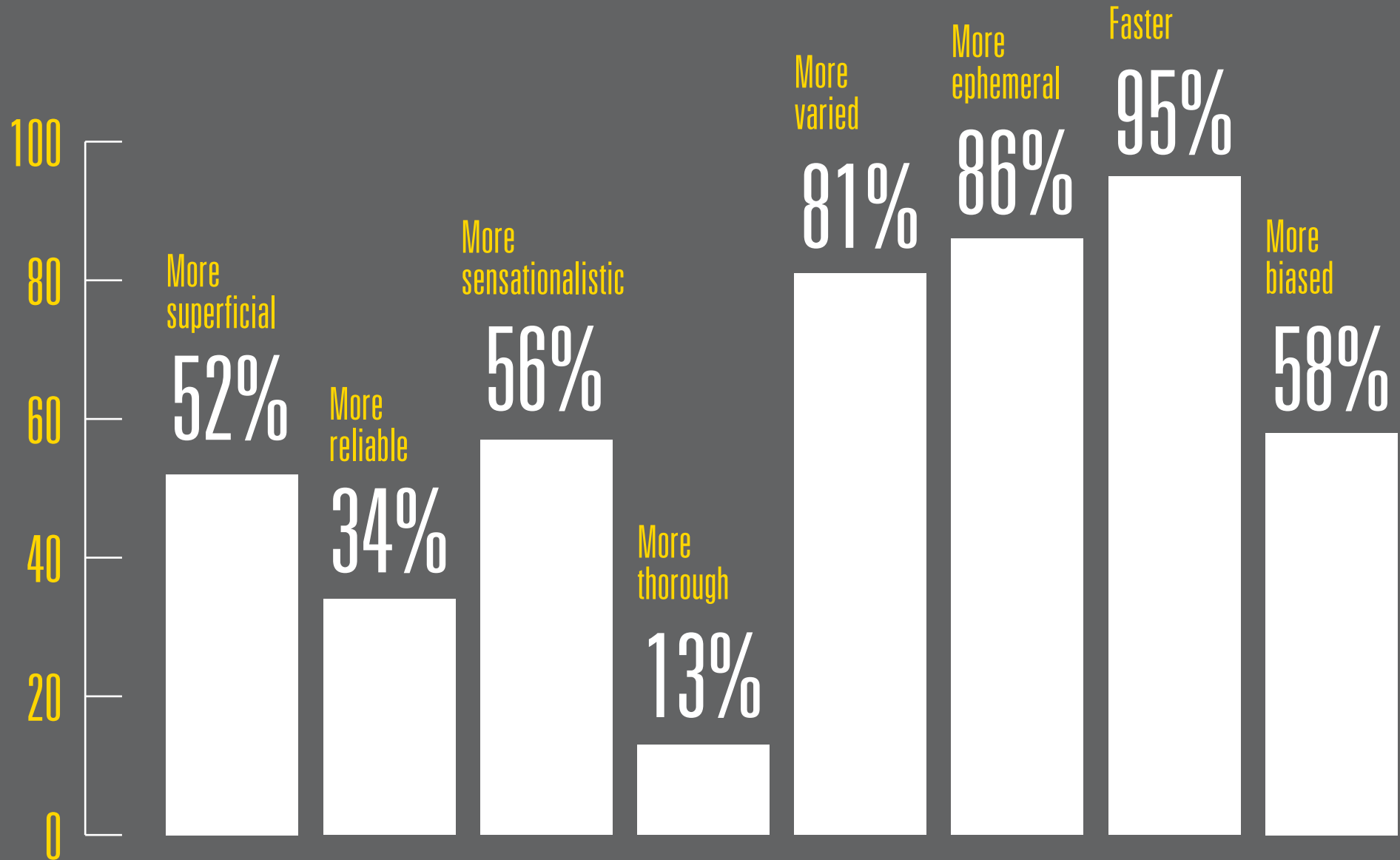
18%



66%

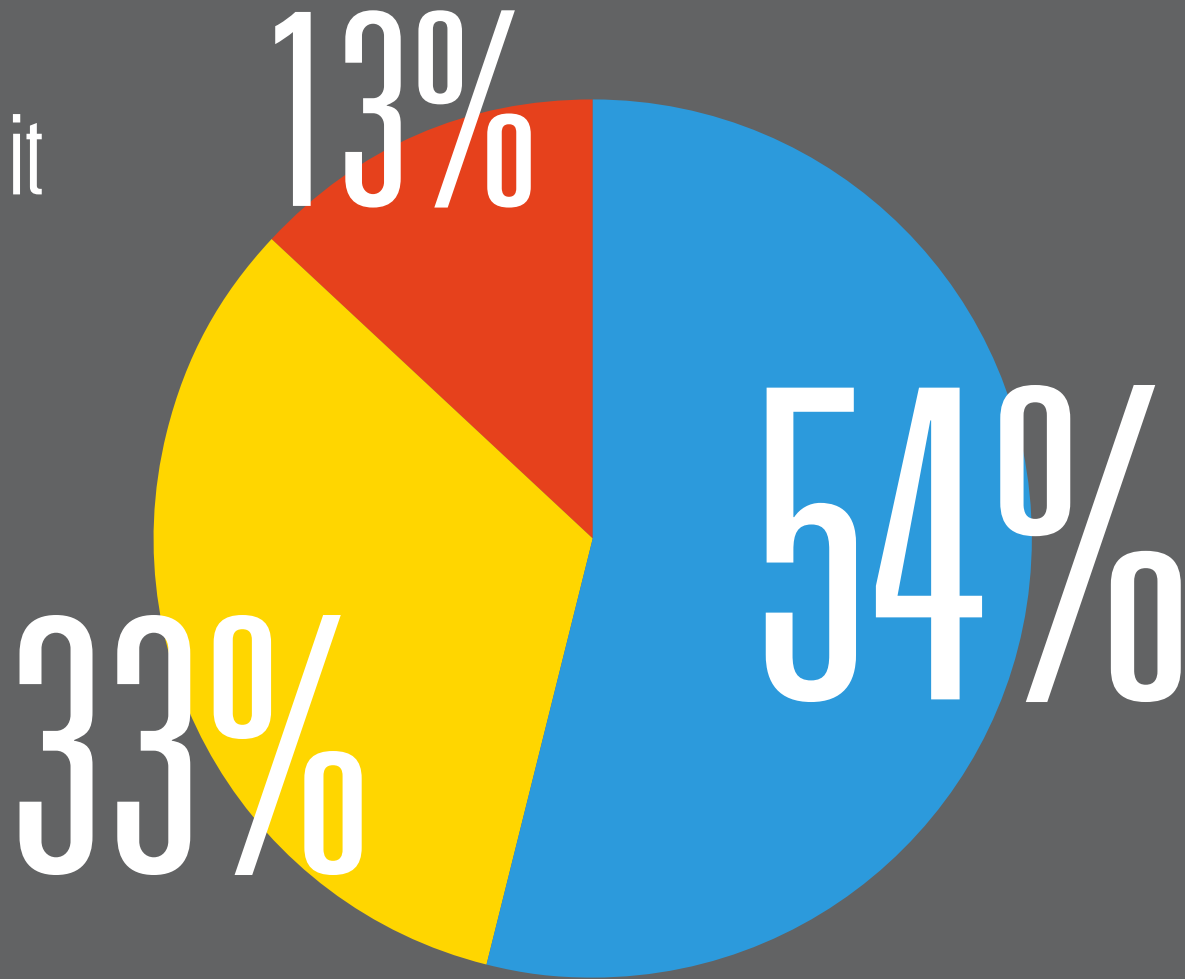


DO YOU BELIEVE THAT JOURNALISTIC INFORMATION ON TWITTER WITH RESPECT TO OTHER MEDIA IS...?

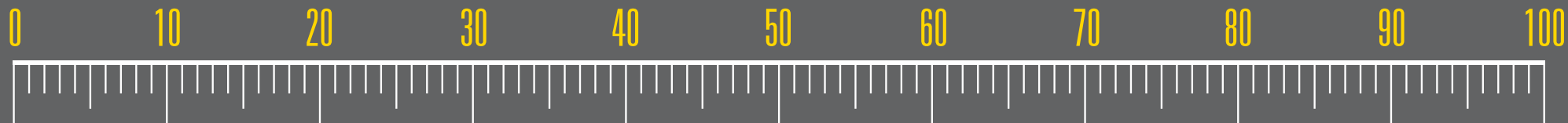


09 / HAVE SPECIFIC GUIDELINES OR SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BEEN ESTABLISHED IN YOUR MEDIUM?

- No
- We are working on it
- Yes



10 / WHEN YOU WRITE FOR THE WEB, HOW DO THE FOLLOWING FACTORS AFFECT YOUR WRITING?



The viral potential of the piece of information

44%

The public interest

95%

What is being published by other media

49%

The quality and thoroughness of the information

97%

The exclusiveness of the information

72%

11 / WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF PARTICIPATION IN NEWS SITES / SOCIAL MEDIA?

NEWS SITES
SOCIAL MEDIA



It allows a better knowledge of the audience's preferences



It is just a system to attract audiences



It gratifies users but does not affect the agenda



It has effects on the hierarchy of news



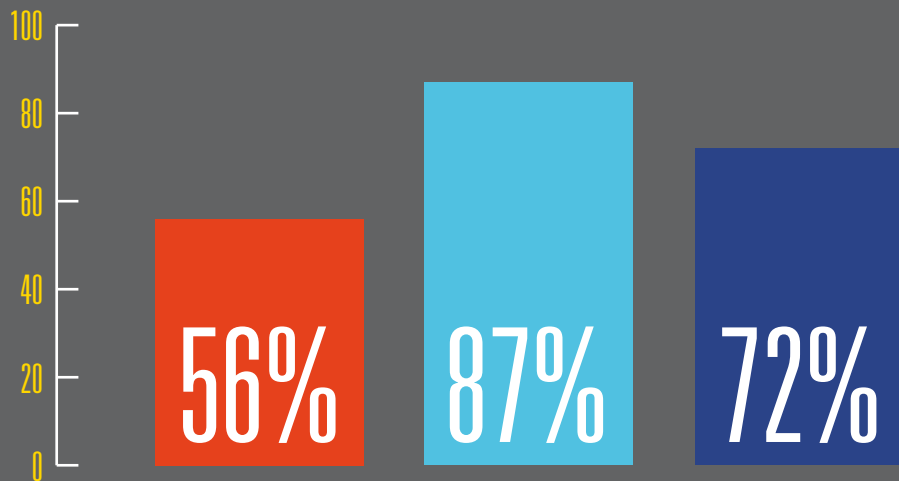
It helps to broaden the agenda



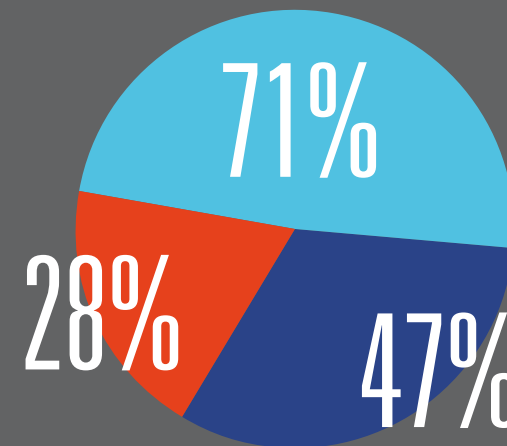
12 / GRATIFICATIONS REPORTED BY BLOGS, TWITTER AND FACEBOOK.

BLOG FACEBOOK
TWITTER

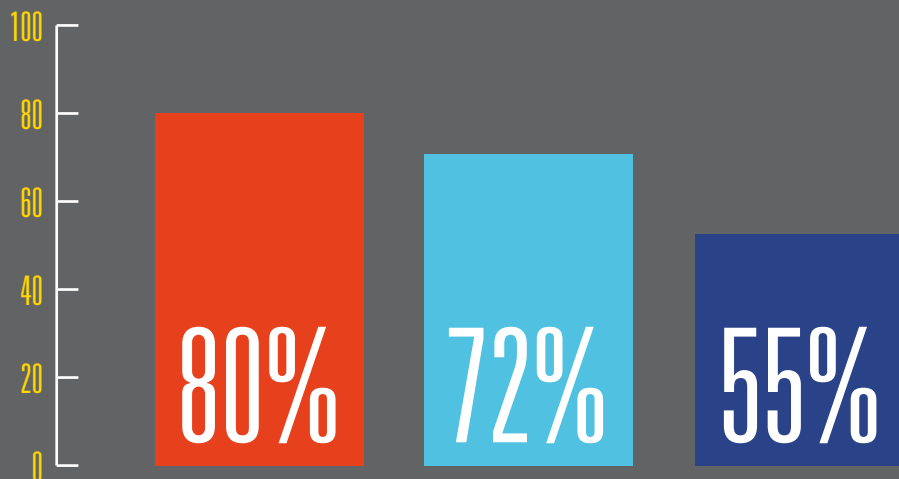
FEEDBACK FROM USERS



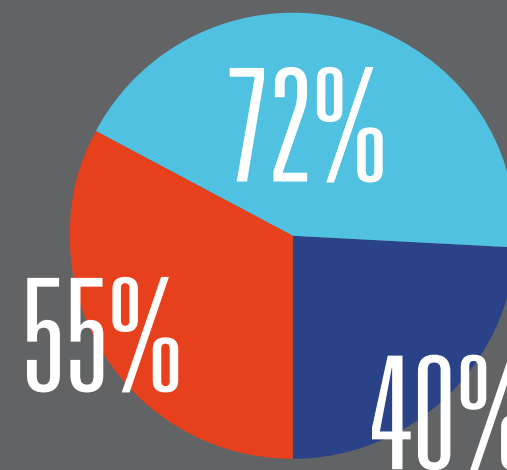
USER-GENERATED CONTENT



MORE FREEDOM OF STYLE AND NEW ISSUES



PRESTIGE



13 / HOW SHOULD THE MEDIA PROMOTE QUALITY PARTICIPATION?



By allowing to leave comments and rating the news



By creating platforms for citizen journalism



By collaborating with the public in order to verify and expand information



By asking the audience to participate as witness



By giving monetary incentives to users



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CONCLUSIONS

Twitter is a platform well received (even warmly welcome) by the surveyed journalists. They see it as a tool with great journalistic potential, unlike other platforms. Gratifications seems to be high. It is an easy way to distribute information, drive traffic and keep in touch with audiences and institutional sources. But it is less widely used for investigative reporting or to contact with sources likely to be integrated in effective reporting. The results of the survey lead us to conclude that Twitter is being mainly used in a surrogated way,

as a platform to make visible what is still being produced outside the logic and the potential of social networks, following the traditional paths of reporting. By now Twitter remains, journalistically speaking, a display, a storefront full of redundant commodities, biding his time to become the rich ground in which the journalists pick up raw material to invigorate reporting. What we do not know is whether that time will come or not. We hope so.



THE MEDIUM IS THE LAB!

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