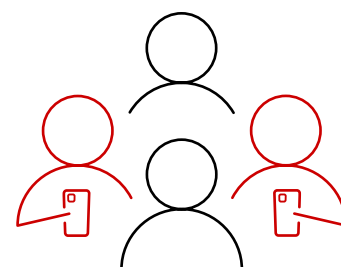


# Journalism and the next wave of Twitter

To continually reach audiences, news organizations must diversify content distribution channels and evolve with news consumption trends.

## A little history: The digital town square transforms journalism

Once upon a time, the world relied on reporters and journalists to gather, curate, and share information. In the late 2000s, when smartphones became the norm and almost anyone could capture quality video or images, citizen journalism emerged. Independent, centralized platforms showed exponential growth. News organizations experimented with how to fold social media content into traditional coverage. Twitter was among the most promising.



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**51%** of Americans that owned a smart phone by January, 2013

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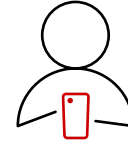
(Source: [Pewresearch](#))

As Twitter gained popularity, a symbiotic relationship with traditional forms of news coverage emerged. Often referred to as a “digital town square,” journalists started to rely on the platform to cover news and promote their own journalistic and personal brands. It also proved effective at breaking news ([University of Nebraska](#)).

Boston Marathon coverage demonstrated how journalists could harness Twitter to tell better stories, faster than ever before. At the same time, Boston Marathon Twitter activity spread rumors. Often more provocative than the truth, unverified and false tweets were prevalent. This problem permeated event chatter across Twitter. By 2018, falsehoods spread 70% more quickly on Twitter than factual information ([Science.org](#)).

*Did you know...*

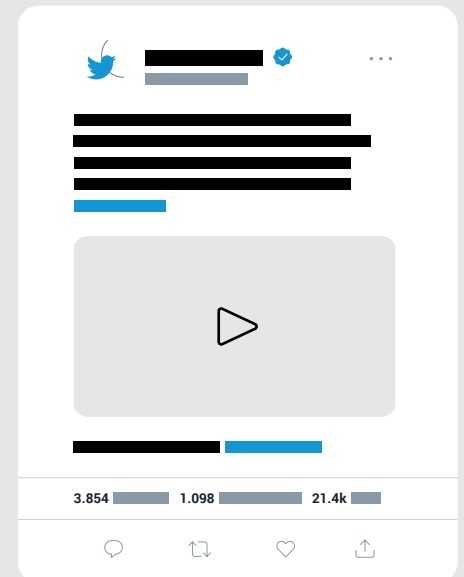
**News of the Boston Marathon bombing was tweeted about by average citizens 7 minutes before any official reports?**



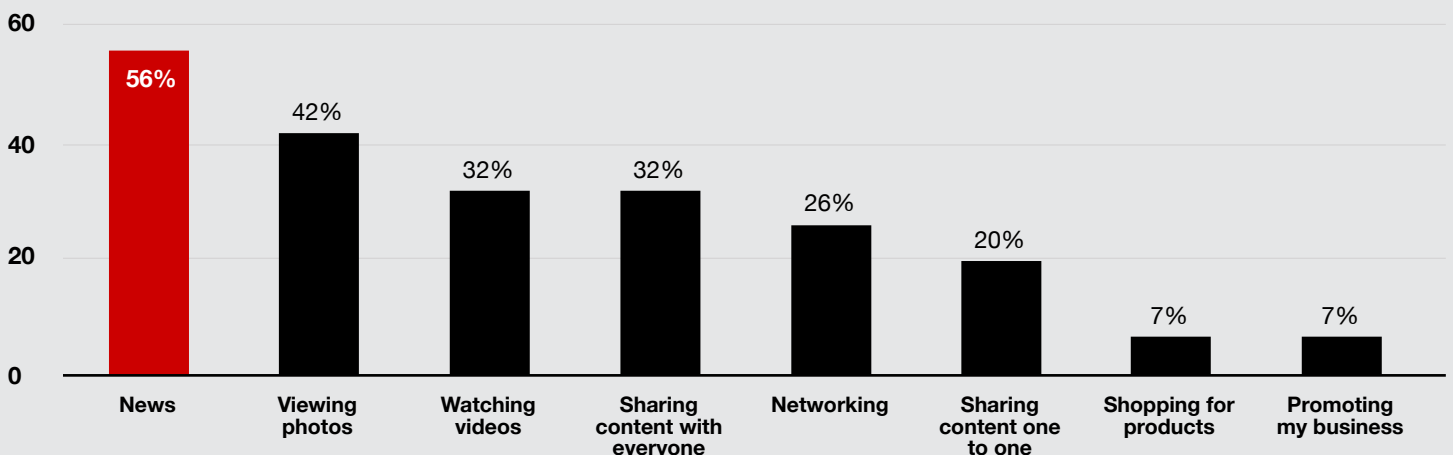
Explosion:	2:48pm
First Tweet:	2:50pm
First Official Report (The Boston Globe)	2:57pm

# News consumption is the most common user activity on Twitter

Twitter amplified cultural and political polarization. The company developed content moderation policies but was criticized for being too lenient on certain rhetoric and moderating other content too heavily. This tension culminated with the emergence of alternative platforms such as Parler and Truth Social. Despite the competition, Twitter endured. By January 2022, Twitter had 436 million active users each month – and the most common user activity was news consumption.



## Most Common User Activities on Twitter

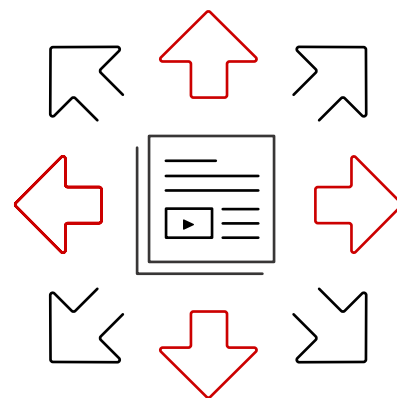


(Source: eMarketer)

# User behavior shift leads journalists to alternate platforms

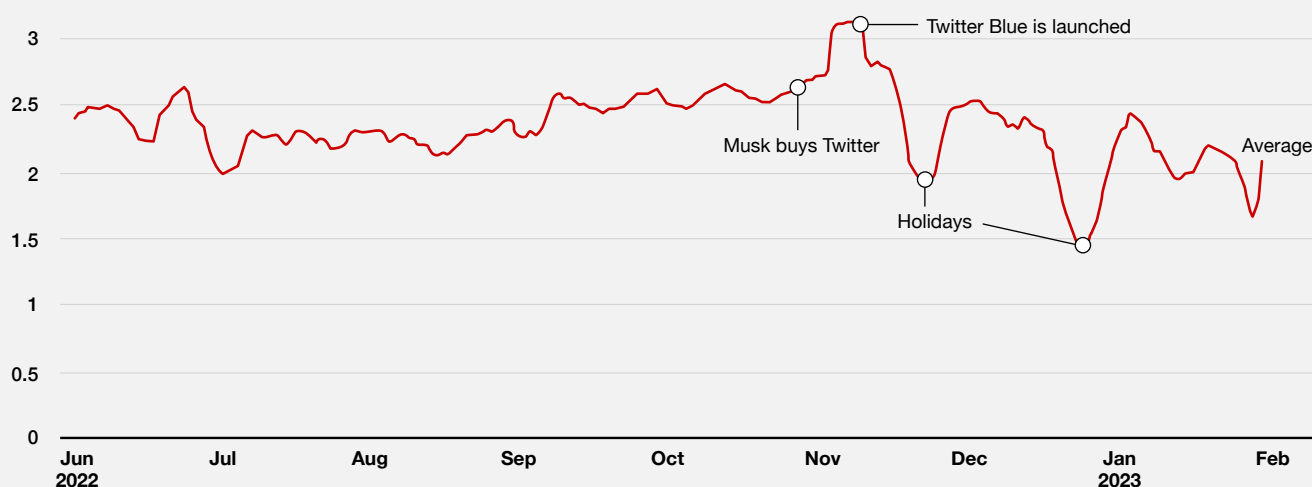
In October 2022, a big shift came when Twitter was purchased by Tesla and SpaceX entrepreneur Elon Musk. Musk enacted major changes across the company, including layoffs, verification policy adjustments, and new rules for content moderation. Celebrities, journalists, and other long-time users vocalized their plans to leave the platform. While most users stayed, many tweet less, and journalistic use of Twitter has trended downward ([Columbia Journalism Review](#)).

Twitter users have begun exploring other forums, and alternatives are grabbing the spotlight. With fewer Twitter users and less activity, journalists are looking elsewhere for places to augment their news coverage, yet no single platform is clearly in the lead. It's an opportune time for news gatherers to investigate how storytelling resonates across different social experiences and how they can leverage other platforms where users are breaking news. The question is, where to next?



## U.S. journalists tweet slightly less following Musk-takeover

The daily number of tweets decreased 3 percent for the journalists in the Tow database since October 27, 2022



Rolling weekly average of tweets from all 4,000 journalists  
Chart: Tow Center for Digital Journalism

While there is no exact match for Twitter, several emerging sites are establishing their own, unique identities within the social media landscape. Check out these:

## 1 Mastodon

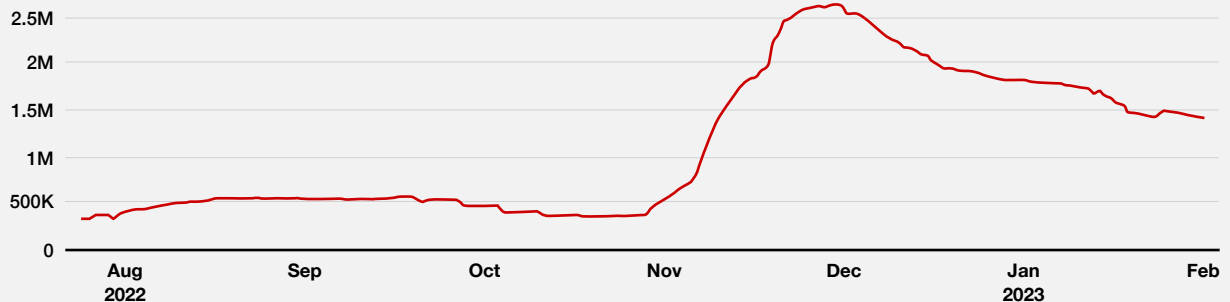
Self-proclaimed “social networking that is not for sale,” Mastodon is like Twitter in that users can share real-time thoughts and re-share posts. The primary difference is that Mastodon uses an open-source, decentralized platform. While its multi-server network can be complex to navigate, Mastodon's non-proprietary, public data infrastructure means it's decentralized and can't be disrupted by ownership changes.



At present, Mastodon boasts about 1.4 million active users monthly, down from its peak in November 2022 when Twitter first faced turbulence.

### Mastodon users surged, then slumped

Active users on the decentralized platform soared after Elon Musk bought Twitter in October. Not all of them have stuck around.



Source: [Mastodon](#)

## 2 Post

Specifically meant for journalists and news junkies, Post's goal is to help news gatherers monetize their content. Post is centralized and thus could share some of Twitter's pitfalls.



### 3 Blue Sky

What if the founders of Twitter created an app that was de-centralized like Mastodon? That’s the story of Blue Sky, which recently hit app stores as an invite-only beta. Spearheaded by Twitter’s Jack Dorsey, Blue Sky has been in the works for some time, and it’s described as a “stripped-down version of Twitter” ([Techcrunch](#)).



### 4 Discord

Boasting 150 million active users, Discord has grown well beyond its intended purpose as a place for gamers to chat. Though Grand Theft Auto and meme channels are still its most popular segments, the platform has become a place for people to connect across a wide array of interests. Today, it’s a forum to discuss technology, cryptocurrency, gaming, and other similar topics.

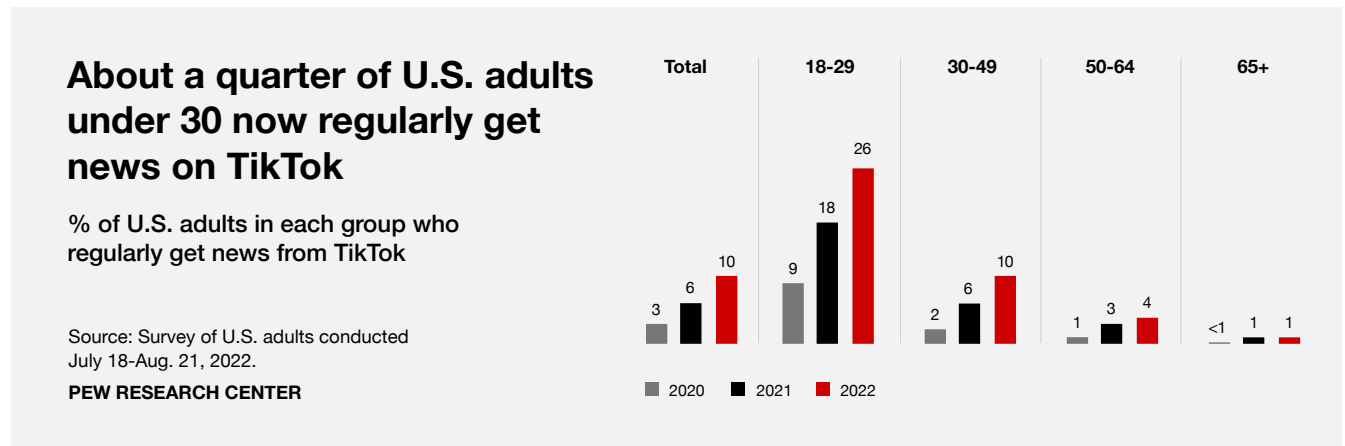


### 5 TikTok

Often considered an entertainment platform, TikTok is seeing more activity in the news space. Household news brands like ESPN are garnering large followings. As of August 2022, about a quarter of adults under 30 get news from TikTok, and popularity is growing across age groups. In the same time frame, most social platforms saw declining or steady user numbers for news consumption ([Pew Research](#)).



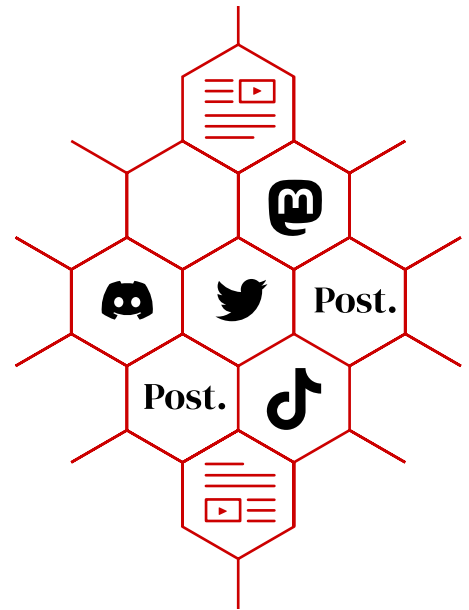
It’s important to understand how users engage with TikTok. While young users may view celebrity, lifestyle, and other lighthearted topics, they don’t necessarily see it as a place for serious news. For subjects like the war in Ukraine, TikTok is often used in combination with traditional news platforms ([The Guardian](#)).



# The crossroads between journalism and social media is ever-changing

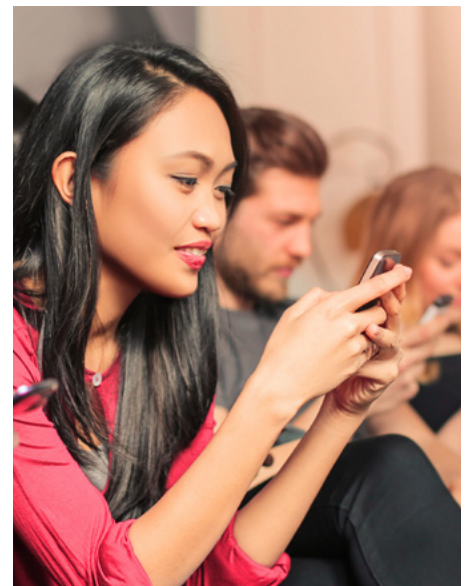
In 2022, TikTok was criticized for spying on journalists. According to [the Guardian](#), TikTok looked at journalist user IP addresses to learn if they shared locations with employees suspected of leaking confidential information. The company acknowledged the incident and fired four employees who improperly accessed data. Has trust been restored? Time will tell.

Award-winning journalist Andrew Losowsky predicts the future digital town square will not be a platform, but a social media ecosystem where various content streams are pulled together for a holistic, seamless, networked experience. He says, “we cannot trust closed platforms to keep us safe, protect our data, or act in the best interests of journalism. The economics of Silicon Valley just don’t work that way. We need to see beyond single platforms to an ecosystem of spaces, some of which we can build and control, and then we can decide when and how the benefits of network effects outweigh the drawbacks” ([Niemen Lab](#)).



## The Takeaway: News organizations should diversify distribution channels and adapt to changing news consumption trends.

Twitter’s turbulence serves as a reminder that platform stability and user engagement are not guaranteed. Additionally, user preferences vary across generations. To continuously reach audiences, it’s imperative not to rely on just one form of technology for news gathering or content distribution. Along with a search-engine-optimized website and solid content, it’s important for journalists to have multiple social platforms in their toolbox.



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