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Social media and traditional media

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Policy Debate of the Hour

Social Media and Traditional Media

Key Messages

- Social media affects how traditional outlets select and frame news, acting as a feedback tool for journalists
- The influence of social media causes outlets to offer more homogeneous reporting and to cover a larger proportion of soft news
- Social media has turned citizens into reporters, bringing new perspectives into the realm of information but raising accuracy concerns
- Politicians' social media posts are amplified by traditional outlets, shaping news and public opinion
- European policy must address how social and traditional media interact to protect pluralism and accountability



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The way citizens access news has gone through important changes over the past decade. Social media has grown into an important source of information. Still, traditional media, especially television, continue to play a central role. This pattern is illustrated in Figure 1. The left panel shows how television remains strong in continental Europe. In the United Kingdom and the United States, by contrast, social media makes up a larger share of news consumption. The right panel points to the role of age: younger cohorts turn

more to social media for news, while older cohorts still depend mainly on television.

These patterns matter for two reasons. First, debates about social media regulation cannot ignore the continued importance of traditional media. Older citizens, who form a large part of the electorate, still rely heavily on television as their main news source. Second, the coexistence of both news sources raises a need to study their interaction. Content that starts on social media can reach offline audiences once it is amplified by television or print. Understanding how this interaction between social and traditional media is processed is important to grasping the broader impact of social media on public debate and political outcomes.

Social Media as a Tool to Learn About Audience Preferences

Past studies and surveys have identified several ways through which social media influences traditional media (Aridor, Jiménez-Durán, Levy and Song 2024).

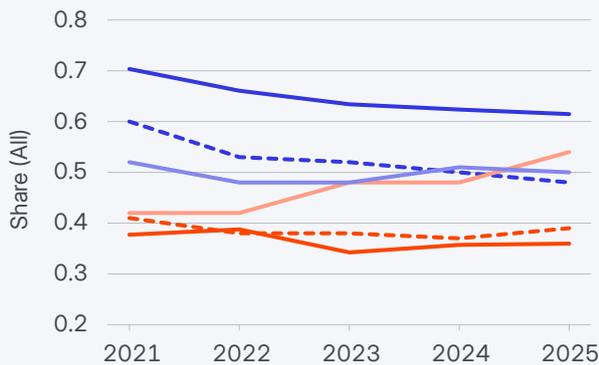
Figure 1

Evolution of Traditional Media (TV) and Social Media as Sources of News

TV & social media by country

Source – Country:

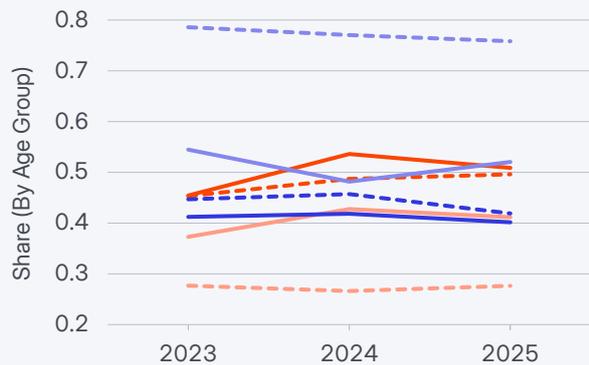
- TV – EU*
- - - TV – UK
- TV – US
- Social media – EU*
- - - Social media – UK
- Social media – US



TV & social media by age (for EU*)

Source – Age:

- Social media – 18-24
- - - Social media – 25-34
- Social media – 35-44
- - - Social media – 55+
- TV – 18-24
- - - TV – 25-34
- TV – 35-44
- - - TV – 55+



Notes: Left panel – Trends in the share of people using traditional media (TV) and social media as news sources across the EU* (weighted average, by population size, of France, Germany, and Italy), UK, and US, 2021–25. Right panel – Breakdown of same sources by age groups in the EU* (weighted average of France, Germany, and Italy by population size), 2023–25.

Source: Data from Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2021–25). Age group disaggregation only available from 2023 onward.

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One important channel is the use of social media as a tool to learn about audience preferences. The way that a topic or an article is discussed online – both the extent and tone of that discussion – provides journalists and editors with information about audience demand. Outlets can then use this information to adjust their content dynamically, aiming to maximize audience size and, consequently, revenues.

Cagé, Hervé and Mazoyer (2020) show that the extent to which an event is discussed on Twitter, in France, influences how much attention that event receives from online newspapers. That is, outlets monitor what gains traction on Twitter and adapt their coverage accordingly.¹ This responsiveness is stronger for newspapers that rely more on advertising revenues and are thus more dependent on audience engagement. Additionally, it comes at a cost: coverage becomes more homogeneous, shifts toward

softer news, and reflects the preferences of an audience different from that of the average news consumer.²

Similarly, Leung and Strumpf (2022) show that reactions on social media affect how newspapers adjust their headlines. The authors study how the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal modify their headlines after publication to maximize engagement. The paper finds that these editorial changes are often responses to reactions on Twitter, negative feedback prompting revisions. The study also shows that such changes, prompted by social media responses, not only boost the visibility of articles online but also shape the tone of the discussion around them, reinforcing partisan slants.

Taken together, these studies highlight that social media has become an important feedback mechanism for traditional outlets. By monitoring online discussions, newspapers adapt both what is covered and how it is covered.

¹ Related past work in economics has already documented that newspapers respond to online engagement metrics from their own websites – a concept known as “click bias” – adjusting editorial priorities toward stories that attract more readership (e.g., Sen and Yildirim 2015, focusing on India). The studies reviewed here differ in their focus: outlets using social media signals, not their internal traffic, to guide coverage decisions.

² Evidence from outside the social media context also points to a drift toward softer news. Djourelouva, Durante and Martin (2025) document that US newspapers, after losing a large share of classified ad revenues to Craigslist, responded by cutting back on hard news. This shows how changes in business models can shape editorial choices, in ways similar to those induced by social media feedback.

While this can make coverage more responsive to readers' interests, it also risks distorting journalistic priorities and amplifying online biases.

Social Media as a Source of Information on Offline Events

A second strand of work studies how social media has become a source of information for offline events. Online social media platforms enable ordinary citizens to report from the ground, turning them into "citizen-journalists." This development has changed how traditional outlets cover events, particularly in conflicts and other contexts where direct access is costly or dangerous.

Hatte, Madinier and Zhuravskaya (2022) study how user-generated content posted on Twitter from within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict zone affects the coverage of that conflict by US television. The paper shows that when civilians can post online in this conflict zone, television networks increase the coverage devoted to the conflict. The nature of the reporting also changes: coverage focuses more on the suffering of civilians and uses more emotional language. At the same time, coverage becomes more uniform across networks with different political orientations.

These findings illustrate both the opportunities and the risks of relying on social media for the reporting of con-

flicts. Citizen-generated content allows coverage of events that would otherwise remain uncovered. Yet this expansion of coverage does not come without costs. Reliance on a limited number of online sources exposes news outlets to the risk of disseminating manipulated content. It also leads to a homogenization of coverage, as different outlets respond to the same set of online material.

These costs should be assessed differently depending on the context. When direct media reporting is impossible, social media serves as an indispensable reporting tool. When reporting is possible but costly, social media can become a substitute for professional journalistic work. This may discourage independent newsgathering and lead outlets to replace original reporting with readily available online material. The result can be a shift from diverse perspectives to more uniform and less scrutinized coverage of events.

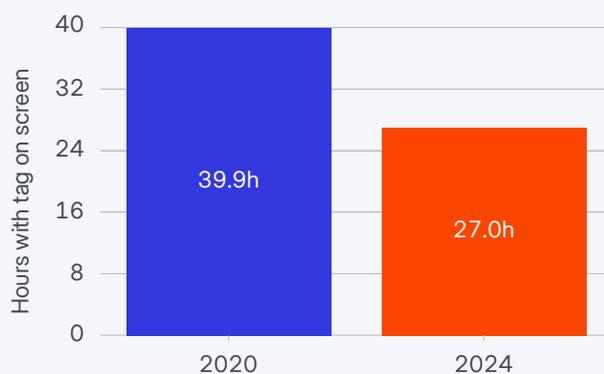
Social Media Events as News

Finally, social media itself has become a source of news. Political actors now use social media platforms to speak directly to their constituents, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. Their posts, which are often more emotionally charged than statements made through conventional channels, can be picked up by television or newspapers within minutes. This creates a new channel of influence: events that take place online, once amplified by traditional

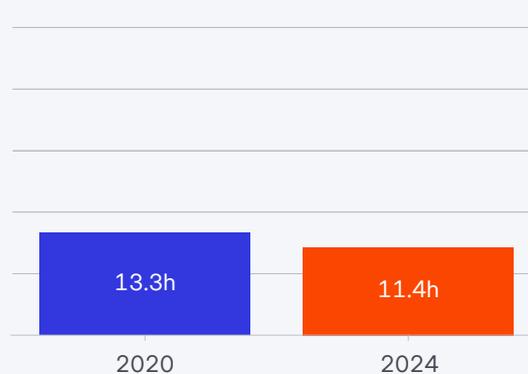
Figure 2

Television Coverage of Social Media Tags, 2020 vs. 2024

Trump tag on screen: 2020 vs. 2024



Congress tags on screen: 2020 vs. 2024



Notes: Left panel – Number of hours in which Trump's social media tag (@realDonaldTrump) appeared on screen on US cable news (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) in 2020 and 2024. 2020 tag refers to Trump's Twitter account; 2024 tag refers mainly to Trump's Truth Social account. Right panel – Number of hours in which social media tags of US members of Congress appeared on screen on US cable news in 2020 and 2024.

Source: Data on text displayed on screen from GDELT's Visual Global Entity Graph 2.0. Data on congressional Twitter tags from Tweets of Congress dataset.

outlets, can shape public debate, even among people who are not active on social media.

In Marques-Pereira (2023), I study this channel by examining how US cable television covered Donald Trump's tweets before and during his first term as US President, and how this coverage influenced viewers' political opinions. In the paper, I first show that President Trump's tweets caused shifts in cable news coverage: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC would often increase their coverage of the issues raised in Trump's tweets minutes after these tweets were posted. This pattern held both before and during his first time in office. In this way, Trump exercised an agenda-setting power over television news through social media.

Second, I show that this channel was not limited to Twitter or President Trump. On the one hand, President Trump's posts on Truth Social in 2024 also received levels of coverage comparable to his tweets in 2020 (see left panel of Figure 2). This shows that the role of traditional outlets in spreading online political statements is not tied to a single social media platform. On the other, tweets posted by members of Congress were also covered on TV, both in 2020 and 2024 (see right panel of Figure 2). This shows that social media posts from politicians other than Trump can also reach offline audiences through traditional media.

Third, I show that the amplification of Donald Trump's tweets by cable networks had clear political effects. This coverage influenced both the approval ratings and voting intentions of Donald J. Trump in the 2020 US presidential election. The direction of these effects depended on the outlet: CNN's primetime coverage decreased support for Trump among its viewers, Fox News primetime coverage increased support among its audience. These effects seem to be driven by two mechanisms. First, filtering: outlets chose to cover different Trump tweets. Second, slanting: even when outlets covered similar tweets, each outlet presented these with a different tone.

These findings highlight another channel through which social media shapes traditional news. By posting online, politicians can bypass standard editorial filters and set topics that traditional outlets later amplify. This process extends the reach of online content to audiences who are not active on social media, allowing digital messages to shape both mainstream news agendas and the broad political debate. The result is a feedback loop with tangible consequences for public opinion and, potentially, electoral outcomes.

Policy Implications

One concern is that using social media as a tool to learn about audience demand can distort editorial priorities. Online audiences are not representative of the public, and stories that trend on platforms are not always of broad civic importance. If coverage follows these online signals too closely, debate can shift toward the concerns of narrow groups. Addressing this issue requires greater transparency about how newsrooms use social media and more systematic research on audiences beyond platform metrics. EU or national support schemes could condition funding on broader measures of demand, ensuring that editorial choices reflect the wider public.

A second concern is homogenization. Because journalists across outlets react to the same online cues, coverage becomes more similar and shifts toward softer, more "clickable" stories. This weakens media pluralism, which is one of the core principles of the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). Countering this risk requires incentives for outlets to differentiate their coverage. Tools already being discussed in Europe – targeted subsidies for investigative reporting, public-interest journalism funds, or diversity benchmarks in pluralism monitoring – could be strengthened to offset this homogenizing pull of social media.

A third challenge comes from using social media as a direct source of reporting. User-generated content expands coverage from places that are difficult or dangerous to access, but it also raises concerns about accuracy and manipulation. Large outlets often have resources to fact-check, while smaller outlets usually do not. European policy could help close this gap by investing in shared verification infrastructures – such as EU-level fact-checking hubs or cross-border collaborations – that smaller outlets could use. These measures would allow citizen-generated content to enrich news coverage without undermining news reliability.

Finally, social media has become a direct channel for politicians to shape traditional news. Their posts are covered by traditional news outlets and are thus amplified to audiences who are not active online. This creates a structural shift in the agenda-setting power of politicians: they can now inject content into mainstream media that does not necessarily meet conventional editorial standards. These dynamics are likely to give greater visibility to politicians who use social media in more provocative – and therefore more engaging – ways, as prior research suggests that posts attracting more online engagement tend to receive disproportionate coverage from traditional outlets. Policy

should not restrict political speech but instead promote transparency. Requiring broadcasters and newspapers to disclose when news content originates from a politician's post, and building public archives that track such amplification, would help ensure political accountability in this new communication environment.

Overall, regulation that promotes transparency, safeguards pluralism, and supports verification can help mitigate risks while preserving the benefits of a more connected news ecosystem. •

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