

The nation is seeing a bloodless coup in the world of information. In the past, established news broadcasters like CBS and newspapers of record like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal were the sole arbiters of what we considered 'true'. Because they were trusted to be reasonably objective, they had the power to shape what millions of Americans considered “the facts”. But, before our eyes, that power is being wrested away by social media. Tweets and soundbites capture people's attention, spreading misinformation and partisanship like a wildfire in the forest of public discourse.

Research shows that the average human attention span is eight seconds¹. Which one is closer to that crucial timespan -- a well researched news article or a TikTok? Social media platforms encourage influencers to fit their content into that tiny timespan. Disturbingly, the manipulation goes even further. Social media algorithms play with human emotions, displaying polarizing content to ensure users come back for doses of validation of their biases-- validation that a quality news article doesn't necessarily provide².

According to Pew Research, 53% of Americans get news from social media "Often" or "Sometimes". Twitter, in particular, stood out, with 59% of its users regularly getting news from the site. Crucially, most people aged 18-29 used TikTok, an app essentially made of soundbites, for news³. Behind these statistics is a simple truth: soundbites and tweets are entertaining. They are gratifying. Sure, social media cannot be trusted to be objective, but it can be relied upon to amaze and delight.

Even as powerful stories drown in tweets and soundbites, journalists can still take steps to save them. In this brave new world of information, journalists -- both professionals and students -- must bring quality journalism to social media, where much of today's audience resides. Bring the fight to the provocateurs.

Journalists must embrace the fast-paced, multimedia nature of new digital platforms and counter the prevailing garishness with quality content. A TikTok isn't long enough to tell the whole story, but a TikTok can act as a hook with a link to an article or Youtube video that explores all sides of the topic. If the story permits, journalists can break stories down into smaller parts for a shorter format, like The Economist on TikTok⁴. Excellent presentation doesn't need to compromise information. For example, data journalists, like the ones at FiveThirtyEight, can help illustrate concepts with slick graphics⁵.

Similarly, journalists can pledge to be civil on platforms like Twitter. A tweet, much like a TikTok, can act as a gateway to more detailed information. By presenting themselves as a respite from Twitter drama, journalists can rise above the noise to tell powerful stories to millions.

As the world enters a new era of information, the press can too. Journalists have the power to create crucial conversations that have and will shape the course of history. With that power comes the responsibility to innovate. Only then will powerful, responsible stories have the impact they need to make.

Works Cited

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