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## How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact With Mainstream News

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## How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact With Mainstream News

### Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

### Comments

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# **How Black Twitter and other social media communities interact with mainstream news**

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**KNIGHT  
FOUNDATION**

# How Black Twitter and other social media communities interact with mainstream news



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#asianimmigrant #asianam  
#immigrantheritagemonth  
#justice4liang #peterliang #  
#makemulanright #intotheb  
#freshofftheboat #emerging  
#aaironfist #whitewashedo  
#oscarstillsowhite #tildasy  
#aapi #beingasian #starring  
#feelthebern #bobbyjindalis  
#myasianamericanstory  
#ihm2015 #berniesanders  
#asian #jindian #feelthebern  
#doctorstrange #emergingus  
#thisis2016 #onlyonepercen  
#underratedasian #abc  
#muslimneighborhood #still  
#emergingus #alllivesmatte  
#thanksgivingclapback  
#blackgirlmagic #blackout  
#blacktwitter #blm  
#growingupblack #trump  
#feelthebern #freddiegray  
#betawards #blacklivesmat  
#notmypresident #blackout  
#thanksgivingwithblackfam  
#sayhername #oscars  
#altonsterling #staywoke  
#imstillwithher #batonrouge  
#ferguson #uniteblue #ripvi  
#concernedstudent1950 #ok  
#sandrablant #dallas #icho



## Executive Summary

People have been forming communities using digital communication technologies since long before the web as we know it today. Social media are only the latest in a long series of digital forums that have enabled global conversations and connections around nearly any topic imaginable. With its emphasis on public accessibility and real-time content production, Twitter has become a major hub for communities of all types and sizes.

The issues and voices of people of color and women have attracted much attention from professional journalists over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> Yet many such individuals have criticized journalists' portrayals and coverage of issues that are important to them. In response, some participants have assumed the role of news creators and distributors, focusing on their communities' particular concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Understanding these emerging social subcultures will allow more accurate portrayals of diverse communities and yield insights for better journalistic engagement in the digital age.

This report, commissioned by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and co-written by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Virginia, Northeastern University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explains the complex interactions between journalists and three specific Twitter subcultures: Black Twitter, Feminist Twitter and Asian-American Twitter, each of which has been the subject of extensive news coverage in recent years. Based on computational analyses of large-scale Twitter data and interviews of community participants and journalists, our research sought to answer three related questions:

**1. How do community participants interact with journalists and news content?**

**2. How do journalists report on and interact with communities and their participants?**

**3. How can the relationship between the professional news media and these online communities be improved?**

Our findings support several broad conclusions about relationships between the news media and these Twitter subcultures, in relation to these questions:

### **Participants produce and share news without journalists:**

- ✓ **Community agenda setting:** Participants often use Twitter to circulate and raise awareness about issues of concern on their own terms without waiting for professional journalists to take interest. Some community participants use Twitter itself as a curated news source to avoid problematic portrayals by mainstream news outlets. In this role, Twitter allows traditionally marginalized communities to set their own agendas rather than merely being raw material for unengaged journalists.
- ✓ **Gaps in news coverage:** Comparing the most prominent issues within each community to what media outlets mentioned most often (and deemed newsworthy) revealed several differences. For Asian-American Twitter and Black Twitter, some of the underrepresented hashtags appeal to highly specific community interests not likely to be shared by outsiders (such as [#thanksgivingclapback](#) or [#ryanpotterfortimdrake](#)). However, this was not the case on the topic of rape in Feminist Twitter, which was underrepresented in news coverage despite its societal importance and prominence.

### **Media relies on Twitter subcultures as a source of news:**

- ✓ **News gathering:** Individual explorations of each community reveal that journalists view Twitter as a highly productive tool for gathering story ideas and insights. News coverage of Feminist Twitter mostly dealt with long-standing issues such as sexism in STEM fields ([#ilooklikeanengineer](#), [#distractinglysexy](#)), insulting behavior from male elites ([#nastywoman](#), [#askhermore](#)) and transphobia ([#girlslikeus](#)). Black Twitter coverage focused mostly on anti-black police

violence ([#blacklivesmatter](#), [#sayhername](#)) and black political and cultural commentary ([#oscarssowhite](#), [#famousmelaniatrumpquotes](#)). Asian-American Twitter coverage stood out in that the most popular topic was Asian/Asian-American representation in movies and television ([#starringjohncho](#), [#whitewashedout](#), [#myyellowfacestory](#)).

✓ **Improved journalistic engagement:** Active participants did not like having their tweets harvested by journalists for story content without permission, citing two major concerns: lack of control over intellectual property, and the potential for surveillance and online harassment. These participants also expressed concerns about which individuals are selected by mainstream journalists as community representatives.

✓ **Synergistic elements between community and media:** Media scholars and journalists have noted that social media allow users to share content with one another without the aid of traditional media gatekeepers. Yet this analysis found that media coverage is one of the main ways social media content spreads beyond local follower networks. Participants tended to share news content that covered their community's high-visibility Twitter activities (trending hashtags, for example). This created feedback loops in which a community created compelling Twitter content, media outlets covered it and the community then circulated the media coverage of its own content.

✓ **Participants have a skeptical view of news coverage:**

**Favorability of specific news outlets:** Participants criticized and censured news media outlets more often than praising and endorsing them. Nevertheless, the most criticized outlets were usually also the most shared. Twitter and social media share counts are often seen as endorsements and important metrics of news impact. However, the data analysis illustrated that popularity in

terms of share counts does not necessarily imply approval or trust. The most favored (trusted) news organizations were a mix of digital-native outlets, newspapers and entertainment magazines. Four of the five most criticized news organizations were TV news outlets. Interview participants often mentioned masthead diversity as a vital reform for increasing trust in news outlets.

## Overview

Defining “community” online has never been an exact science.<sup>3</sup> Participants, journalists and other onlookers may have a vague sense of partaking in or witnessing the activism, the sharing of jokes and memes, and the creation of subcultures more generally through social media, but as these are not formal membership-based organizations, drawing strict boundaries around them is difficult. To offer an impression of what these subcultures do, we collected a set of hashtags specific to each community (such as [#thanksgivingwithblackfamilies](#), [#feminism](#), [#myasianamericanstory](#)) to represent its interests and participants. (The appendix contains a complete list of these hashtags.)

Obtaining every tweet containing these hashtags during 2015 and 2016 yielded 44,620,175 tweets to help us answer our research questions. We analyzed them using both advanced computational methods and more traditional qualitative textual approaches. We also interviewed 45 prominent community participants and journalists who have covered them to understand how the two parties interact. We present our interview data and qualitative analyses of tweet content in three sections—one devoted to each community—that explore key similarities and differences among them.

The three communities are not independent monoliths: Rather, they overlap to varying degrees. Figure Number 1 represents the communities as “tag clouds” of their 50

most prevalent hashtags linked by the numbers of tweets containing hashtags associated with both communities. The figure makes clear each community's core priorities at a glance, while revealing that the strongest link connects Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter. (As we detail in later sections, interview participants from Feminist Twitter and Black Twitter also noted the close association between the communities.) The weakest link lies between Feminist Twitter and Asian-America Twitter: Only 822 tweets contain hashtags from both communities. These patterns should remind journalists that while focusing on one community at a time may be easiest analytically, the close links between some of them suggest that doing so may not always tell the whole story. Indeed, in some cases the overlaps themselves can yield interesting story ideas.<sup>4</sup>

The communities differed greatly in news coverage as well, but news accounted for a minority of content in each. While Black Twitter was covered most in absolute terms, Asian-American Twitter attracted the greatest proportional amount of coverage. Over 36.7 million tweets matched at least one of Black Twitter's hashtags, while the corresponding numbers for Feminist Twitter and Asian-American Twitter were roughly 8 million and 1.2 million tweets, respectively. Black Twitter also attracted the highest number of unique users at 5.6 million, with Feminist Twitter at 2.4 million and Asian-American Twitter at 0.33 million. Overall, we found 43,413 tweets by news organizations and journalists, representing 0.1 percent of all tweets.<sup>5</sup> News content shared by non journalists was more prevalent in the data set, with 4,071,383 tweets (9.1 percent) containing a news link or mentioning a news account. By community, these proportions were 10.9 percent for Asian-American Twitter, 10.4 percent for Feminist Twitter and 8.6 percent for Black Twitter. These numbers excluded discussions of news topics that did not mention the names, Twitter accounts, or links of news organizations, as these would be impossible to tally accurately.

# Producing and sharing news without journalists

Marginalized communities have many broadly shared concerns that are not always accurately or adequately portrayed in mainstream news stories. Participants use Twitter to circulate and raise awareness about these concerns on their own terms without waiting for professional journalists to take interest. When they do engage with news content, the communities prefer to receive their news prescreened by trusted curators rather than relying heavily on specific news outlets. This low degree of trust and engagement manifested itself in the Twitter data in several ways.

First, news outlets and journalists were very rare among the most retweeted and mentioned users in each community (Figure Number 2). Not a single mainstream news outlet was represented in any community's top 10; entertainers, politicians and activists were much more popular. If we broaden our definition of "news-related" slightly, we will notice several popular news aggregators, including @crystaljohnson, @trueblacknews, @everydaysexism and @asamnews. (The Alex Jones-affiliated account @prisonplanet may also be considered "news" of a sort, but has been criticized for spreading unsubstantiated information.) Each specialized in content of specific interest to its community. In addition to the professional news content they relayed, these accounts also redistributed stories from ordinary social media users and image-based memes of uncertain origin.

Figure Number 1

**Hashtag  
co-occurrence  
among three  
Twitter  
communities**

15,071





#iamanimmigrant  
 #asianamerican  
 #underratedasian  
 #immigrantheritagemoth  
 #iamasianamerican #benedictcumberbatch #onlyonepercent  
**#justice4liang**  
 #freepeterliang #peterliang #goodmuslimbadmuslim #amc  
 #oscarssowhite  
**#makemulanright** #abc  
 #ihm2016 #asians4blacklives #blacklivesmatter #representasian  
**#intothebadlands** #starringconstancewu #graceleetaughtme #thewalkingdead  
 #emergingus #stillsanders #aaironfist  
**#freshofftheboat**  
 #oscarssowhite #savepeterliang  
**#whitewashedout**  
 #tonedownforwhat #myasianamericanstory  
**#tildaswinton** #graceleeboggs #rally220  
 #bobbyjindalsowhite #aapi #ihm2015  
 #thisis2016 #doctorstrange #asian  
**#beingasian** #ryanpotterfortimdrake  
 #muslimneighborhood #coloemebadlands  
**#starringjohncho** #myyellowfacestory  
**#feelthebern**

822

#girlslikeus  
**#rapeculture**  
 #imwithher #blackwomenmatter #equality  
 #iwd2016 **#sandrablant**  
 #howtospotafeminist #history #prolife  
**#feminist** #humanright #pinkout  
 #education  
 #hrw #notbuyingit #youoksis #women #fem2  
**#heforshe**  
 #justiceforsandrablant #blacklivesmatter #tcot #uniteblue  
**#feminism**  
 #prochoice #theemptychair #everydaysexism #distractinglysexy  
 #childabuse **#sayhername**  
 #shoutyourabortion #ilooklikeanengineer #nastywoman  
 #sarahreed #plannedparenthood #waronwomen #blogher16  
**#standwithpp** #culture  
 #genderequality #istandwithpp #notallmen #ifmenhadperiods  
**#womeninstem**  
 #abortion #yesallwomen  
**#notokay**

1,286,095

Figure Number 2

**Ten most referenced screen names by community (2015-16)**

**Black Twitter**

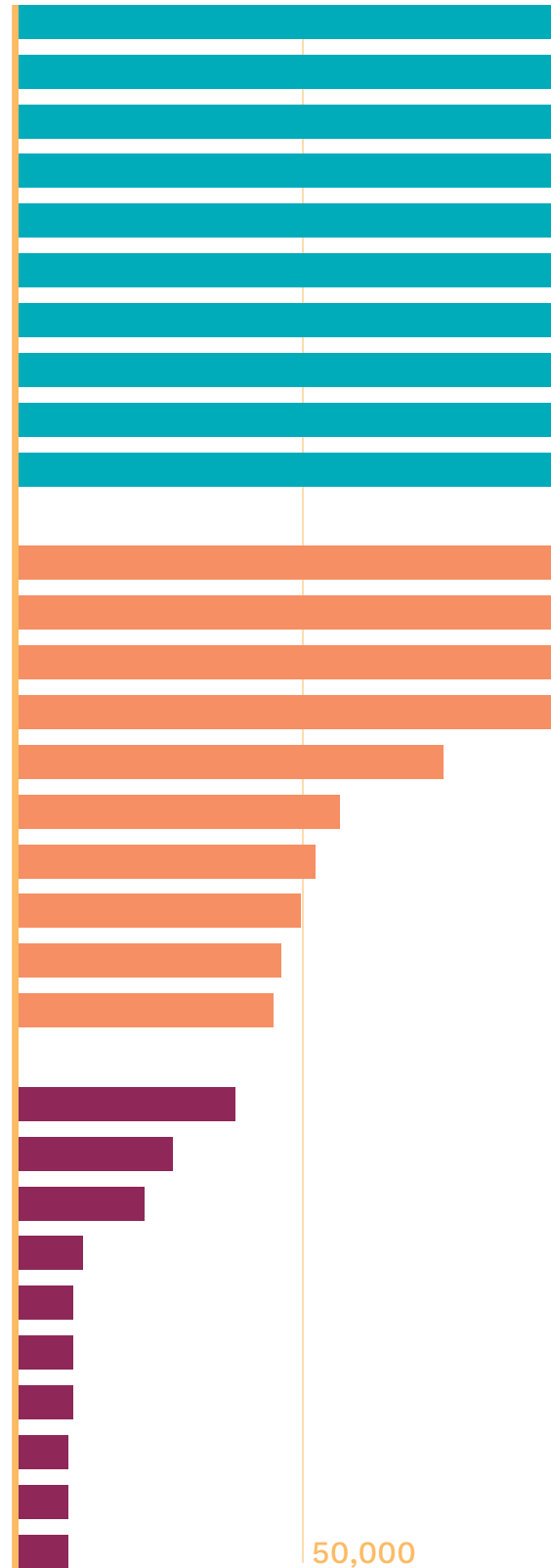
- @prisonplanet
- @jessewilliams
- @deray
- @commonBlackgirl
- @realdonaldtrump
- @trueblacknews
- @bet
- @betawards
- @crystal1johnson
- @hillaryclinton

**Feminist Twitter**

- @emwatson
- @heforshe
- @un\_woman
- @ppact
- @harry\_styles
- @ppfa
- @yesallwomen
- @hillaryclinton
- @everydaysexism
- @kellyoxford

**Asian American Twitter**

- @freshoffabc
- @intothebadlands
- @justice4liang
- @constancewu
- @juanito29434
- @thenerdsofcolor
- @oliverstarkk
- @cnn
- @wheeler\_forrest
- @asamnews



50,000

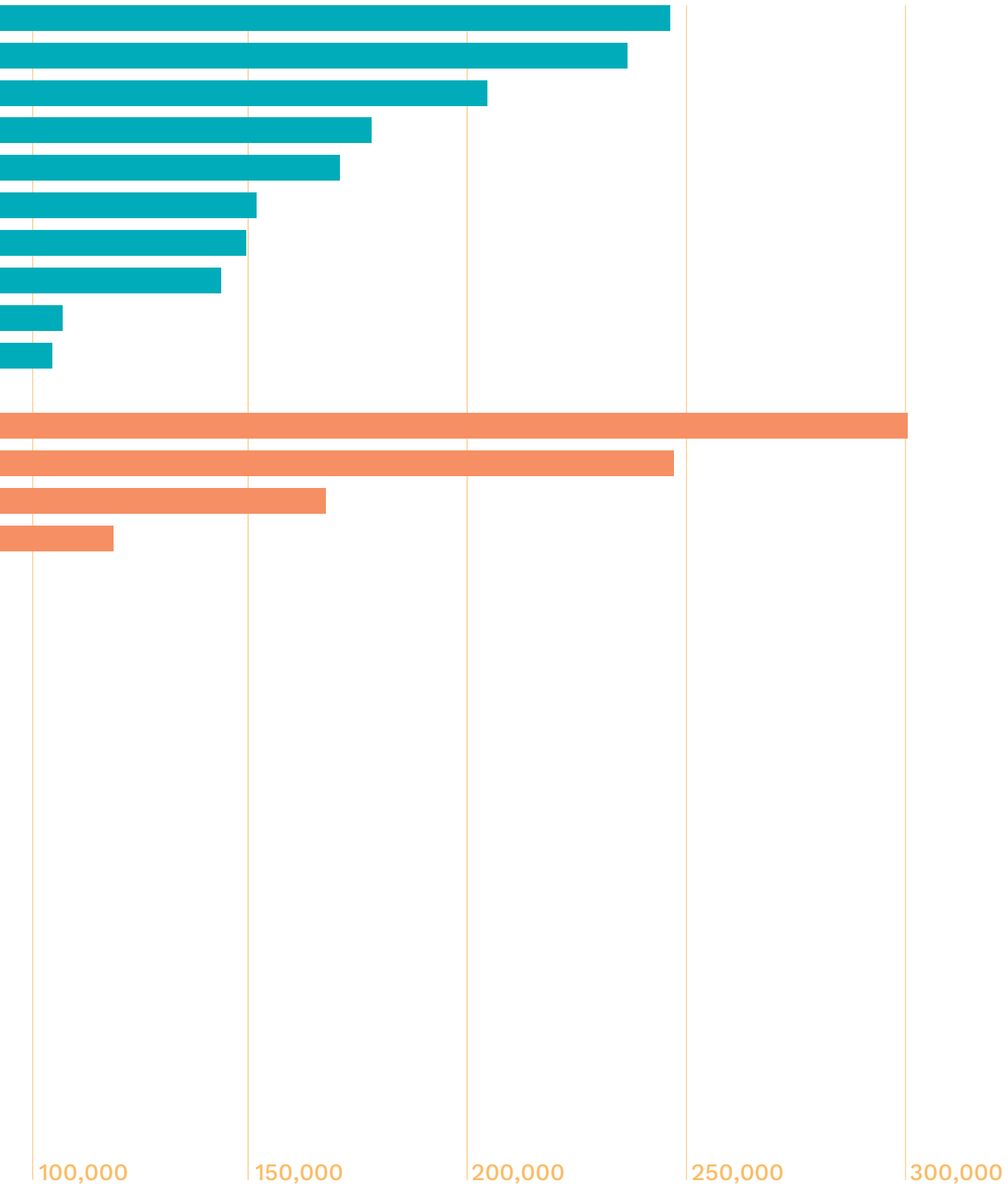
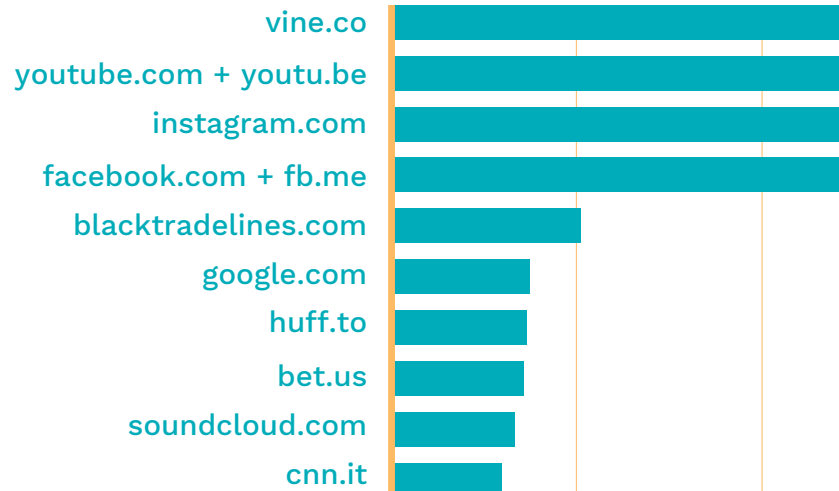


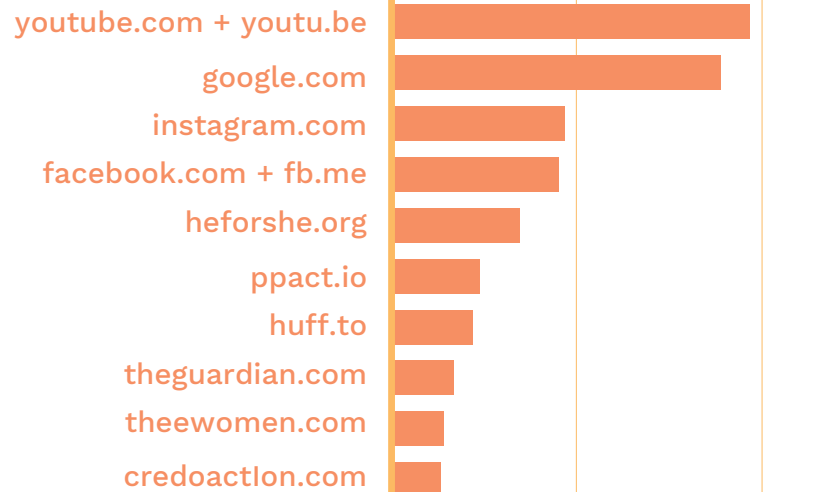
Figure Number 3

**10 most popular web domains by community (2015-16)**

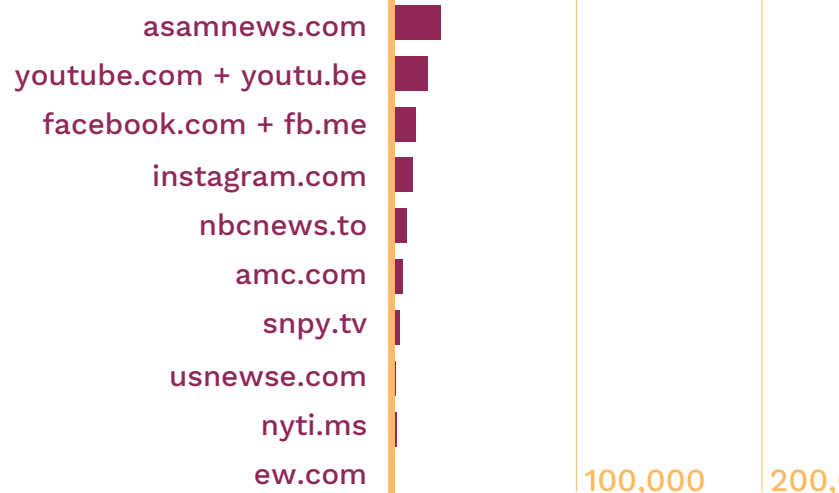
**Black Twitter**



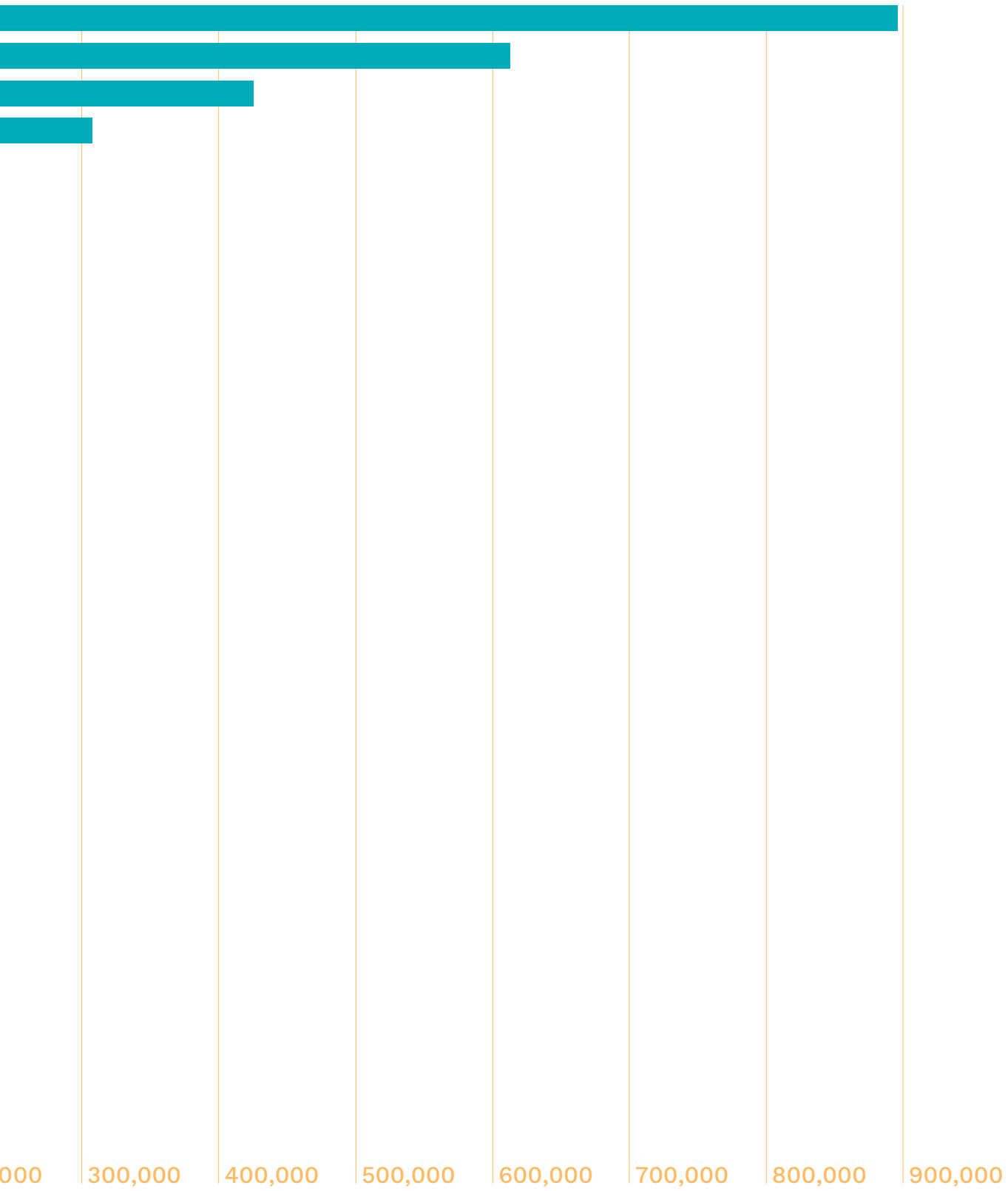
**Feminist Twitter**



**Asian American Twitter**



100,000 200,000



News outlets were infrequently referenced by community participants. They occupy six of the 30 slots making up the three communities' 10 most cited web domains (Figure Number 3). HuffPost, which holds the seventh spot on both the Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter lists, is the only outlet to appear on more than one list. More common than news were social media, entertainment, activist and multimedia sites (such as YouTube and SoundCloud). Based on figures 1 and 2, we may conclude that community participants were probably more likely to interact with news content by posting links than by retweeting or mentioning news outlets' screen names.

## **A skeptical view of news**

One key question that emerged from exploring the relationship between these communities and the news outlets that cover them dealt with trust. Communities that distrust “the media” will neither cooperate with reporters nor read the stories they write. But users rarely express media trust or distrust explicitly on Twitter. As such, we measured a closely related sentiment that is both closely linked with trust/distrust and more common on Twitter: favorability. To measure favorability, we randomly sampled 3,000 tweets—1,000 from each community—that contained a link or screen name associated with a news outlet.<sup>6</sup> A team of five research assistants read these tweets and judged whether each one was favorable or unfavorable to a journalist or news outlet.

The first key finding was that very few tweets about the news passed any judgment on the underlying news story. As Figure Number 4 shows, over 90 percent of tweets contained no news criticism and over 95 percent contained no praise. A majority of each remainder consisted of “maybes,” in which one research assistant saw praise or

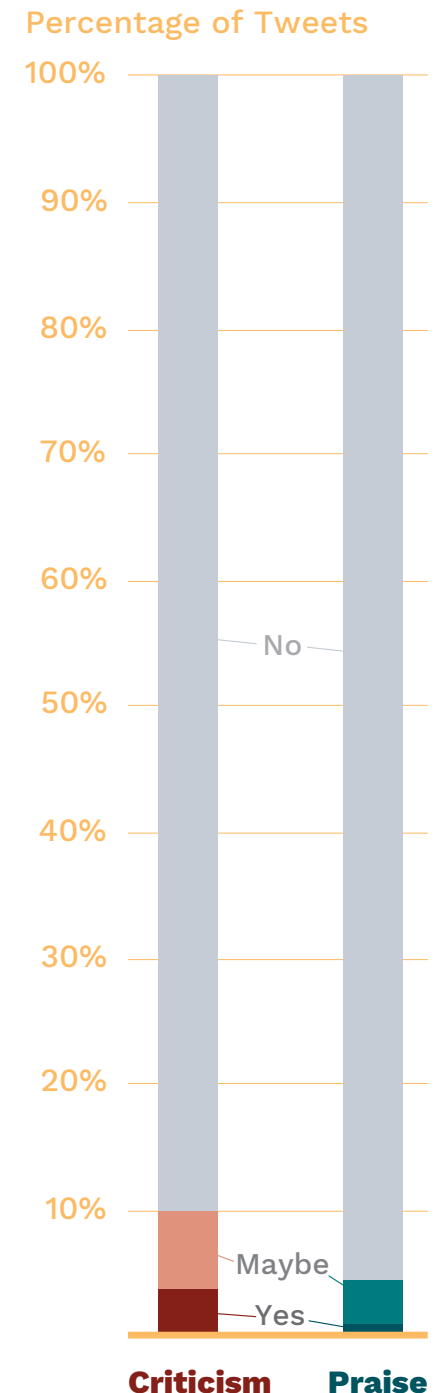
criticism while the other did not. We also informally observed in the tweets that evaluations of news content were more prevalent than evaluations of news framing or quality. In other words, participants appeared more likely to say “I disapprove of these events” than “I disapprove of how these events were reported.” However, many of our interviewees did express the latter sentiment, as we detail later.

Between only the positive and negative evaluations, the latter were over twice as prevalent as the former. This was in keeping with all three communities’ emphasis on grievances compared with positivity.

Next, we considered the net favorability scores of the 23 news outlets that received at least five ratings in either direction (Figure Number 5). Sixteen scores (71 percent) were negative, and four of the five lowest scores were held by TV news outlets. CNN was evaluated especially harshly, as its score of minus 48 was well over twice as low as the second-lowest-rated outlet, Fox News. The seven outlets with scores of zero and higher were more diverse in terms of focus, with two digital natives (BuzzFeed and Mic), three legacy media outlets (The Atlantic, The Guardian, and the Los Angeles Times) and two entertainment news sites (The Hollywood Reporter and Variety). The more often an outlet was rated, the lower its score tended to be, which raises the possibility that broad viewership may invite criticism in and of itself.<sup>7</sup>

Figure Number 4

### Criticism and praise of news-related tweets



Accordingly, low favorability did not prevent communities from sharing a media outlet's content widely. Figure Number 6 shows the most shared outlets across the communities arranged according to the number of top 10 lists that included each outlet. Five outlets—BuzzFeed, The Washington Post, The New York Times, HuffPost and CNN—appeared on all three communities' top 10 lists. Two outlets appeared on two lists, and 11 outlets appeared on only one list. Of the five outlets that appeared on all three lists, only one (BuzzFeed) had a favorability score above zero.

On Twitter, posting someone's content is sometimes seen as an endorsement, and social media share counts are important metrics of audience reach. But as this analysis shows, popularity in terms of share counts does not necessarily imply approval or trust. At the same time, we should consider what, if anything, we can credibly infer from the large majority of news-bearing tweets that passed no judgment on their content. Later, our interview findings will show that trust can vary dramatically within outlets depending on who wrote the piece.



# Subcultures as a source of news

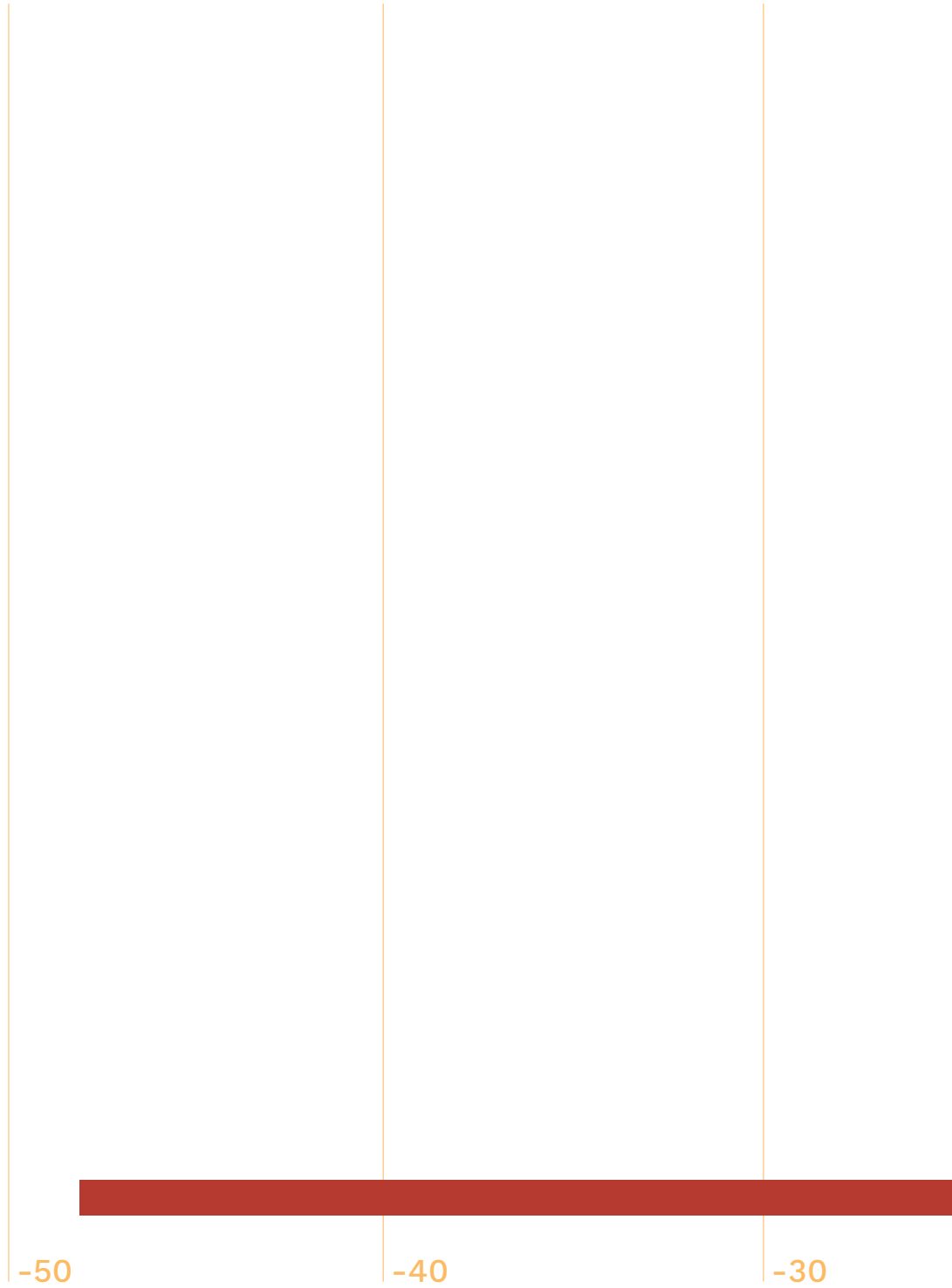
We also analyzed journalistic engagement with the three communities. In absolute terms, news organizations posted to Black Twitter hashtags most often (33,579 tweets), then Feminist Twitter (5,965 tweets), then Asian-American Twitter (2,816 tweets). This amounted to a very small proportion of total tweets (0.01 percent). However, Asian-American Twitter had a much higher proportion of news coverage (0.24 percent) than Black Twitter or Feminist Twitter (0.09 percent and 0.08 percent, respectively). As the previous discussion shows, news content was more likely to manifest in the form of shared links than as tweets by journalists and news outlets. To some extent this may result from our use of hashtags as sampling criteria, as journalistic accounts may be less likely to include hashtags in their tweets.

An important question emerged from this initial analysis: What kinds of posts from each community attracted the most attention from news outlets? To answer it, we created two data sets per each of the three communities. First, we compiled the 10 most posted community hashtags by journalistic Twitter accounts across the study period. With the second, we wanted to emphasize the differences between the hashtags that news accounts discussed and those they avoided. We created a “rank difference” metric that revealed hashtags that were popular among community participants but relatively ignored by news accounts.<sup>8</sup>

Table Number 1 displays these quantities for Black Twitter. News accounts were interested in a variety of topics, including activism ([#blacklivesmatter](#), [#sayhername](#), [#concernedstudent1950](#)), political/cultural commentary ([#oscarssowhite](#), [#famousmelaniatrumpquotes](#)), and formal and informal celebrations of blackness ([#betawards](#), [#blackgirlmagic](#)). Most had a direct

Figure Number 5

**Net favorability scores for most frequently rated news outlets**



◀ **Negative scores**

**Positive scores** ▶

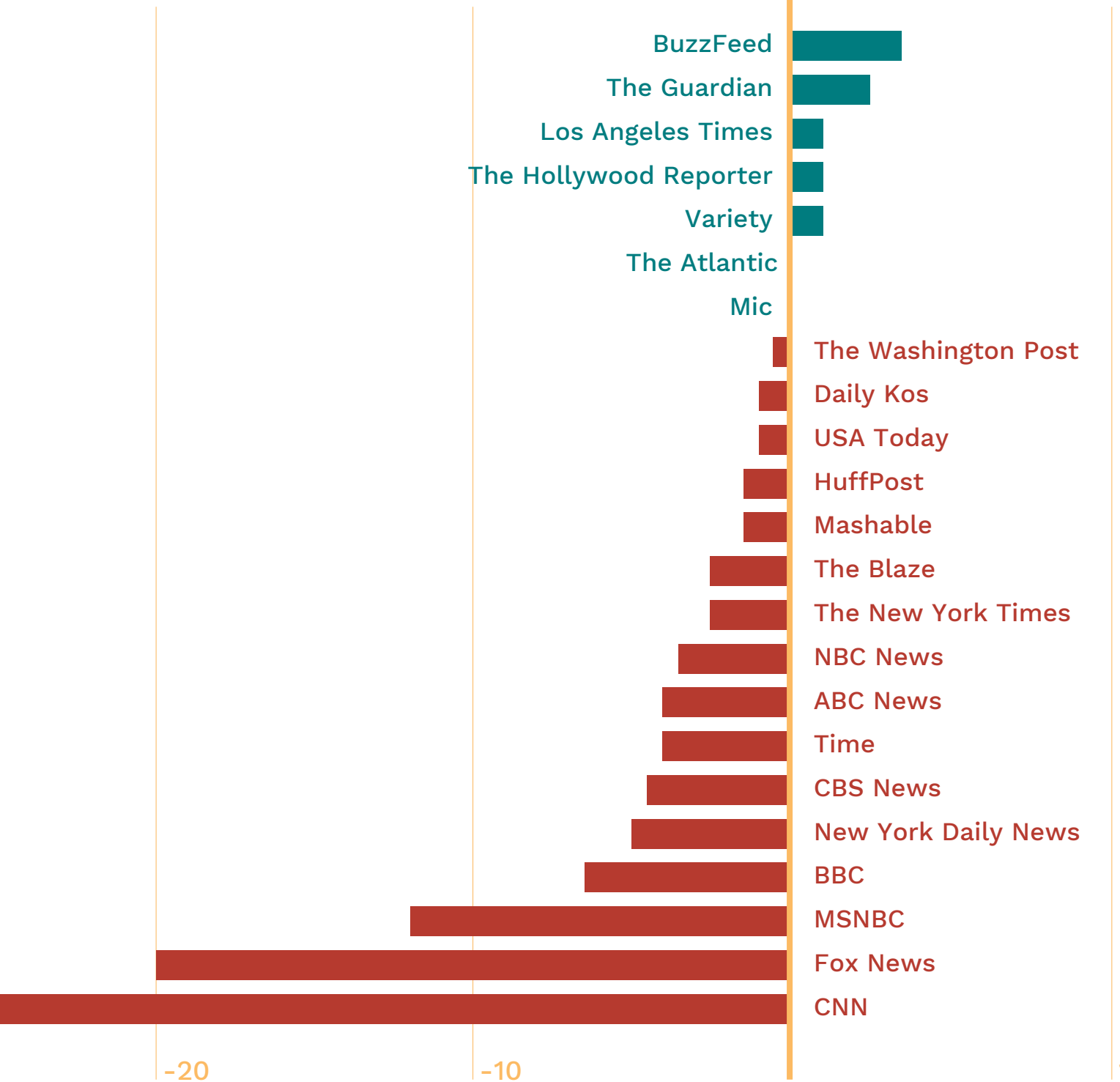
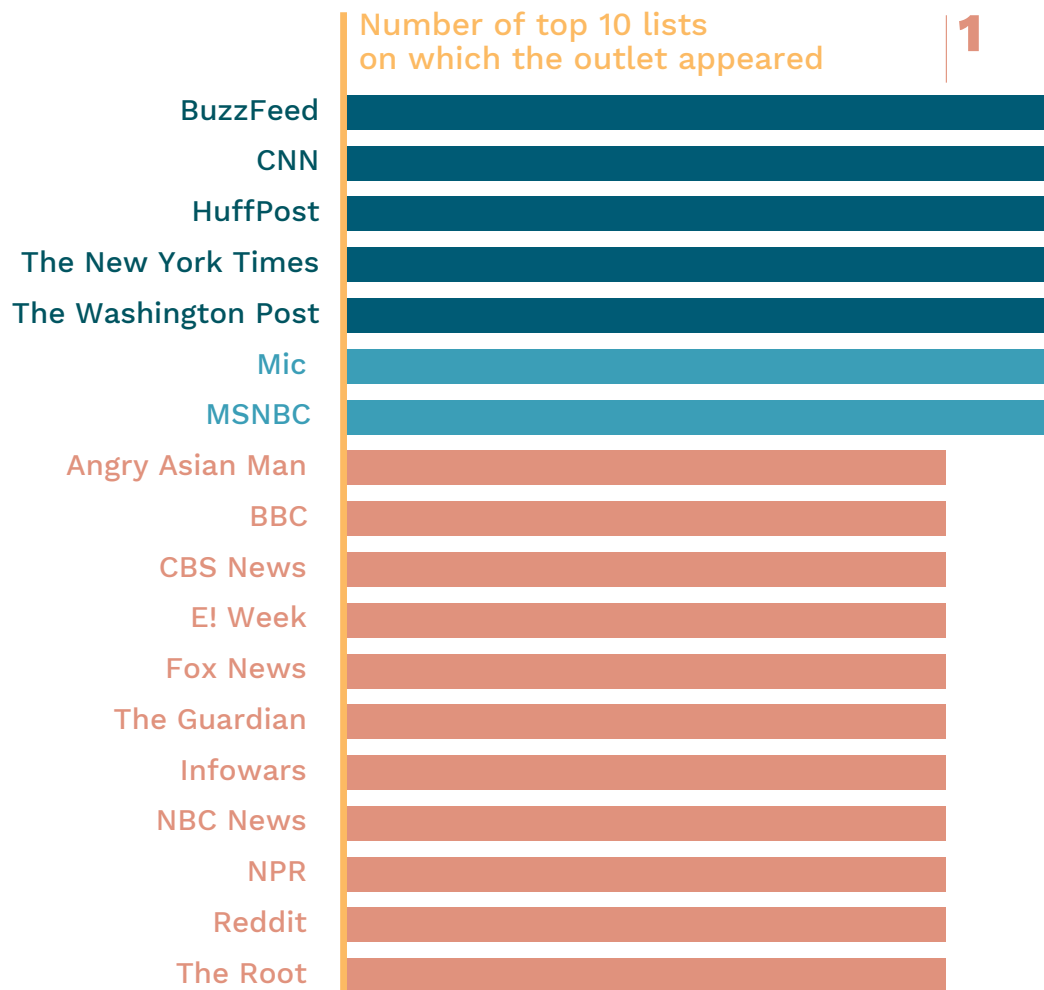


Figure Number 6

**Most shared news outlets by number of appearances on community top 10 lists**



**2**

**3**



connection to some external event of public concern, such as police killings of African-Americans, award shows, and electoral and campus politics. In contrast, the most underreported hashtags address issues that only community insiders would fully understand: [#vinehalloffame](#) pays tribute to the best Vine videos, many of which feature culturally specific in-jokes; [#thanksgivingclapback](#) chronicles sassy rejoinders to condescending Thanksgiving remarks; and [#growingupblack](#) highlights youthful experiences shared by black Americans. (See Table Number 1)

The Asian-American Twitter hashtags that were most prevalent on the news side (Table Number 2) sorted into two broad categories: those that tell various aspects of the Asian-American story ([#emergingus](#), [#thisis2016](#), [#myasianamericanstory](#), [#aapi](#)) and those that focus on representations of Asian-Americans in TV and film ([#freshofftheboat](#), [#starringjohncho](#), [#whitewashedout](#), [#intothelands](#)). A few of the underreported hashtags also focus on the Asian-American story ([#underratedasian](#), [#representasian](#), [#myyellowfacestory](#)), but one major type was not represented among the most newsworthy: hashtags that demand specific changes to TV and film content ([#ryanpotterfortimdrake](#), [#yoshiforshang](#), [#cancelmailorderfamily](#), [#makemulanright](#)).<sup>9</sup> (The hashtag [#starringjohncho](#) from the most newsworthy side was close to this but focuses on reimagining existing films rather than trying to affect decisions on upcoming ones.) These kinds of campaigns were not as frequently covered as activism aimed at conventional politics and general media representation. (See Table Number 2)

The Feminist Twitter hashtags (Table Number 3) most frequently discussed by news accounts fell into several categories, including general feminist discussion ([#feminism](#), [#feminist](#), [#fem2](#)), calls for men to treat women as equals ([#askhermore](#),

**#ilooklikeanengineer**, **#heforshe**), reproductive health (**#standwithpp**, **#shoutyourabortion**) and women's struggles (**#sayhername**, **#girlslikeus**). As with Asian-American Twitter, some of these categories are also present among the most underreported, including equality (**#womeninstem**) and reproductive health (**#istandwithpp**). However, the topic of rape/sexual assault/sexual harassment was strongly represented here (**#yesallwomen**, **#notokay**, **#rapeculture**, **#yesallmen**) but absent from the most frequently mentioned group. (See Table Number 3)

Overall, these early quantitative findings painted a picture of three subcultures directing their own agendas with only limited interaction with the news media. Those interactions we did find were more negative than positive. Higher levels of sharing news content did not seem to translate to approval of the way stories were being covered, pointing toward possible areas of improvement for journalistic engagement with diverse online communities.

## **Community-focused sections**

Each of the following three sections takes an in-depth look at one of the communities analyzed above. Through in-depth interviews and close readings of prominent tweets, we aim to paint three rich pictures of journalist/participant interactions. We hope our findings will start a conversation about how journalists can cover online communities centered around traditionally marginalized groups more thoughtfully and accurately.

In particular, the Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter communities overlap with the practice of migration from blogs to social media platforms as a source for community connection and information dissemination. Additionally, Asian-American Twitter's creation of hashtag movements designed to draw attention to issues of concern takes a page directly from the Black Twitter playbook.

Table Number 1  
**Black Twitter**  
**hashtag rankings**

RANK	MOST TWEETED BLACK TWITTER HASHTAGS BY NEWS OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS	NEWS HITS
<b>01</b>	<b>#blacklivesmatter</b>	<b>18,330</b>
<b>02</b>	<b>#oscarsowwhite</b>	<b>4,063</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>#blacktwitter</b>	<b>2,935</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>#betawards</b>	<b>2,470</b>
<b>05</b>	<b>#blackgirlmagic</b>	<b>1,768</b>
<b>06</b>	<b>#sayhername</b>	<b>1,214</b>
<b>07</b>	<b>#staywoke</b>	<b>438</b>
<b>08</b>	<b>#notmypresident</b>	<b>345</b>
<b>09</b>	<b>#concernedstudent1950</b>	<b>310</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>#famousmelaniatrumpquotes</b>	<b>242</b>



**MOST UNDERREPORTED BLACK TWITTER HASHTAGS****RANK  
DIFF.****#vinehalloffame****27****#cnnbelike****19****#thanksgivingclapback****12****#growingupblack****11****#obamaday****10****#blacktwitterverificationquestions****09****#benandjerrysnewflavor****08****#thanksgivingwithblackfamilies****07****#superpredator****07****#notmypresident****05**

Table Number 2

**Asian-American  
hashtag rankings**

RANK	MOST TWEETED ASIAN-AMERICAN TWITTER HASHTAGS BY NEWS OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS	NEWS HITS
<b>01</b>	<b>#freshofftheboat</b>	<b>998</b>
<b>02</b>	<b>#emergingus</b>	<b>356</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>#aapi</b>	<b>244</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>#thisis2016</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>05</b>	<b>#myasianamericanstory</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>06</b>	<b>#starringjohncho</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>07</b>	<b>#whitewashedout</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>08</b>	<b>#myaapivote</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>09</b>	<b>#intothebadlands</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>#immigrantheritagemonth</b>	<b>47</b>

MOST UNDERREPORTED ASIAN-AMERICAN TWITTER HASHTAGS	RANK DIFF.
#ryanpotterfortimdrake	28
#justice4liang	26
#freepeterliang	26
#underratedasian	25
#representasian	22
#yoshiforshang	20
#cancelmailorderfamily	15
#makemulanright	13
#bobbyjindalissowhite	13
#myyellowfacestory	13

Table Number 3

**Feminist Twitter  
hashtag rankings**

RANK	MOST TWEETED FEMINIST TWITTER HASHTAGS BY NEWS OUTLET AND JOURNALISTS	NEWS HITS
<b>01</b>	<b>#sayhername</b>	<b>1,214</b>
<b>02</b>	<b>#feminism</b>	<b>788</b>
<b>03</b>	<b>#girlslikeus</b>	<b>576</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>#heforshe</b>	<b>391</b>
<b>05</b>	<b>#feminist</b>	<b>375</b>
<b>06</b>	<b>#askhermore</b>	<b>373</b>
<b>07</b>	<b>#ilooklikeanengineer</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>08</b>	<b>#standwithpp</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>09</b>	<b>#shoutyourabortion</b>	<b>233</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>#fem2</b>	<b>161</b>

MOST UNDERREPORTED FEMINIST TWITTER HASHTAGS	RANK DIFF.
#yesallwomen	16
#womeninstem	9
#notokay	7
#istandwithpp	5
#blogher16	5
#nastywoman	4
#standwithpp	3
#rapeculture	3
#everydaysexism	3
#yesallmen	2

#aninmanicaptions #askracine  
#beckywiththebadgrades  
#benandjerrysnewflavor  
#berniemademewhite  
#berniesoblack #bestofblack  
#bet2016 #betawards  
#blackcelebsbelike #blackcl  
#blackderbyhorsenames  
#blackgirlmagic  
#blacklivesmatter #blackout  
#blackpanthersolit #blacktv  
#blacktwitterverificationque  
#buzzfeedvideoquestions  
#charlestonmassacre  
#charlestonsyllabus #cnnbel  
#concernedstudent1950  
#duraghistoryweek  
#earnthisdamnvoteorlose  
#famousmelaniatrumpquote  
#girliguessimwithher  
#growingupblackBlack  
#hiddenfences #ifidieinpolice  
#iftrumpwereblack #kapsob  
#muslimlivesmatter  
#newhillarylogo #notmypres  
#obamaday #oscarssowhite  
#realblackpeoplequestions  
#sayhername  
#smartblackwomenoftwitte  
#smartblackwomenontwitte  
#staymadabby #staywoke

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## Black Twitter



Meredith D. Clark

Of the communities examined in this report, Black Twitter is undoubtedly the best-known. However, as Figure 1 demonstrates, presenting Black Twitter as completely divorced from Asian-American Twitter and Feminist Twitter offers a false distinction. Several key values are constant across the three communities, a finding that reflects intersectional experiences among the groups—at some points, difference and objectification are predicated by ethnic, racial and gender differences, no matter which group is being discussed. Each section details how use and amplification of tweets without proper context have damaged relationships between media and diverse communities. Each section also reflects a collective desire for journalists to develop meaningful relationships within the online communities they cover, learning its norms, language, practices and values.

In particular, the Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter communities overlap with the practice of migration from blogs to social media platforms as a source for community connection and information dissemination. Additionally, Asian-American Twitter's creation of hashtag movements designed to draw attention to issues of concern takes a page directly from the Black Twitter playbook.

## **What (or who) is Black Twitter?**

Before Black Twitter received its name, its users were simply Black on Twitter. The label "Black Twitter," in several forms, initiated as a mockery of early observations of the phenomenon that centered the white gaze, such as Chire Sicha's reference to "late-night black people Twitter."<sup>10</sup> But demographically speaking, there was reason to take note of what black people were doing on Twitter. At the height of its popularity among black internet users between 2010 and 2013, nearly 25 percent of all black people in America who were online also used Twitter. In 2014, the last year for which the Pew Research Center published data on Twitter use among African-Americans, that number dropped to 22 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Although the phenomenon's inflection point differs depending on whom you ask, respondents in this research described Black Twitter's development as a space in which black people discuss issues of concern to themselves and their communities—issues they say either are not covered by mainstream media, or are not covered with the appropriate cultural context. For these users, Black Twitter allows everyday black people to serve as gatekeepers for the news and information needs of a plurality of black



American experiences—with coverage, perspective and consideration not found elsewhere.

Findings from this research indicate that black users who consider themselves part of or familiar with Black Twitter have three key considerations for news professionals who wish to better engage with black people in America:

- ✔ **They are concerned that reporters over-rely on Twitter for sourcing, and they raise ethical concerns about surveillance.**
- ✔ **They express a desire for news professionals to cultivate authenticity by showing up as a “real person” online.**
- ✔ **They want journalists to cover the plurality of black communities with diverse voices, stressing that “Black people are not a monolith.”**

# Surveillance

The largest division between journalism/media professionals interviewed for this research and individuals outside the journalism industry centers on how tweets posted online should be used in reporting. There are two key concerns to observe here. First, the volume of tweets analyzed in this data set indicates that mainstream news misses rich conversation among the very individuals it is trying to reach. Naturally, journalists who observe the community dialogue with and among diverse groups might be inclined to simply begin following individuals and their conversations. However, we caution journalists to truly see Twitter as a tool for source development and not surveillance. Several participants who were asked to participate in this research about Black Twitter flatly declined, citing overuse of the online content they had created in conversations with their communities. In related research, other participants have admitted leaving the platform altogether because of journalistic intrusion on their day-to-day activities. Clearly, a lack of trust in news outlets can yield substantial consequences.

Walking the line between source development and surveillance requires a commitment to ongoing engagement—developing a sense of community—with the communities a reporter is trying to reach. While Black Twitter’s boundaries are not exclusive to black participants, it helps for media professionals to have or develop rich historical context of the incidents that spark trends. This means going beyond the five W’s and an H<sup>12</sup> and considering whose narratives were left out of the original story, the power dynamics at play in current events, and the evolution of demands from the community affected by the incident being reported.

The creation of open-sourced “syllabi” serve as one example of Black Twitter’s collective work to educate members of the online public about the racial, economic,

social and political underpinnings of breaking news events while reporters are still working to piece together timely elements of the story. Co-created by [#blacktwitterstorians](#) and other public contributors, [#charlestonsyllabus](#) provided context for the historical significance of white racial violence against the black church, including specifics on the religious iconography and political history of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where white supremacist Dylann Roof shot and killed nine parishioners during Bible study in June 2015. Such resources can help journalists skip the kinds of introductory questions that irk community participants and move the conversation forward.<sup>13</sup>

These collective learning and teaching experiences extend to cultural events as well. Hours after Beyonce debuted her visual album, “Lemonade,” on HBO in April 2016, black feminists tweeted their contributions of reading suggestions that would help viewers move frame-by-frame to unpack some of the imagery and references under the hashtag [#lemonadesyllabus](#).

Aside from insightful reporting from outlets including The Guardian, which has tapped many high-profile members of Black Twitter’s online communities, and digital outlets such as Splinter (formerly known as Fusion) and Mic, these digital coursepacks remained largely unmentioned by mainstream journalists who published countless op-eds, columns and stories about both events. For example, the [#charlestonsyllabus](#) hashtag was tweeted only 32 times by journalistic Twitter accounts out of a total of 23,108 appearances in our data set.

# Use of sources

Tweets from high-profile Black Twitter participants have driven many news stories. Per Twitter's terms of service, any tweet posted from a public account may be used in any way—including as quotes or color in a story. However, this practice was debated between the journalists and nonjournalist users interviewed for this project.

The media professionals, pointing to Twitter's terms of service, held that embedding or otherwise quoting tweets in their stories is a technologically and journalistically defensible approach to reporting via Twitter. The everyday users—in each section of this report—disagreed. Their suggestions range from contacting the user to notify them that one or more of their tweets may be used in a story, to requesting the user's permission, to even paying the user for tweets that they consider to be “intellectual property.”

Black Twitter users noted that the reproduction of tweets in nationally distributed news reports exposes them to potential online harassment, threats or violence that they otherwise might not have faced had their tweet not been promoted on a larger platform. One user noted a discrepancy in the practice of some outlets redacting the names and handles of some Twitter users, while leaving others, particularly black women, exposed for their readers to see, find and harass.

Media professionals and everyday users found common ground in noting that at the very least, a news outlet should contact users to let them know that their tweets may be used in a story. As with Asian-American Twitter, both journalists and regular users in Black Twitter said a simple DM could open a line of communication between a reporter and a potential source. Jesse Holland, an Associated Press reporter, said he contacts users to verify tweets, which are essentially quotes. “Verification is probably the first and foremost thing,” Holland said. “Doing that means that you're actually having a conversation, either by email or in person.

It's very rare that I would just take someone's tweet and say, "This person said that."

Initiating conversation with Twitter users equips reporters to provide accurate context by going beyond the metrics of what is being retweeted, and why. Simply searching for high retweets and "favorites" can link false narratives to Black Twitter via popular hashtags. For instance, the far right-wing account @prisonplanet had three out of four of the highest retweet counts in our data set, amassing just over 21,000 and 18,000 retweets for two tweets using the [#notmypresident](#) hashtag, which Black Twitter used to signal disdain for President-elect Donald Trump. The account gained an additional 13,000 tweets by linking to a video that the user claimed "would be devastating for [#blacklivesmatter](#)." Verification of the identity and intention of users like this, preferably through conversation, is key to understanding the message that is being communicated through hashtags that gain traction on Twitter. Simply relying on Twitter trends to tell the story will not suffice.

# Journalistic authenticity

The quest for journalistic objectivity does not seem to hold up well online. Or at least not on Twitter. Respondents among the Asian-American and feminist participants in this research criticized the so-called neutral position of journalists as a default to a white, male worldview. Members of each community encouraged media professionals to show up authentically and to cultivate relationships with members of the group.

Black Twitter, for instance, is held together by varying degrees of a sense of community. Those who want to engage in meaningful interaction with Black Twitter should consider that doing so is akin to walking into a neighborhood. Rather than standing in the middle of the street and shouting to deliver information that affects readers' lives, journalists who want to connect with Black Twitter are encouraged to be "their real selves" on Twitter.

Showing up as a multidimensional person online has several purposes where Black Twitter is concerned. First, in an era when consumers have their choice of sources for news, it presents an opportunity for reporters and editors to distinguish themselves as human beings with particular interests, a sense of humor and, to a certain degree, distinct perspectives on contemporary power dynamics that shape the news.

Second, conversational engagement with followers and others on the timeline serves as a form of source development. Regular, public interactions online promote trust between Twitter users and news professionals, making users more willing to either speak on the record themselves or refer journalists to others who may have information relevant to the stories they want to report.

Finally, making regular conversation with other Twitter users grants journalists who otherwise have little knowledge or connection to Black Twitter a relatively unobtrusive opportunity to learn more about the history, power dynamics and discourse within those communities. The language, references and other information journalists refer to as background are bandied about in everyday conversation among Black Twitter's folks. Engaging in the everyday dialogue will keep journalists from making "you're not from around here" mistakes like the **#coatswitching** debacle of 2016. Peter Howell, the Toronto Star's movie columnist, learned this in the Great Twitter Lecture Hall when he referred to "Moonlight" director Barry Jenkins' ability to switch between street vernacular and more urbane language as "coatswitching," rather than "code-switching," as the practice is called. (To be fair, he is Canadian; perhaps he misheard.)

The quality of these conversations delineates the difference between surveilling, listening to, and actually engaging with Black Twitter. The return on investment of time is manifested in the reporting that black users seek and share online.

# Covering the diversity of Black America

Several respondents mentioned turning to Twitter for their news rather than relying on broadcast, print or online news sites for information about black communities. For some such users, the tendency to seek news about black communities bounded by geographies, cultural commonalities and social identities began with news about their respective college campuses. For others, Black Twitter opened up a world of information about identities they did not find being reported on anywhere else. “Black women, black feminists, black gay men—they’re basically invisible communities outside of Black Twitter,” said Barbara Olivier, a student at Lafayette College.

According to a study published in 2014 by the Media Insight Project, 75 percent of black Americans said news media accurately reported on their communities only “moderately” or “slightly/not at all.” Participants said mainstream news media tend to focus only on narratives of deviance or exceptionalism among black Americans and ignore the complexities of identity and power.

In 2007, social-media-fueled citizen journalism about the Jena Six, a group of black teens convicted of beating a white teen in Jena, Louisiana, presented one of the earliest cases of the use of Twitter by black Americans to disrupt the national news agenda. “People were using Twitter to get out news around the Jena Six,” said Jesse Holland, who reports on race in America for The Associated Press. “They said, ‘Have you seen this?’ ‘Have you heard about this?’ ‘The news media isn’t talking about this. Honestly, I had not heard about [it],” Holland said. He first saw chatter about the case on Twitter. “Then I started paying attention to local news reports about it,” he said. In September 2007, one day before the youngest of the Jena Six was to be sentenced,



tens of thousands of people descended on the Louisiana city (pop. 3,300) to protest the teens' disproportionately harsh punishments. The conversation, coverage and protests were early indicators of Black Twitter's power to shape news narratives, Holland said.

In this sense, the personal communities and subject-matter "neighborhoods" position high-profile users within Black Twitter as secondary gatekeepers of information. While some participants use their own blogs, videos, memes or threaded "tweetstorms" to present black-oriented perspectives on the day's news, others circulate stories from mainstream media, adding commentary to characterize it for members of their communities. In some respects, Black Twitter's participants become news workers themselves, connecting mainstream outlets with populations they have alienated through routine journalistic practices.

#askhermore #believewome  
#blogger16 #distractinglyse  
#everydayfeminism  
#everydaysexism #fem2  
#feminism #feminist  
#feministfuture #girlslikeus  
#heforshe #howtospotafemi  
#ifmenhadperiods  
#ilooklikeanengineer #istan  
#myfeminismis #nastywoma  
#notallmen #notbuyingit #n  
#pussygrabsback #rapecult  
#sayhername #shoutyourabo  
#standwithpp #survivorpriv  
#theemptychair #whitefemi  
#whyistayed #womeninstem  
#yesallmen #yesallwomen  
#youoksis #rapeculture #eq  
#sandrabland #imwithher #  
#heforshe #blacklivesmatte  
#blackwomenmatter #imwi  
#iwd2016 #hrw #notbuying  
#youoksis #women #fem2  
#education #pinkout #huma  
#p2 #tcot #uniteblue #femi  
#prochoice #askhermore  
#everydaysexism #distracti  
#sayhername #childabuse  
#ilooklikeanengineer #nasty  
#standwithpp #genderequat  
#notallmen #istandwithpp

# Feminist Twitter



Sarah J. Jackson

Feminist Twitter is an amalgamation of users with diverse backgrounds and varied experiences with journalism, politics and social justice work. Members of this community list traditional feminist issues such as reproductive rights and reproductive justice, sexual assault and gendered violence, workplace discrimination and harassment, and other topics media-makers have long labeled “women’s issues” as central to their informational and political concerns. But this community is also outspoken about commitments to racial justice, sex and gender justice, labor and immigration rights, the environment and other progressive issues.

Members of this network have long created their own media, with many reporting having joined Twitter as an early extension of their participation in the feminist blogosphere, in left-of-center online political organizing spaces such as

MoveOn.org, and in academic or personal investments in centering women's voices and critiquing mainstream narratives about gender, race, and other identity-based issues. This is reflected in many of the Feminist Twitter hashtags and debates that have received news coverage in recent years including [\*\*#yesallwomen\*\*](#) after the 2014 Isla Vista shooting that targeted women at the University of California at Santa Barbara; [\*\*#solidarityisforwhitewomen\*\*](#), a hashtag created by Mikki Kendall that forced the Feminist Twittersphere to address histories of racism in feminist activism; [\*\*#survivorprivilege\*\*](#), the hashtag created by campus anti-rape activist Wagatwe Wanjuki in response to a column in The Washington Post claiming that accusations of rape on college campuses are falsified and exaggerated; [\*\*#notbuyingit\*\*](#), a hashtag used to call out sexist commercials during the Super Bowl, and many others.

When asked to define "Feminist Twitter," members of this community disagree about whether it can be bounded because of historical tensions within the feminist movement. In particular, community members distinguished what they call "mainstream feminism" or "white feminism," a category that is described as often excluding or marginalizing the concerns of women of color, immigrant women, queer and transgender

women, disabled women and fat women, from “Black Feminist Twitter,” which is described as including all of the above as well as issues related to racial justice that are not generally categorized as feminist issues (e.g., prison reform). (This report incorporated hashtags associated with both categories.) What is notable about these descriptions is that almost every person interviewed for this study (including white, Latina, Asian and black women) spontaneously described these distinct feminisms and seemed to use the categories of “white feminism” and “black feminism” as stand-ins for particular politics that are not necessarily distinct to race. For example, several white women interviewed reported that they do not see themselves as part of “white feminist Twitter” because they closely follow Twitter conversations about the rights of transgender people, incarcerated women, sex workers, and fat women—categories that are not racial but which they view as being excluded from “mainstream” “white feminism.” Thus, the nature of Feminist Twitter’s boundaries seems to fall somewhere between those of Black Twitter, a community that sees itself as clearly bounded in a common identity and set of experiences, and those of Asian-American Twitter, in which cohesiveness is strategic but not necessarily constant.

In addition to examining the network characteristics, leadership and popular discourses in Feminist Twitter for this study, we interviewed 15 influential members of this network. Several key findings arose from this data:

- ✔ **Intersectionality is a core value of Feminist Twitter: Feminist Twitter is far more diverse, in terms of both the identities of its membership and the issues they are concerned with, than mainstream media reflect.**
- ✔ **Feminist Twitter became newsworthy, and feminist users became newsmakers, through advocacy: Many members of Feminist Twitter identify as journalists, writers and public commentators. While some members identified this way before Twitter, many became newsmakers because of their political engagement online.**
- ✔ **Feminist Twitter is highly skeptical of mainstream journalists whose voices are elevated in the mainstream media and how they cover feminist issues. Members of this community are more likely to trust content written and shared by journalists and columnists with connections to the Feminist Twitter community than any particular**

# **(Intersectional) Feminist Twitter makes the news**

One of the most notable findings is that the top users in the Feminist Twitter network reflect far greater diversity in race, sexual orientation, gender, ability, and age than the top mainstream journalists who cover it. The overwhelming majority of journalists covering Feminist Twitter are young, middle/upper class, cisgender white women—something the interview participants identified as a problem, frequently citing the centrality of intersectionality in the network and the concern that mainstream media have a blind spot when it comes to including women who do not fit a particular mold.

In this regard, participants describe Twitter as a platform that helps to “expand,” “amplify” and “promote” the growing intersectional commentary, analysis and reporting that once arose from, and challenged, the feminist and politically progressive blogosphere. Some of the blogs that brought these users to Twitter are now defunct, but even members of the network who write for ongoing high-traffic blogs, such as Melissa McEwan of Shakesville, suggest that Twitter took over the role that blogs once played in terms of community-building and debate because of the wider and more immediate engagement the platform allows and the way it facilitates “listening to people talking about their lives.” This centering of stories from people’s lives aligns with findings in Black and Asian-American Twitter communities in which identity-based experience is treated as expertise in a way not usually allowed to members of marginalized populations by traditional media.

Many participants identify as “writers” and write on feminist news and issues for the feminist press (such as Bitch magazine), feminist blogs (Feministing), women’s

magazines (Marie Claire) and the alternative press (ThinkProgress and Rewire). Notably, many of these writers either left other careers to pursue freelance writing (for example, former historians, engineers and attorneys) or continue to work in these careers while writing. Only some identify as “journalists,” and many of these describe a journey in coming to identify as journalists through experiences reporting on issues they care about despite lacking formal journalistic training. For example, Jessica Luther has published several high-profile investigative reports on sexual assault on college campuses and traces her move into journalism to the 2012-13 Texas state Senate battles over several anti-abortion bills. Luther was on the ground as a concerned citizen live-tweeting as pro-choice activists organized demonstrations at the capitol and Sen. Wendy Davis conducted a 13-hour filibuster. Imani Gandy, a former practicing attorney, identifies as a “legal journalist” because of the work she does reporting on the specifics of reproductive rights law, which combines her legal training with the journalistic goal of making the complex topic accessible to readers who might lack in-depth knowledge of the legal system.

Other members of the network shirk the title of “journalist.” These writers cite their own perspective that writing about “women’s issues” and “feminism” is not “neutral” or “objective”—descriptors they see used by mainstream journalists as justification for excluding social justice frameworks from their reporting or including voices from “the other side” that demean and endanger women.



# News, trust and Feminist Twitter

As reflected in the quantitative and qualitative data here, Feminist Twitter is concerned not solely with serious political issues but also with popular culture and sharing community around women's stories. For example, Feminist Twitter includes fans of programs such as "Scandal," and many interviewees cited some of their most enjoyable Feminist Twitter moments as those that included the community live-tweeting award shows. However, both the most retweeted news in the Feminist Twitter network and the accounts of members of this community attest to the issues most central to it. Interviewees listed the following issues as most important to the Feminist Twitter community in descending order of frequency: sexual violence/rape/gendered violence; reproductive rights and reproductive justice; racial justice (for example, many interviewees identified [#blacklivesmatter](#) as central to the Feminist Twitter network, and several noted that they have learned a lot from indigenous women in the network); transgender rights; politics generally (many interviewees particularly listed the 2012 and 2016 elections as having been central topics in the network as well as the campaigns of particular women legislators); representation of women in media/advertising/popular culture; the wage gap; and issues faced by women professionals in male-dominated fields such as tech.

The most retweeted news in the network reflects these concerns, with this news focusing on stories and using hashtags centered on women in political and social life generally ([#nastywoman](#), [#everydaysexism](#)), the killing of black women by police and the murder of trans women in general ([#sayhername](#), [#sandrabland](#), [#aiyannastanleyjones](#)), stories about sexual assault and rape ([#notokay](#), [#theemptychair](#), [#rapeculture](#)), trans rights ([#girlslikeus](#)), reproductive rights ([#standwithpp](#)), and women in the workplace ([#distractinglysexy](#)).

The participants report the most trust in the feminist press (Ms. Magazine, Bitch magazine, Bustle, The Establishment), the alternative press (ThinkProgress, Rewire), women's magazines (Teen Vogue, Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan) and international press such as The Guardian, for coverage of feminist issues and issues of general importance to the community. Trust in the feminist and alternative press and women's magazines is linked to the centering of women's perspectives and voices in these spaces and the clear positions taken on political and social issues ranging from abortion to female genital mutilation. Trust in international media is likely the consequence of a different editorial ethic abroad than in the U.S. Van Badham, a widely shared columnist in the Feminist Twitter network, describes, for example, an ethic at Guardian Australia in which "all my line editors are feminists, and the encouragement certainly is for me to write feminist work." Badham notes that she identifies not as a reporter but as a columnist and that she was brought on by Guardian Australia because of her extensive experience as an activist on progressive issues, connections to Labor Party members of Parliament and, in her own words, "being a smartass on the internet." No mainstream U.S. television news networks or newspapers were cited by participants as doing a "good job" on feminist issues.

Members of the Feminist Twitter network frequently name particular writers who are a part of that network as trusted sources of general news, including Jessica Luther, Robin Marty, Imani Gandy, Mikki Kendall, Lindy West and Irin Carmon. These and other members of the network describe being linked through Twitter in ways that allow for the development of trust and familiarity with one another's work and politics despite disparate geographic and social locations. When prompted to name mainstream outlets or mainstream journalists they trust for news, interviewees named very few of either, saying they tended to trust specific news stories that other members of the network share (as long as the share is not for the purpose

of critique) or trust news stories written by members of the network first, women of color second, and women generally third.

The only mainstream outlets or journalists whose names were specified by multiple interviewees as trustworthy are: Melissa Harris-Perry, whose canceled MSNBC morning show was the only TV news program that members of the network named as doing a “good job” on feminist issues and inclusion of feminist voices, and who now is an editor-at-large for Elle magazine; Jamil Smith, formerly of MTV News and The New Republic and who established much of his Feminist Twitter following while working as a producer at MSNBC for the “Melissa Harris-Perry” show; Yashar Ali of New York magazine, who, like many members of Feminist Twitter, blogged on gender and politics before entering mainstream journalism; and The New York Times, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times if and when a particular story or column in one of these publications is written by an identifiable member of the Feminist Twitter community (such as Lindy West or Tamara Winfrey Harris).

## **What Feminist Twitter wants from the news**

When asked what best practices journalists, editors and producers should adopt to gain more trust from members of the Feminist Twitter community and for better coverage of the issues important to this community, interviewees unequivocally echoed some form of the same interconnected recommendations: (1) hire a greater number and diversity of women to report, edit and analyze the news and (2) credit women for their ideas and use women sources ethically.

Participants repeated frequently that they believe the lack of diversity in newsrooms at the content production and editorial levels results in a failure to adequately cover feminist and women's issues specifically and to contextualize news generally. They suggest that more women journalists, and particularly women journalists of color and those with other intersecting identities (including trans women, disabled women and immigrant women), would create the nuance and care in stories the network believes are desperately lacking from the mainstream. Several interviewees compared the relationship of mainstream journalists to Feminist Twitter as anthropological rather than collaborative and described the discomfort of being written about as if alien rather than to or for.

Participants of all races named African-American users as those who have most significantly shaped the internal debates and politics of Feminist Twitter. These users include Mikki Kendall, Trudy, Jamie Nesbitt Golden, Feminista Jones and Jamia Wilson. Yet interviewees noted that these women are rarely given platforms to begin and advance careers in mainstream media. For example, Bitch magazine Editorial Director Lisa Factora-Borchers credits the "intersection of Black Twitter and feminism and black women having a platform to share analysis" as not only foundational to Feminist Twitter but apparently central to anyone who is a part of the network. However, she decries the ease with which ideas arising from that analysis are "plagiarized, branded and exploited" by media-makers who are not good faith members of the community.

Accordingly, members of Feminist Twitter believe mainstream journalists frequently used the ideas and debates that arise from Feminist Twitter interactions, blogs and feminist-specific publications and spaces to inform stories without crediting or citing the sources of these ideas. In doing so, interviewees argued, mainstream journalists often misunderstand or misconstrue feminist

ideas and debates because they lack the nuance that comes with being fully involved in those discussions, and render invisible the labor of the women engaged in developing those ideas and debates. Members of the community questioned why more mainstream outlets do not use feminist experts as sources in stories and why they return repeatedly to the same small number of “mainstream white feminists” (for example, Jessica Valenti, Amanda Marcotte and Jill Filipovic) as sources.

At the same time, members of the network are very concerned about the harm done by journalists and other media-makers who simply pull tweets or quotations from Twitter and report them in stories without first asking or alerting the authors of these tweets. They frequently cite the harm done to rape and domestic violence survivors by journalists who amplify tweets about their assaults without permission, or trans women and women of color who are viciously trolled when tweets intended for a smaller network are shared out of context. Interviewees who identify as journalists acknowledged the complexity of these issues given the public nature of Twitter, but insisted that basic journalistic ethics should include a consideration about how the inclusion (or exclusion) of particular voices and narratives that arise from feminist spaces can perpetuate inequality and exploitation.

#aaronist #aapl  
#aapical4solidarity  
#aapis4blacklives  
#aapisolidarity #actualasian  
#actualasianpoets #apis4bla  
#asianactorproblems  
#asianamerican #asians4bla  
#asiansresist #asianwhitew  
#askanadoptee #beingasian  
#belikedarsh #bobbyjindalis  
#cancelcolbert  
#cancelmailorderfamily  
#dearmyaapirep #emergingu  
#emmysowwhite #fight4aas  
#filipinasnot4sale #fredkore  
#freepeterliang #freshoffthe  
#goodmuslimbadmuslim  
#graceleeboggs #graceleeta  
#hawaiisowwhite #iamasian  
#iamnotyourwedge  
#immigrantheritagemonth  
#immigrationstoryin5words  
#intothebadlands #jindian  
#justice4liang #makemulan  
#manzanar #modelminority  
#muslimneighborhood #mya  
#myaapivote #myasianamer  
#myasianamericanstory  
#mybananastory  
#mysikhamericanlife  
#myyellowfacestory

poet  
acklives  
acklives  
ashing  
sowwhite  
S  
ematsu  
boat  
ughtme  
merican  
right  
nutiny  
apistory  
icanlife

## Asian-American Twitter



Lori Lopez

Asian-American Twitter refers to an occasional groundswell of Twitter conversation about topics of interest to Asian Americans. Asian-American Twitter is relatively small compared with Black and Feminist Twitter, which makes sense for a group that is only five percent of the U.S. population. It is also less of an ongoing conversation than the other two, emerging quickly in response to relevant external events and then subsiding as attention wanes. That said, it is the fastest growing of the three communities, and its digital conversations are deeply intertwined with coverage of Asian-Americans in mainstream journalism.<sup>14</sup> This includes both the frequent sharing of news articles by Asian-Americans on Twitter and the frequent news coverage of issues that were raised by communities on Twitter.



Asian-Americans interviewed for this report generally noted fairly positive relationships with journalists and mainstream news coverage. Many Asian-American activists create Twitter campaigns with the hope that journalists will notice and call attention to issues that are otherwise being ignored, such as violence against Asian-Americans or the invisibility of Asian-Americans in Hollywood. When journalists contact Asian-Americans about their tweets and hashtag campaigns, it is seen as a signal that their activism has been effective, and those contacted are generally pleased with the stories that ensue—particularly when the stories are written by Asian-American reporters.

This does not mean that all coverage of Asian America is good coverage, as there are still plenty of concerns about journalists misunderstanding the issues, failing to effectively depict the diversity of the community, or reifying negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, Asian-Americans often spoke passionately about how they still did not see their stories represented in mainstream journalism at all, and how they believed this reflected the widespread belief that Asian-American issues just did not matter. Twitter gives Asian-Americans an ability to challenge these injustices and rise to public consciousness, even if only for a moment.



In the sections that follow, these key observations are explored:

- ✔ **Asian-Americans use Twitter as a tool for anti-racism organizing, but not for sustaining a long-term digital community like those seen in Black Twitter and Feminist Twitter.**
- ✔ **Asian-Americans on Twitter tend to trust individual reporters over specific outlets, and the journalists they trusted were Asian-Americans who had a track record of good reporting on issues affecting their communities.**
- ✔ **Asian-Americans are hungry for more news coverage, as long as reporters work to become part of their communities and accurately reflect their complexities.**
- ✔ **Asian-American journalists become activists alongside Twitter users when they are successful in pitching stories that are important to Asian-Americans and write them in a way that is authentic to their backgrounds.**

# Asian-American Twitter as temporary anti- racism coalition

Many Asian-American Twitter users believed there was not a singular or stable “Asian-American Twitter” that could compare to what they recognized as “Black Twitter.” They identified a small number of prominent Asian-American Twitter users who consistently contribute to dialogue about Asian-American issues, including a number of individuals who represented hybrid roles that spanned media production and activism/community organizing. But most considered Asian-American Twitter to be a fluid collective that would coalesce momentarily “in celebration or outrage” and then fade away. One respondent said: “Asian-American Twitter happens in moments; it’s not a fixed space in quite the same way as Black Twitter. It only surfaces when it needs to exist.” Many believed they did not see the same level of community support (“we don’t necessarily defend each other or boost each other up”) or cohesiveness from Asian-American Twitter as they saw in Black Twitter.

When Asian-Americans momentarily rise to visibility on Twitter, they use it to call attention to neglected instances of racial injustice—against Asian-Americans, but also in solidarity with other communities of color. Some of the most commonly identified moments when Asian-American Twitter materialized were in response to casting and representational issues in Hollywood. Hashtags such as [#whitewashedout](#), [#aaironfist](#), [#iammajor](#), [#makemulanright](#) and [#starringjohncho](#) reference the outrage from Asian-Americans when white actors were cast to play Asian or Asian-American roles. Beyond casting issues, Asian-Americans also responded collectively to moments such as an episode of “The Walking Dead” in

which Asian-American actor Steven Yeun's character Glenn was beaten to death with a baseball bat—a tragic character death that was reminiscent of the brutal murder of Chinese-American Vincent Chin in the 1980s.

In this vein, there have also been many instances in which violence, discrimination, bullying, harassment and hate crimes against Asian-Americans were reported by Twitter users long before they were covered by mainstream news. For instance, Asian-Americans used Twitter to call attention to the racial dynamics of the mistreatment of passenger David Dao, who was dragged off a United Airlines flight.<sup>15</sup> Participants argued that mainstream journalism was not discussing Dao's race, but they strongly believed his Asian identity contributed to his treatment on the airplane and in the coverage that followed. The hashtag **#thisis2016** rose to prominence after Michael Luo, a high-profile Asian-American journalist at The New York Times, used it to describe his experiences of anti-Asian racism.

But one of the narratives that was most central to participants' descriptions of the way that Asian-Americans were coming together on Twitter was to support other communities of color. In particular, they commonly spoke about Asian-Americans who were politically aligned with the Black Lives Matter social movement with hashtags such as **#asians4blacklives** and with Latinx communities using hashtags such as **#heretostay** and **#immigrantheritagemoth**. There was a lot of frustration around the fact that Asian-American cross-racial alliances were often elided in mainstream media. One participant described the campaigns surrounding **#oscarssowhite**: "It was an act of solidarity amongst marginalized groups, but it became a wedge issue, and a lot of that was because of how it was covered." The term "wedge issue" refers to the fact that Asian-Americans are often pitted against other minorities, rather than being understood as politically aligned, which is the explicit political goal of many Asian-American participants on Twitter.

Among Asian-American Twitter users who do rise to visibility through the use of retweeted hashtags, there are many high-profile professionals. These include actors, authors, activists, scholars and journalists—for example, Constance Wu, Phil Yu, Jeff Yang, Michael Luo and Jeremy Lin. Many of the Twitter accounts that are used to propel hashtags into mainstream conversations are those of activist organizations or media outlets. This is in contrast to the idea that ordinary people can use their personal Twitter accounts to contribute to this kind of message circulation. Ordinary users do sometimes contribute to Twitter virality, such as some of the most prominently retweeted messages for [#makemulanright](#) and [#beingasian](#). But it was much more common for the most retweeted messages to have been sent by prominent Asian-Americans who already were well-known outside Twitter.

## **Developing trust with Asian-American journalists**

When asked what kinds of journalism they found most trustworthy or were most likely to share with their followers, participants did not name any news outlets. Instead, they named specific journalists such as Jay Caspian Kang and Kat Chow, whose work they found to be well-researched, nuanced and fleshed out. They particularly were satisfied when stories carefully contextualized the complex issues that arose in Twitter conversations. They wanted reporters to consider the way that every individual tweet is part of a larger set of communities, conversations and racial politics. Participants noted that any single journalistic outlet could have a mixture of stories—some that did a good job representing Asian-American issues and sourcing Asian-

Americans, and others that were disappointing because they relied only on negative stereotypes or showed a lack of research. This is why they came to trust only individual reporters whose track record demonstrated that they understood and cared about the specificities of Asian-American experiences.

All of the interviewees said the stories they trusted the most were written by Asian-Americans, while the articles that were most inaccurate were written by non-Asians, specifically white reporters. One participant said: “Mainstream journalism operates from a space that heavily defaults to white issues. How do I trust this perspective when they don’t make the assumption that ‘people’ includes nonwhite people?”

Common frustrations about the way journalists reported on Twitter conversations included failing to wait for a user’s permission when posting tweets and listing the tweets without properly researching where they came from, whether or not there was a coalition behind the tweet. Participants also complained about moments when reporters showed a poor understanding of racialized tropes and concepts, such as the difference between “whitewashing” and “the white savior trope” in stories inspired by hashtags such as [#whitewashedout](#) and [#aaironfist](#). Stories that left out South and Southeast Asians were also seen to misrepresent the true diversity of Asian America. There was a desire to see more complicated and nuanced issues covered in mainstream reportage. One participant described growing weary of “rehashing the same conversation over and over again with no progress, no new takes.” Interviewees encouraged journalists to help move conversations forward rather than always using mainstream journalism as a site for “Asian-American Studies 101.”

# Asian-Americans want more coverage

A common theme across interviews was that participants at a basic level simply wanted to see more coverage of Asian-American issues in mainstream journalism. They saw their engagements on Twitter productively contributing to this hoped-for outcome and saw news coverage as an indication that their activism had succeeded in pushing their issues into the spotlight.

Nearly all of their engagements with journalists who had contacted them through Twitter had been positive, and they were very receptive to being contacted in the future. One participant said, “I was pleasantly surprised that in most cases, the people who interviewed me gave me plenty of chance to let me speak, they let me talk about things in a complex way, and they tried to represent that.” When journalists contacted them via Twitter, the participants liked knowing the reporter’s background and hearing what the focus or intention of the story would be. None believed they had been misled or deceived by a reporter, and few had been disappointed with the stories that resulted.

Of the engagements with journalists that were disappointing, most stemmed from complications around attribution or failing to give proper credit to participants in Twitter activism or campaigns. One participant described the conflict as such: “The media is not well-equipped to deal with movements or stories that are created by movements or large groups of people where there’s not one main character. When you talk about stories that happen on Twitter, that’s not how it works. The story is, why did all these very different people feel sufficiently compelled to come together to work on this thing?” Another mentioned that stories about the hashtag [#whitewashedout](#) had failed to properly describe the large team of participants who had carefully organized the campaign. Even after

speaking directly to members of the team, many reporters seemed to attribute the visibility of the hashtag to tweets by comedian Margaret Cho.

Beyond hiring more Asian-American journalists, the participants hoped that journalists would broaden and diversify their Twitter following habits so that they could stumble upon different topics and users. When discussing Twitter campaigns and phenomena that are complex and potentially leaderless, they suggested finding ways to crowdsource questions so that the responses might reflect the messy and contradictory ways that Twitter campaigns are organized. Reporters should seek to become part of the communities they cover, to the best of their abilities.

## **Asian-American journalists engage in media activism**

The journalists interviewed for this story were selected because they identified as Asian-American and were extremely active on Twitter, with between 10,000 and 40,000 published tweets each. They wrote for a variety of publications, from large legacy media outlets to smaller online publishers. They covered different beats, including entertainment, politics, breaking news and racial issues. But one aspect that united their work was that they saw themselves as playing an important role in supporting Asian-American activism through bringing their personal backgrounds and sensibilities to their reporting and shedding light on stories that flew under the mainstream radar.

Twitter was viewed as a highly productive tool for gathering story ideas, and many journalists had come to rely on the platform for a wide array of purposes. One said: “I definitely use Twitter to surface stories and see what conversations people are having. Also for seeing stories that are reported

on a smaller level and just kind of gauging people's reactions." They were not particularly focused on hashtags or trending topics, though some had reported on hashtag-related issues in the past. Rather, they checked their Twitter feeds to learn about the topics that were important to Asian-Americans. Others described Twitter as "auxiliary" to their reporting; they might primarily read trade publications or press releases to learn about what was going on in the entertainment world, for instance, but then could turn to Twitter for emotional responses that went deeper than the analysis provided by professional spokespeople.

Many Asian-American journalists also relied on Twitter for interview sources. They described having significant success contacting people through a simple direct message, and some said Twitter users would DM them with story suggestions as well. One reporter described the willingness of Asian-American Twitter users to share their posts or give quotes related to the issue at hand, and laid out her own approach and values: "I was offering these people a very wide audience to air their grievances to, so that was helpful. Typically, I'm coming to people stating why I want to hear from them—I think you have valuable insight, I think you're an authority. I try to assure people I'm not using them as a prop or for a sound bite that will make them look bad. I want to help them get to a larger audience. Part of what Asians are being stereotyped for is being passive, so people really wanted to speak up."

Asian-American journalists had stories of fighting to develop a focus on Asian-American communities in their reportage. They appreciated the support they felt from Asian-American audiences, because it helped them to convince their editors that this was a beat worth pursuing. Such efforts to counter the systemic erasure of Asian-Americans from mainstream media position these journalists as media activists, even if they do not identify themselves as such. Their efforts to remedy the social injustice of Asian-American narratives being devalued



or misrepresented must be understood as aligned with more overtly political forms of media activism, such as participating in watchdog organizations, policy advocacy, or minority professional alliances such as the Asian American Journalists Association.<sup>16</sup>

The journalists interviewed for this study had not experienced much negative backlash from Twitter communities, but understood that this was sensitive territory. One participant said: “If you mess up online and you have an online persona, the internet will destroy you. I’ve learned to be more mindful; people are really sensitive.” Asian-American journalists are accurate in their understanding that productive relationships with Asian-American communities on Twitter, and more generally, are connected to their own identities and investment in the community. Although they still described their reporting as objective and impartial, they also recognized that being recognizable as Asian-American made them the best person to report on those topics. One said, “I’m part of this community too. I try to frame my reporting as, I’m exploring this thing, but I’m also a part of it too. It’s something that’s very connected to me.”

#reelthebern #freddiegray  
#betowards #blacklivesmat  
#notmypresident #blackout  
#thanksgivingwithblackfam  
#sayhername #oscars  
#altonsterling #staywoke  
#imstillwithher #batonrouge  
#ferguson #uniteblue #ripvi  
#concernedstudent1950 #ok  
#sandrabland #dallas #ichoc  
#famousmelaniatrumpquote  
#baltimore #oscarssowwhite  
#askrachel #vinehalloffame  
#cnnbelike #trumpprotest  
#benandjerrysnewflavor #u  
#girlslikeus #rapeculture #e  
#sandrabland #imwithher #  
#heforshe #blacklivesmatte  
#blackwomenmatter #imwi  
#iwd2016 #hrw #notbuyingi  
#youoksis #women #fem2  
#education #pinkout #huma  
#p2 #tcot #uniteblue #femin  
#prochoice #askhermore  
#everydaysexism #distracti  
#sayhername #childabuse  
#ilooklikeanengineer #nasty  
#standwithpp #genderequal  
#notallmen #istandwithpp #  
#notokay #yesallwomen #cu  
#womeninstem #shoutyours

ter  
day  
ilise

e #tcot  
ne  
amaday  
osebey  
es

niteblue  
equality  
feminist  
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nglysexy

woman  
lity  
#abortion  
culture  
abortion

## Recommendations for journalists



Meredith D. Clark

The “fix” for professional news media outlets and the diverse communities they cover is simple, and it is tweeted every day among the groups represented in this research: Do the work. Just as reporters of journalism lore spent hours talking to potential sources, media professionals who truly want to improve their outlet’s position in the digital and social media landscape will invest the time to learn more about the communities and individuals they meet online. The context behind each click, share and “favorite” tell a much richer story than can be conveyed by numbers alone. Sometimes digital traffic is an indication of a cultural failure on the news outlet’s part: Tweets may be retweeted or favorited because the writer and/or outlet are being singled out for criticism. While it is tempting to ignore online chatter, dismissing the standpoints of underrepresented people in media contributes to further division between people who make news and those who need it most.

A pre-emptive measure, and one that newsrooms everywhere should adopt, is to allow reporters and editors to spend more time pursuing meaningful digital and social media engagement that may not immediately connect with the organization's bottom line. This interaction can include participating in the online conversation as users second-screen a televised event, such as a weekly show or awards special. Make note of the best tweets of the night and their subsequent commentary. Develop a list of people to follow who offer insightful comment about what may seem banal or even alien to you. The task is cultural immersion in an experience unlike your own.

To avoid engaging in cultural anthropology—studying community members from a distance rather than connecting with them—media professionals should give of themselves online as well. One key suggestion from the individuals queried as part of the Black Twitter research is that a journalist should show themselves to be “real people.” When I first joined Twitter as an editorial writer, my colleagues derisively mocked the platform as a place where people talk about their lunch. They missed the point. Everybody (unless they're experiencing food insecurity) eats. Every day, if they're fortunate. Tweeting about a favorite restaurant, with pictures of the food or the company, or a brief story about an

#overheard conversation, paints a picture of one part of a person's day. While seemingly banal, it is relatable, no-brainer information that gives readers a bit of perspective about your day. It confirms that the person behind the byline is not just a faceless name—it's someone who enjoys a good sandwich just as much as the next person.

More substantively, social media are a solid channel for telling potential readers and listeners about the information that did not make the final edition. Reporters can use social media to provide timely answers to questions about stories after they are published, often developing potential leads for follow-ups. Another actionable suggestion is for journalists to make a weekly habit of detailing how they worked on one story. Social media offer an opportunity to be more transparent with readers. Outlets that appreciate this will find ways to push information about their decisions and processes to better connect with the groups they want to serve.

The dwindling of “objectivity” in news has contributed to the divide between media and devalued groups, including women, people of color, members of LGBTQ communities, and folks who fit all those descriptions. Objectivity is a value that was introduced and shaped by white men, often to the exclusion

of others. When those others were included, their stories were told from a disconnected worldview that focused on what was easily measured and described from a majority point of view. Now, as the numbers of “minority” populations continue to grow, together we will soon occupy majority status in the country’s demographic profile.

We hope that these suggestions, and indeed the entire report, will meaningfully contribute to the ongoing conversation about how journalists ought to cover social media communities centered on traditionally marginalized groups. We hope to build on these findings to explore more currently understudied populations and how they may express themselves on Twitter. We welcome reader feedback, which we may incorporate into future publications on the subject.

# Synthesis and implications

Having finished with the empirical sections of the report, we now return to the three major research questions we introduced at the outset. We hope the answers will help improve the quality of the relationships between journalists and the social media communities they cover.

## How do community participants interact with journalists and news content?

Overall, this report paints a picture of three Twitter communities largely in control of their distinct agendas. Indeed, Figure 2 suggests that communities are more interested in interacting directly with politicians, celebrities and activists than with news outlets. News websites and Twitter accounts constitute a minority of the most-referenced in each community, although it seems likely that many community tweets discuss issues that participants originally learned about from news sources. Social media and multimedia sites are much more prevalent, which raises the possibility that participants are using them to share non-news content. Indeed, Figure 2 suggests that communities are more interested in interacting directly with politicians, celebrities and activists than with news outlets.

Activism was an abiding theme in the content produced and shared within the three communities. Most of the top hashtags focused on activist subtopics such as police brutality, racial justice, sexual violence, gendered harassment, and minority media representation. In this context, news content becomes a key source of information about developments in ongoing stories within each

category. It seems likely that much of the discussion around these issues probably drew on information from news articles, even when the tweets themselves did not include any news links or Twitter accounts. But discovering exactly how the millions of unique users found out about each issue they tweeted about lay beyond our empirical capabilities.

Interactions between communities and journalists were heavily colored by the low levels of trust of the latter by the former. This emerged repeatedly in both our quantitative and qualitative results. Negative net favorability scores for the top outlets outnumbered positive scores by over 2-to-1, yet an interesting paradox emerged with respect to content sharing. The lowest-rated outlets were also some of the most shared, indicating that sharing activity does not necessarily imply endorsement of the content. In a similar vein, very few of the writers, journalists and outlets mentioned as trustworthy by interviewees appeared among the most referenced Twitter accounts or web domains. This gap has several possible explanations: One is that dissatisfaction with a news outlet's coverage may actually increase sharing of its stories. But most responsible outlets would not intentionally exploit this dynamic even if it were true. Another possibility is that outlet visibility is driving both sharing activity and unfavorability. If this is the case, it should be possible for news outlets to maximize trust and content reach at the same time.

While considering the above analysis, we should also recall that only a small minority of news-bearing tweets contained any evaluation of the article or outlet. Many news-bearing tweets were simply retweets of the story's original headline without any additional commentary. News organizations might be tempted to treat these as endorsements, but our analysis indicates that participants need not fully endorse news stories to share them. Because the largest and best-known news outlets also tend to break news, participants may share based on availability rather than waiting on their



preferred outlets to post a story. Further, our interviewees noted that their trust in mainstream news outlets is uneven because one might post a favorable story one day and something extremely problematic the next. Thus, retweets of particular news stories, even when users do endorse them, should not be interpreted as blanket endorsements of the publishing outlets.

## How do journalists report on and interact with communities and their participants?

Unsurprisingly, journalists tend to write about hashtags that can be pegged to traditional news priorities—politics, activism, crime, entertainment, science/technology, etc. In some cases, the stories describe social media reactions to newsworthy events (e.g. [#myasianamericanstory](#), which was a reaction to a comment by Jeb Bush; and [#famousmelaniatrumpquotes](#), which parodied the similarities between Melania Trump’s speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention and an earlier speech by Michelle Obama). In others, the hashtag created the story on its own (as with [#oscarssowwhite](#), [#thisis2016](#) and [#girlslikeus](#)). In at least these two ways, social media have become a fixture of reporting on a wide range of traditional news topics.

Of course, not everything social media communities do will necessarily be newsworthy. Some hashtags, such as community in-jokes (e.g., [#duraghistoryweek](#)) and nostalgia trips ([#beingasian](#)), drew less attention, probably because they were less likely to interest outside audiences. This lack of coverage highlights communities’ role as a sort of gossip page for ordinary users, giving participants who share

something catchy enough their 15 minutes of fame. It is not the sort of thing one would necessarily see on CNN or in the local paper, but it helps bind the community together, a key journalistic value. Communities apply somewhat different criteria from journalists when deciding what to share, and this may contribute to the trust gap between the parties.

The interviews further illuminated these differences. Most news professionals are beholden to the ideal of objectivity, which prevents reporters from taking sides. This was another source of friction with participants, who often found the resulting reporting inappropriately detached from its subject matter.<sup>17</sup> In extreme cases, this resulted in reporters misunderstanding key concepts such as code-switching and whitewashing, and those misunderstandings being passed on to unsuspecting readers. Following social media conversations from a distance without engaging genuinely makes such errors more likely.

Perhaps it goes without saying that when news outlets mine communities for stories, they expose participants to much wider audiences than would otherwise be the case. This high visibility is a double-edged sword for participants. On the positive side, they can draw more attention to issues that are important to them, in the process potentially moving toward the goal of systemic change. Our Asian-American Twitter interviewees were especially appreciative of the journalistic attention they received. On the negative side, higher visibility can also expose some users to harassment or other unwanted attention. This in turn can damage communities by reducing or eliminating participation by prominent participants who become targets of coordinated harassment campaigns.

# **How can the relationship between the professional news media and these online communities be improved?**

Our results suggest multiple aspects of the relationships between journalists and communities that could be improved. Most of these came from participants, which makes sense given the more powerful position of salaried journalists working for widely known news outlets. The most frequently mentioned areas for improvement fell into four main categories: inclusion, representation, acknowledgment and protection.

## **Inclusion**

Many participants we interviewed felt shut out of the mainstream news media. This sense of exclusion is one reason for the development of independent online community spaces in the first place. Despite the success of these spaces, participants wanted to see people like themselves in high-prestige positions at internationally known news outlets. This is in part because they do not want their stories being told solely by outsiders—they want community perspectives woven in organically by people who know what they're talking about. Closely related to this is the desire of writers from marginalized groups to be able to make a living as salaried journalists, instead of only as precarious freelancers or occasional contributors.

The obvious solution is for major news outlets to hire more staff from these communities. Lack of diversity in mainstream newsrooms is a long-running complaint, but the specific criticisms detailed in our interviews lend it new

urgency. News outlets will never be able to tell the complete story about issues that matter to marginalized people without substantial representation on the masthead.

## **Representation**

Related but distinct from inclusion is representation, by which we mean portraying each community as diverse and complex rather than monolithic. Labels such as “Asian-American Twitter,” “Black Twitter” and “Feminist Twitter” can give a false impression of unity, and headlines such as “[#BlackTwitter](#) Isn’t Happy with Tyrese’s Latest Comments on Women” or “Feminist Twitter Shuts Down CBS for Passing on ‘Too Female’ Pilot” may lead readers to underestimate the internal diversity of online communities.<sup>18</sup> For groups that have long struggled for mainstream visibility and respect, monolithic portrayals breed mistrust.

Representation also means penetrating beyond superficial and introductory accounts of communities that may not be household names. The “anthropological” viewpoint that many outsider journalists bring to community-focused stories was repeatedly cited as problematic by interviewees. Of course, a certain degree of explanation is necessary to offer context to readers who are not familiar with a given community. Thus, journalists should seek innovative ways of providing such context and explaining unfamiliar terms and concepts without “othering” community members.

It seems logical to assume that increased inclusion will lead to improvements in representation, but this will not necessarily happen automatically. In addition to diversifying reporting staff, news outlets should also instruct editors to bear the goal of representation in mind when commissioning and editing stories. For example, they could consider how often they have written about the community in question and ensure that later stories build on earlier ones instead of rehashing the same introductory

content. Another factor to bear in mind is the outlet's target audience: Editors will be able to make different assumptions about what most readers will probably know based on who they are. The degree of explanation necessary for an online publication written for black millennials will differ from what would be appropriate for USA Today.

## **Acknowledgment**

Some of the most prominent community participants we contacted for this study refused to speak with us. Thus, this very report suffers from the communities' mistrust of journalists—under better circumstances, it might have benefited from broader participation. One of the main reasons participants gave was a sense that news outlets had taken advantage of them in the past by appropriating their ideas without giving proper acknowledgment, credit or compensation. Sometimes this takes the form of community-sourced ideas showing up in published articles without any mention of who created them.<sup>19</sup> A good example of this is journalistic uses of community-specific language such as “on fleek” and “throwing shade” that rarely reference their origins. Consequently, outlets often misuse the terms or misinterpret the ideas they represent. Participants also disliked articles that were little more than best-of lists of tweets from viral hashtags.<sup>20</sup> While embedded tweets offer a degree of acknowledgment by linking to creators' profiles, journalists do not always obtain permission to post the tweets. (As explained in the Black Twitter section, Twitter's terms of service do not require such permission.)

The easiest solution would be to ask participants before quoting or embedding tweets in a story. Rather than simply assuming that “public” tweets imply unrestricted permission to repost in any context, journalists should show respect by empowering users to grant or withhold such permission. Going further, several participants raised the issue that tweets are intellectual property and that therefore users should be paid royalties for the use of their

tweets. While this may not be feasible as a general policy, boosting inclusion by hiring exceptionally creative and prolific community participants contributes to this goal while cultivating trust.

## **Protection**

Besides acknowledgment, some participants suffer elevated risks of harassment because of who they are, what they say, or how they say it. Journalists need to be aware of these risks both pre- and post-publication. Specific individuals and subgroups who have been attacked in the past need targeted measures taken in advance to minimize potential harms. One common example is that Twitter's tweet-embedding feature exposes users' profile information without offering an option to hide it. This information provides harassers a direct path to their targets. Thus, the officially sanctioned method of incorporating tweets into online articles could cause serious problems for certain users in certain contexts.

One potential solution is to grant anonymity to any community member who requests it and avoid using the embed function in such situations. One way to do this is to take screenshots of tweets to be included in articles and redact any identifying information from them or their visible metadata. Yet journalists and participants should be aware that web-searching the text of anonymous tweets will reveal the originals, screen names and all. Furthermore, harassment can ensue unexpectedly when all parties have agreed to post tweets with identifying information. In such cases, journalists should strongly consider removing any information that may help harassers find their targets. Communities typically prioritize their own safety above the public's right to know, and would be more likely to trust news outlets that do so as well.

One of our Black Twitter interviewees alleged that some outlets are inconsistent in how they handle different users' tweets. According to this individual, some users are extended the protections of redaction and other identity-shielding measures, while others—especially black women—are not. It is not clear which news outlet or outlets this user was referring to, but the comment urges journalists to apply their identity-protective policies evenly to all sources. The mere possibility of disparate treatment between social groups should motivate outlets to take steps to ensure that it does not occur.

# Appendix

The quantitative sections of this report were based on a data set of 44,620,175 tweets posted during 2015 and 2016. These tweets were purchased directly from Twitter and matched at least one of 152 hashtags associated with one of the three communities. These hashtags were selected by the authors based on press coverage and their personal knowledge of the content. Table A1 displays these hashtags. (Asian-American Twitter features many more hashtags than the two other communities because it is by far the smallest and we wanted to make sure we had enough tweets to analyze.) Tweets were analyzed using scripts and software written in the Python programming language by the first author.

## **Identifying news-related links and Twitter accounts**

To identify web links and Twitter accounts associated with news outlets and journalists, we began by computationally compiling a list of the most popular web domains appearing in the tweets. Next we identified which of the top 300 such domains belonged to a news outlet or reporter. (We used a liberal definition of “news” that included bloggers and nontraditional and professional commentators and suppliers of political content.) This process generated 125 distinct news outlets after multiple domains belonging to a single outlet were consolidated. We then computationally combed through all tweets in the data set and recorded all verified accounts that tweeted one of these domains. From these, we extracted 592 accounts that we manually confirmed to be affiliated with one of the 125 outlets, most of which belonged either to individual journalists (@donlemon, for example) or subject-specific verticals (@huffpostwomen). The result was a list of domains and accounts associated with the most popular news outlets in our sample.



### **Net favorability index**

To calculate the net favorability index, a content analysis was conducted. First, we randomly selected 3,000 tweets (1,000 from each community) that contained a screen name or URL associated with one of the news outlets identified by the process described above. Then two research assistants (RAs) of a group of five read each tweet and judged whether it praised or criticized a news outlet or journalist. Once they finished, we compiled their ratings into distinct favorability and unfavorability scores for each outlet based on the link or screen name mentioned in each tweet. We counted instances in which both RAs agreed on favorability or unfavorability as one point for that score/outlet, and instances where they disagreed as half a point. We then subtracted each outlet's aggregate unfavorability rating from its aggregate favorability rating to produce its net favorability rating. Outlets with fewer than five ratings were excluded from the analysis.

### **Rank differences**

Rank differences were calculated by first ranking each community hashtag in terms of its prevalence among journalistic Twitter accounts as defined above and then among all community tweets. Next, the journalistic rank for each hashtag was subtracted from its community rank, generating a measure of the difference between its journalistic and broader community popularity. A rank difference of 0 means that both news accounts and the community ranked the hashtag at the same position. High rank differences indicate hashtags used disproportionately by the community as compared with news outlets and journalists.

### **Interviews**

We conducted a total of 45 interviews with participants from each community and the professional journalists who cover them. We identified interviewees based on the most-retweeted screen names in our data set, self-identification with the community, and snowball sampling. Interviewees who were not salaried journalists or writers were compensated for their participation with \$25 Amazon gift cards.

Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis via phone and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Names were included only when interviewees explicitly consented to being identified. Some of those we contacted did not agree to be interviewed, and the makeup of our final interview cohort reflects that nonresponse bias. That said, while the qualitative sections of this report are not representative, they offer fine-grained insights into how community participants and journalists view one another.

Table A1:

## Hashtags used to sample tweets from three Twitter communities

### Asian American Twitter

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#aaironfist	#intothebadlands
#aapi	#jindian
#aapicall4solidarity	#justice4liang
#aapis4blacklives	#makemulanright
#aapisolidarity	#manzanar
#actualasianpoet	#modelminoritymutiny
#actualasianpoets	#muslimneighborhood
#apis4blacklives	#myaapistory
#asianactorproblems	#myaapivote
#asianamerican	#myasianamericanlife
#asians4blacklives	#myasianamericanstory
#asiansresist	#mybananastory
#asianwhitewashing	#mybrownfacestory
#askanadoptee	#mysikhamericanlife
#beingasian	#myyellowfacestory
#belikedarsh	#neveragain9066
#bobbyjindalissowhite	#notyourasiansidekick
#cancelcolbert	#notyourmodelminority
#cancelmailorderfamily	#onlyonepercent
#dearmyaapirep	#oscarstillssowhite
#emergingus	#representasian
#emmysowhite	#repsweats
#fight4aas	#ryanpotterfortimdrake
#filipinasnot4sale	#seasians4blacklives
#fredkorematsu	#starringconstancewu
#freepeterliang	#starringdumbfoundead
#freshofftheboat	#starringjohncho
#goodmuslimbadmuslim	#thanksgivingwithasians
#graceleeboggs	#thisis2016
#graceleetaughtme	#tildaswinton
#hawaiisowhite	#underratedasian
#iamasianamerican	#weneedaapistudies
#iamnotyourwedge	#whitepenname
#immigrantheritagemoth	#whitewashedout
#immigrationstoryin5words	#yoshiforshang

## Black Twitter

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#armanicaptions  
#askrachel  
#beckywiththebadgrades  
#benandjerrysnewflavor  
#berniemademewhite  
#berniesoblack  
#bestofblacktwitter  
#bet2016  
#betawards  
#blackcelebsbelike  
#blackchurchsex  
#blackderbyhorsenames  
#blackgirlmagic  
#blacklivesmatter  
#blackoutday  
#blackpanthersolit  
#blacktwitter  
#blacktwitterverificationquestions  
#buzzfeedvideoquestions  
#charlestonmassacre  
#charlestonsyllabus  
#cnnbelike  
#concernedstudent1950  
#duraghhistoryweek  
#earnthisdamnvoteorlose  
#famousmelaniatrumpquotes  
#girliguessimwithher  
#growingupblackBlack  
#hiddenfences  
#ifidieinpolicecustody  
#iftrumpwereblack  
#kapsoblack  
#muslimlivesmatter  
#newhillarylogo  
#notmypresident  
#obamaday  
#oscarssowhite  
#realblackpeoplequestions  
#sayhername  
#smartblackwomenoftwitter  
#smartblackwomenontwitter  
#staymadabby  
#staywoke  
#superpredator  
#thanksgivingclapback  
#thanksgivingwithblackfamilies  
#trapcovers  
#trapkaraoke  
#vinehalloffame  
#youoksis

## Feminist Twitter

---

#askhermore  
#believewomen  
#blogher16  
#distractinglysexy  
#everydayfeminism  
#everydaysexism  
#fem2  
#feminism  
#feminist  
#feministfuture  
#girlslikeus  
#heforshe  
#howtospotafeminist  
#ifmenhadperiods  
#ilooklikeanengineer  
#istandwithpp  
#myfeminismis  
#nastywoman  
#notallmen  
#notbuyingit  
#notokay  
#pussygrabsback  
#rapeculture  
#sayhername  
#shoutyourabortion  
#standwithpp  
#survivorprivilege  
#theemptychair  
#whitefeminism  
#whyistayed  
#womeninstem  
#yesallmen  
#yesallwomen  
#youoksis

# Endnotes

- 1 Sanjay Sharma, "Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion," *New Formations* 78 (January 1, 2013): 46–64; André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 529–49, doi:10.1080/08838151.2012.732147.
- 2 Deen Freelon, Charlton D. McIlwain, and Meredith D. Clark, "Beyond the Hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the Online Struggle for Offline Justice" (Washington, DC: Center for Media and Social Impact, American University, February 29, 2016), <http://cmsimpact.org/blmreport>; Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles, "#Ferguson Is Everywhere: Initiators in Emerging Counterpublic Networks," *Information, Communication & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 3, 2016): 397–418, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2015.1106571; Hunter Harris, "The Problem With Black Twitter That No One Is Talking About," *Refinery29*, September 14, 2016, <http://www.refinery29.com/2016/09/123061/black-twitter-moments>.
- 3 See discussions in Robert Plant, "Online Communities," *Technology in Society* 26, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 51–65, doi:10.1016/j.techsoc.2003.10.005; Samuel M. Wilson and Leighton C. Peterson, "The Anthropology of Online Communities," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2002): 449–67, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085436; Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (MIT Press, 2000).
- 4 Theodore Ross, "Mikki Kendall and Her Online Beefs With White Feminists," *Vice*, May 29, 2014, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/xd5aq3/their-eyes-were-watching-twitter-0000317-v21n5](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/xd5aq3/their-eyes-were-watching-twitter-0000317-v21n5); Charlton McIlwain, "The Past, Present, and Future of the Black Lives Matter Network," *Pacific Standard*, August 24, 2015, <https://psmag.com/news/the-past-present-and-future-of-the-black-lives-matter-network>.
- 5 We counted only the 125 most popular news outlets for this analysis, so this number represents a minimum bound. For more details on our methods, see Appendix.
- 6 A pair of research assistants (RAs) read each tweet and judged whether it was favorable, unfavorable or neutral toward the news outlet it mentioned. Next, we generated net favorability scores for each news outlet mentioned at least once by combining screen names and web domains belonging to the same outlet (such as <http://cnn.it> and [@donlemon](http://donlemon.com)). We added one point for every time the RAs agreed a tweet was favorable, subtracted a point when they agreed a tweet was unfavorable, and added or subtracted half a point when only one RA judged it as favorable or unfavorable.
- 7 These two variables were correlated at  $r = -0.913$  ( $p < .0001$ ).
- 8 Researchers subtracted each hashtag's news rank from its overall rank to yield a "rank difference" that revealed hashtags that were popular among community participants but relatively ignored by news accounts. The higher the rank difference, the greater the disparity between the hashtag's news ranking and its overall ranking. For example, the BT hashtag #vinehalloffame ranked 27 spots higher overall than it did for only news accounts. A rank difference of zero means the hashtag occupied the same ranked position on both lists.
- 9 The term "newsworthy" is used here to mean the most frequently mentioned by news accounts.

- 10** Choire Sicha, "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night?," Medium (blog), November 11, 2009, <https://medium.com/the-awl/what-were-Black-people-talking-about-on-twitter-last-night-4408ca0ba3d6>.
- 11** Thus, African Americans are overrepresented on Twitter compared with their share of the U.S. population. See Shannon Greenwood, Andrew Perrin and Maeve Duggan, "Social Media Update 2016" (Pew Research Center, November 11, 2016), [http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/11/10132827/PI\\_2016.11.11\\_Social-Media-Update\\_FINAL.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/11/10132827/PI_2016.11.11_Social-Media-Update_FINAL.pdf).
- 12** "Five W's and an H" refers to the six standard questions journalists typically seek to answer in their articles: "who," "what," "where," "when," "why" and "how."
- 13** See also the analogous comment about "Asian-American Studies 101" on p. X.
- 14** Asian-American Twitter's total tweet count increased by 75.5 percent from 2015 to 2016, while Black Twitter's rose by 34.7 percent and Feminist Twitter's decreased by 25.7 percent.
- 15** This incident was not included in our quantitative data, as it occurred after the final date of data collection.
- 16** Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (NYU Press, 2016).
- 17** Historically, the black press has advanced a similar objection. See Rosalee A. Clawson, Harry C. "Neil" Strine, and Eric N. Waltenburg, "Framing Supreme Court Decisions: The Mainstream Versus the Black Press," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 6 (July 1, 2003): 784–800, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934703033006004>.
- 18** For example, Zeba Blay, "Feminist Twitter Shuts Down CBS for Passing on 'Too Female' Pilot," *Huffington Post*, May 16, 2016, sec. Women, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/feminist-twitter-shuts-down-cbs-for-passing-on-too-female-pilot\\_us\\_5739cf59e4b08f96c1839226](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/feminist-twitter-shuts-down-cbs-for-passing-on-too-female-pilot_us_5739cf59e4b08f96c1839226); Najja Parker, "#BlackTwitter Isn't Happy with Tyrese's Latest Comments on Women," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 11, 2017, <http://www.ajc.com/news/blacktwitter-isn-happy-with-tyrese-latest-comments-women/MkDAb3bUZ0IKO4zEv5tT9J/>.
- 19** Tracy Clayton, "Gawker Versus Black Twitter," *The Grapevine*, July 30, 2013, <https://thegrapevine.theroot.com/gawker-versus-black-twitter-1790884929>; Doreen St. Felix, "Black Teens Are Breaking the Internet and Seeing None of the Profits," *The Fader*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/12/03/on-fleek-peaches-monroe-meechie-viral-vines>.
- 20** E.g., Sylvia Obell, "100 Tweets That Prove Black Twitter Was the Real MVP of 2016," *BuzzFeed*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sylviaobell/the-real-mvps>.



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