Tweet all about it -- Twitter can't replace newswires, study shows

EurekAlert!

News agencies continue to have an edge over Twitter in being first with the news, a study found.

Research into reporting of news events by Twitter and newswire services has found that while Twitter can sometimes break news before newswires, for major events there is little evidence that it can replace traditional news outlets.

Twitter's main benefits for news are bringing additional coverage of events, and for sharing news items of interest to niche audiences or with a short lifespan, such as local sports results.

Scientists at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow developed a software algorithm to track Twitter activity. They used it to study 51 million tweets over 11 weeks in summer 2011 and compared these with output from news outlets for the same period. Newswires tracked included the BBC, CNN, Reuters and the New York Times, which seek to set the news agenda and break news stories ahead of one another.

Scientists were able to examine Twitter messages relating to major news items. They also identified a large amount of minor news items that had featured on Twitter but had been ignored by the mainstream media.

Neither Twitter nor newswires was regularly faster than the other in breaking high-profile news, but when Twitter outperformed newswires for speed, it was for mainly for sport and disaster-related events, their findings showed.

The study, supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, is to be presented at the 7th International AAAI Conference On Weblogs And Social Media, in Boston, US, next week.

Dr Miles Osborne, of the University of Edinburgh's School of Informatics, who led the study, said: "Twitter and traditional news outlets each have their strengths in terms of delivering news. However, Twitter can bring added value by spreading the word on events that we might not otherwise hear about, and for bringing local perspectives on major news items."

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