

Social Media and News Reporting: Staying Engaged and Informed

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By

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Dedication

To my husband and daughters.

Thank you for your understanding and patience during the production of this video and text. I could not have completed this project without your support.

Special Thanks

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Scott Shafer, Senior Correspondent KQED-TV, San Francisco

Doug Sovern, Reporter KCBS Radio, San Francisco

Thuy Vu, Host "Newsroom" KQED-TV, San Francisco

Introduction

This companion text is largely a transcription of the interviews conducted in the production of these video chapters on social media and news reporting. The purpose of this project is to help students and educators understand the growing role of social media in the gathering and dissemination of news and the many ways to make the most of this technology. Social media tools are being used across all media including traditional news outlets and online-based sources.

This program focuses on a variety of ways in which social media is essential to storytelling and news distribution. Each chapter highlights an element of social media used by top journalists who rely on these communication channels to both research stories and broaden their audience.

Social media tools will continue to evolve and provide more opportunities for journalists to educate viewers and readers.

Chapter 1: **Covering Politics Using Social Media**

Interview with Mike Luery, Political and Investigative Reporter for KCRA-TV, the NBC affiliate in Sacramento

It's always challenging to make political stories interesting. It's like watching history being made on a daily basis. There are always things happening inside the State Capitol Building that people don't understand. In other words, you need to take it outside the building. We did a story about "willful discipline" where students can be suspended from school for defying a teacher. It's a California law so if a student does it repeatedly, they can be kicked out of school. A bill in the State Legislature is being considered that would make this law tougher to enforce in grades 1 – 5. We interviewed the author and some of the students from around the state who are largely students of color or LGBT students. They claim they are suspended more than others under this law. To get the side "outside the building" we went around Sacramento talking to parents and school to get their point of view on this story. As a reporter, you hang out until 2:53 p.m. when school gets out to ask the parents and teachers what they think about this proposed legislation. Reaction was wide and varied. As a reporter, always think about the people who could be most affected by a change in law or policy and go talk to them.

When covering state politics, you have to start with the basics. Know how many legislators there are; how state government works; know the role of state constitutional officers and how their roles differ from the federal or local government officials. Pay attention to high school civics lessons; know about political parties. Having that basic understanding is an integral part of being a good reporter.

There is no typical day when covering state politics, and that's what I like about my job. There's no real set agenda. Sometimes news breaks. You'll hear something in the hallways and start to pursue that. Everything can change in politics in an instant.

Sometimes the folks back at the station don't understand the fluidity of the situation in the field and will want to send you to cover another story so you, as a reporter, need to make your "find" as compelling as possible and come up with the best story of the day from the Capitol.

We follow Twitter a lot although you need to double and triple check information that comes across in a tweet. It can be a good starting point, however. Social media is a crucial tool in reporting today since we receive many tips and reach many sources to confirm information even before the story ever makes mainstream media. This is more often the case especially when breaking news happens. If you sit and wait for a news releases, you're going to miss the story. You need to be dialed in to LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. In fact, a lot of stations are using Facebook as a means for viewers to weigh in on stories. We ask viewers, "What do you think about this bill or that trend?" Based on how many people follow the story, the station knows which story to lead with that day.

Politicians love to talk about their agenda. Many of them want your attention because they might be running for re-election or have a bill to promote. It's important not to get caught up in the spin. For example, the Governor may call a news conference to talk about water conservation. Although that might be Plan A for the day initially in the newsroom, there might be something about prisons or transportation that you've been dying to ask. This is your opportunity to do it. The unscripted moments are your best chance for candor from the politician. Reporters need to hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Tips

Do your homework. Research your topic for the day thoroughly. Read as much as you can and be familiar with every side of the issue. Ask yourself, "Who are the key players? Who are the proponents? The opponents? Who does this affect most?" Maybe there's a professor on campus that can give an objective opinion and insight on the subject. Start your day well in advance of when you're supposed to report to the newsroom so you are well versed on the hot topics of the day. Read local and national newspapers and websites especially those that are related to your reporting beat, such as politics. Start drawing a list of questions and making calls to people who can advance your story.

Chapter 2: **Putting the Public back in Public Affairs**

Interview with Scott Shafer, Host of “The California Report Magazine” on KQED Radio and Senior Correspondent for KQED-TV’s “Newsroom” in San Francisco.

For people who love politics, reporting on politics is fun. It's interesting and always surprising. I used to work in politics. I was Press Secretary for former San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos and Chief of Staff for former State Controller Gray Davis. Having worked on the inside, and now outside, of politics is really a great experience for me. It helps to have worked on a campaign.

Covering politics can be very challenging, especially nowadays. It's very controlled. The handlers, the campaign consultants, they manage everything very tightly and are afraid their candidate is going to make a mistake. So the frustration is that you have to get the candidates off their talking points. Try to have one or two questions that they couldn't have possibly thought about ahead of time; a question that might bring out their human side. Politicians are constantly under watch with cell phone videos. Everyone is tweeting and uploading photos so politicians are always on guard. As a journalist it's important to stay focused on the key issues as a public service.

Social media is increasingly important in what we do. As a journalist I'm tweeting out all the time what I'm doing and if I do an interview with someone, I'll tweet out details of it ahead of time to kind of “gin up” some interest in it. I'll also send out pictures.

We all use LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter as tools for finding people, tracking down sources and for getting out our message and getting the quick responses politicians use on Twitter. It has become an unfiltered way to alert journalists to a press conference or the State of the Union, or whatever it might be.

We do use Storify and Tumblr and different websites like Mashables -- sites that have interesting stuff and ways for us to get out and tell stories using audio, video and pictures.

You start with the point that politics and policy are very much related and government officials

and local officials, state and federal as well, are dealing with policies that have a real impact on people, for better or for worse. Whether you are doing a story about food stamps, or clean water, clear air, global climate change, whatever it might be, it helps to begin the story by including a person or a family, an individual, a doctor, or a farmer. Whoever it might be to humanize the issue so you're not just talking about statistics or numbers.

“Newsroom” is sort of the news of the world, and San Francisco, through a Bay Area lens. Whether it's the drought or the governor's race we ask, “What do people who work here or live here think about these issues that affect our world today?” What we try to do is to have a combination of things such as a panel of journalists talking about one particular topic. We include one feature story and we tend to have one-on-one interviews of people who live or are visiting the Bay Area. These featured guests tell us what they are working on. Artists, filmmakers, and other newsmakers often visit “Newsroom” for this purpose.

Tips

Get to know the people around the politicians and elected officials; make friends in high places and low places. These are contacts you can call on a regular basis. Develop sources who work in the bowels of government who aren't used to being quoted and you don't need to quote them but they can give you a heads up if something is going on.

Don't follow the pack. There's a lot of pack journalism out there. It's important to cover news conferences but also important to go in the other direction too. For example, government audits a lot of reports. Download them, read them over because there are always interesting things to be found in them. It isn't necessarily a headline; it might be a sentence that might makes you think, “I want to know more about that.” This kind of research can lead to other stories buried deep inside so dig around and don't just follow the pack.

Writing is very important. In radio you write for the ear. In television you write to video but also for the ear. Broadcast copy is a simpler kind of writing. I read my stories out loud because ultimately that's how people are going to hear them, unlike reading a newspaper or blog.

Interview with Thuy Vu, Host of KQED-TV's “Newsroom” in San Francisco.

Politics covers every cornerstone that affects our lives from economies to policies to education. I teach too and a lot of students want to pursue entertainment reporting. Well, politicians make the laws that affect our lives from where we live to what food we put on the table to the amount of air we breathe to the water we use for crops in this state so everyone should be concerned about politics.

You need to be tenacious as a reporter. You will get a lot of “no's” and you have to learn to brush them off, keep on asking the questions and keep on digging. I think that’s true for all types of reporting, not just investigative reporting. You have to develop a thick skin over time and realize that you are there to get the story. There will always be hurdles in your way. You just have to be persistent and keep on going.

The best stories are always about people. When stories are heavy on policy ask yourself whom it affects. If it affects Mrs. Jones single mother of five, well go out and find Mrs. Jones single mother of five and see how she lives the daily effects of a policy. That’s a good way to get into your story. It's a good way to get people to watch your story and have an emotional investment because in some way they feel a connection to a real life human being who is affected by a policy and that it's not just some nebulous law somewhere. These are real lives that are affected and have to cope with it everyday.

Regarding social media usage - people want to feel they have a personal connection to you; not just your organization when using social media. I use it to solicit people's feelings or questions about an issue. For example, for this week’s show, the topic is “Income Equality.” I put out something on Facebook saying this is the subject for our upcoming show and a bunch of people wrote in with questions for our panelists. Their questions were really interesting so I use social media to engage but I also use social media to inform. If I feel we did something really good on the show, I’ll also post a video clip and copy it on Facebook.

There’s a lot of noise out there so we try to give viewer value and viewer benefit to an issue or discussion by bringing in experts who can talk about it. These experts have the ability to dig deep with analytical skills and that gives our audience a broader understanding of issues.

Tips

Learn to listen. So often we come into an interview with a list of questions and we're really not listening to an answer. That person may have told you something fantastic and you missed it because you weren't listening and didn't ask the proper follow up question. You might have missed your lead element.

Learn to write please. There are so many bad writers in the business. Work on your writing. It's a craft that takes attention and focus. If you can be a good writer you have a leg up in this business.

Write concisely, clearly and compellingly. If you can get those "three C's" down you have the making of a pretty good career.

Chapter 3: **Social Media as a Database**

Interview with KCBS Radio News Reporter Doug Sovern

Social media has changed everything about how we gather and report news in general. For example, Twitter is like an unfiltered wire service that people can access themselves. The material you're going to see on the Associated Press wires in 10, 15 or 20 minutes, is on Twitter first. You have to be careful who it's coming from and that it's vetted and accurate, but you're getting the raw information that in the old days people would phone into a newsroom and now people are tweeting it out.

As a Twitter junkie, and I tweet a lot, I follow lots of politicians. I follow other reporters, people involved in politics, political operatives, and strategists. We all follow each other. On social media, you're going to receive data and information as people want to give it to the world, but it won't always prove useful. You have to separate the wheat from the chaff and figure out what's legitimately valuable and what's self-serving. You can click to other links and information to confirm and verify. There is a lot of stuff there but it's important to remember that social media sites provide just another way to find information that you wouldn't have access to before or it would have taken a lot longer to find.

A lot of what I see is rapid triage on my part. You have to make a quick decision. Is this something interesting? Is it valuable or newsworthy? Maybe it is a resource to be used later on in some other story. There is a lot of self-serving stuff from politicians like a press release. Reporters used to receive news releases in an email but now it's on Twitter. After a while, you do recognize what's going to be valuable. Twitter is good in terms of keeping an eye on what other reporters are working on or what politicians or strategists are thinking. What they're tweeting may not be that interesting but there could be a nugget of information that will make me want to contact them. That could lead to more important information. Before social media, we'd go to the library, make a lot of phone calls or search the telephone book. Now there's this steady stream of news and information that you wouldn't necessarily pursue on your own if you weren't on Twitter, Facebook or other social media.

I've come to social media after 25 – 30 years of being in the news business so I've got the journalism skills. I'm just applying them to a new medium. If you're a new reporter, you need to start with the basics. When you go out on a story, make sure you have the who, what, where, why, when and how figured out. Ask questions. Don't take things at face value. Think critically. Think about why someone is telling you something; do they have an ulterior motive? Is there something behind what they're telling you? You're not just a stenographer. You're a thinker. You're a reporter. Think for yourself. A story often turns out to be something other than what you first thought it was. Observe and ask every question you can whether it's from a person on the street or a politician.

For me, Twitter is the place and it's growing. I get lots of news unfiltered from the people on the scene and newsmakers. For example, when the Asiana plane crashed at San Francisco International, I was looking at tweets and photos from passengers getting off the plane. Those tweets enabled me to figure out the type of aircraft it was, obtain the tail number on the plane, its itinerary and flight plan. While other people were trying to figure out if it was a passenger or cargo plane, I already knew the details, which helped me as a reporter figure out what had happened all because of what I had seen on Twitter.

There are a few other important informational websites to refer to when investigating stories. Opensecrets.org is great for fact checking. The Federal Communications Commission site can help you follow a money trail. That will often lead to the main focus of an investigative story and can help flesh out the truth. Twitter can also lead you to these sites for story information. In addition, I follow many other reporters who all follow me and we follow each other. I also follow all the major news organizations, as well as the social media site "Buzzfeed."

You get this web of re-tweeting if you follow enough influential people. I have a following of 3 – 4,000 and I follow 300 - 400 people. It's a pretty small but influential group such as President Obama, Members of Congress, and very influential journalists.

Once I find something on Twitter, I'm not just going to go on the air and say, "hey look what happened". You're still going to go through the regular journalistic standards and principals which are confirm it, attribute it, source it.

If somebody tweets out something that I can't confirm, I'm not going to report it. I might re-tweet it, which is different, but I'm not going on the radio to say this plane crashed if I don't know with absolute certainty. I won't attribute some random person on Twitter.

I am constantly checking the wires in the newsroom, constantly checking sources online. If I'm in the field on a story, that's not so easy. If you're at an event like an explosion or other breaking story, you don't have time to spend on social media. My first job is to get sound and get it on the radio. The Twitter part of the job is secondary then. It's difficult to juggle all of the demands of a reporter these days that weren't expected of us before. We now need to take photos for the website. Newsrooms want video, audio, photos, and other information that in the past you didn't need to care about as a reporter in the field. You have to be a multi-media convergent journalist. You need to be able to report, blog, take pictures and tweet. Newspaper reporters podcast and they also need to take audio. You need to be well versed in so many areas. It requires stamina.

Tips

You have to have basic reporting skills. You have to have basic writing skills. It is a craft. You need to know how to tell a story for radio or television in a minute or so.

For me social media is another way to gain information and disseminate information. So it's another platform just like TV, radio or print. It's more important to use social media to gather information than to disseminate.

Interviewing is an art. So many times I hear someone asking a question that the person just answered. You have to listen to people.

You have to learn how to get to the kernel of what is important, to capture the absolute essence in a paragraph if you're on Facebook or less on Twitter. On Twitter you only have 140 characters to say what you're going to say.

Know how to embed audio and video. Use links in nearly everything you tweet. Although I find many people don't click on the links I think it's still necessary. People use hashtags a lot to get

the latest on stories. I'm not convinced on the hashtags. I got more new followers on a major breaking story where I didn't use a hashtag than when I use hashtags normally.

Day to day when I divide up my stories, half the ideas are from newspapers, others are stories that need to be covered or come from social media. I will often find out about breaking news on Twitter. Rarely will I find a story I didn't know anything about unless it's a breaking news story.

State politics is relevant because people care about the Governor. The San Francisco Bay Area is the economic engine with the Silicon Valley and these things affect everyone in the state.

You need to check national stories for local angles. When I go on the road covering a national nominating convention debate, I look for the California angle. Always ask what's important. Look for local angles to a national story, or issue that people can relate to. Always look to tie in with your audience. For example, when I covered the earthquake in Haiti, I went with a team of doctors from the University of California at San Francisco. This way it increased chances that the audience would hear about someone they knew in Haiti.

Take everything on social media with a grain of salt and vet it yourself. Just because someone tweeted something doesn't mean it's fact or the truth – even if the information is coming from someone reliable. I've re-tweeted the original source to confirm and the information turned out to be inaccurate.

If you haven't confirmed it yourself, you need to say who said it. Be careful when attributing information.

Chapter 4: **Day in the Life of an Online Reporter**

Interview with Rob Nikolewski, Reporter for NewMexicoWatchdog.org, based in Santa Fe, New Mexico

My day as an online reporter isn't much different than your day as a traditional reporter is going to be. I make phone calls and check on sources. Sometimes I'll take a story someone else wrote, on a national or local level, and I'll spin it off to another story that perhaps that reporter didn't highlight in a way I think is newsworthy. Newsgathering for online reporting is very similar to traditional journalism.

Watchdog.com is a political news site so I cover all sorts of political stories, especially in an election year. The other thing that I do on my website, New Mexico Watchdog.org, is that we really have an emphasis on waste, fraud and abuse in government. That means many times tracking down the money, finding out how much a certain policy could cost taxpayers. I need to find out if it's a good use of taxpayer dollars or a waste of taxpayer dollars. That's something my website really concentrates on.

I find stories by checking with sources. Sometimes people give me tips, especially since we have this waste, fraud and abuse angle. Sometimes I'll get tips from readers who will send me something they suspect is a waste of taxpayer money. Sometimes they don't pan out but it could lead to a good story.

I use what I call "journalism jujitsu", where I try to get as many aspects of a story as I can and make myself a little bit different from the many voices out there. What I mean by that is, my background before I started covering politics was as a sports anchor for about 20 years. I had this television background and used a flip cam very often. It's not just a good use for making sure I have someone on the record and get their quote accurately, but also a way for me to get sound bites. It's similar to how I worked in television, but sound bites in TV could only be ten to twelve seconds. Online reporting is great because I can use an interview about a very controversial subject and run the entire 45-second sound bite. This way, the viewer and reader

are getting information in context. Also, the policymaker I'm talking to cannot say "well, you took that out of context."

The other part of my "journalism jujitsu" is that online reporting has the immediacy of radio. You don't have to wait until a newscast is on or the paper is delivered to bring out the news. Also, just like newspapers you can go into depth. My stories are usually 600 words. When all things are working well, you have the visuals of television, the immediacy of radio and the depth of newspapers.

I use video a lot. It gives the readers a chance to not just read the quote, which can sometimes be dry, but they can see the emotion and expressions of the person being interviewed.

I use social media all the time. I admit when I started this work 3 ½ years ago, I really did not want to use social media. My boss at the time forced me to sign up for Facebook and Twitter. I was reluctant because so much I was seeing on Facebook I considered junk. I only Facebook and tweet in relation to my stories and it really works. Once I write a story, I'll post it on Facebook and Twitter and other sites. It works because the longer you're in this business with each passing day you get more people following you on Facebook and Twitter. As a journalist, you work hard on your stories. You want people to read your stories. The social media are great; maybe the best way to expand your voice, to have your story read and be heard. Social media work in a fantastic way to get your story out.

Tips

If you want to be an online reporter, just go out and do it. You don't need to wait until someone gives you a job. If you're interested in energy, the environment, economics or politics - right, left or center - go out and start your own blog. The great thing about this technology is that you can go out and start your own blog and the most important thing is you will become a better reporter because you're out there working. It's not just theoretical. If you make a mistake you will hear back from people even if you have a small number of people reading you. The best way to become a reporter is to BE a reporter.

The only thing I would recommend when covering politicians is to make sure they don't speak in political jargon. Like health care for example, politicians often don't talk in everyday terms. Get them to talk in everyday terms so the average person can understand the issue. Another thing, ask lots of "how" and "why" questions. These questions force the interviewee to explain their answer rather than just responding with a "yes" or "no".

You make stories interesting by appealing to the average person. The average person doesn't have time in their day to study all the issues around health care, for example. You can ask those policymakers the average question that the average person wants to know. For example, "Is this affordable health care act really going to be affordable?" "What's it going to mean to me?"

You're the advocate for your reader. As long you keep that in mind you'll be on the right path.

Chapter 5: **Behind the Scenes of Storify**

Interview with Burt Herman, Co-founder of “Storify”

Storify is a, technological platform, a social storytelling tool that lets you take media from various social networks and combine them to tell a story that you post on Storify or lets you embed on any website. The main motivation behind Storify is to give journalists the tools to look across different social networks and be able to find and filter out the important stuff and add context to it and add it to their stories.

When we started Storify we knew we wanted to bring together social media and journalism. Storify requires that we pick and choose very carefully what we put in a story. It's more like a blogging tool to write a story. We saw people take to it quite quickly. It seemed to be the right time for something like this. The main purpose behind Storify was to bring together the curation, filtering, editing and instincts of journalism and skills reporters used for decades to sift through budgets and press releases, selecting the best quotes. It's the same thing but applying it to this new source of social media. It's a platform. When major news happens people use Storify to create stories. Now people are posting what they see all the time such as what is happening in the Middle East, in polling places around the United States, where disaster strikes, where people are celebrating and bearing witness to all they see.

It's great that people have the ability to publish but it's also overwhelming. There's tons of noise out there. That's where journalists can play a critical role; to be the people that will sift through all this and find what matters in all this noise and to make sense of it, to add context and to help understand our world. A good story still needs good content and pictures. Storify doesn't change any of that but publishes the best of what's out there on a story. Storify is a different format but it doesn't mean we throw away everything we've learned about good storytelling. We still need a hook to grab readers and educate them and maybe show them something unexpected to keep them reading until the end just like any good journalism story. Storify doesn't just dump in a lot of social media but rather carefully puts in the best and contextualizes it to explain what is going on. In other words, you wouldn't take a reporter's notebook and throw the whole thing in the

newspaper. It's the same thing with Storify. Great storytelling is great storytelling no matter the medium.

What we're hoping to do is open up the news to using more sources. People used to have a Rolodex, which they don't anymore but reporters do have a contact list of experts that they constantly try to expand. What Storify does is offer a wider perspective to find sources and information. You can find out what people are saying on Twitter or Instagram or Facebook.

Everybody is using social media. You can go to a small town and go on Facebook to find lots of local government officials for your story. The same can be said for larger cities like Washington, D.C. As a journalist, you need to be hungry for information with a goal of not missing a story so you should be out there on social media because that's where your audience is.

I am a former journalist. I worked for the Associated Press for 12 years covering news, mostly as a foreign correspondent. We built Storify as a technology platform that anybody can use. It could be a professional journalist, it could be CNN, it could be a student journalist, so we created a platform whereby they can tell their stories by pulling together different social media posts. We're not trying to be a front page where you would go to learn about the world. We're just providing the platform where people can tell their story by pulling together different social media posts. You can take Storify stories and embed them on your own sites.

When you go to Storify you have an editing dashboard where you can search other social networks. You'll find if there is a certain hashtag people are using, maybe you should be looking for pictures on Instagram and continue looking to see what is out there. You can also find out what other people are or have been doing. Start organizing. You can drag and drop information into your story and build from there. Do what you would do for any story in any medium. Write a compelling lead, have a strong nut graph explaining why this story is important and build your story from there. Search for what other people have used.

The web is dynamic, it's going on all the time. A Storify story can evolve over weeks and be updated as you go. It's a live story -- a canvas to bring in new information and quotes. Find ways to bring in readers and leverage it.

I became a journalist because I'm sort of a noisy person and I wanted to cover news and wanted to be where things were happening; to uncover new news. It's a natural thing for journalists to want to know things, to be tuned in to what things people are talking about. It's like a global town square. You can be part of this dynamic when you go to places like Twitter to see what people are chatting and what the issues are.

You should still evaluate sources the same as print. Ask yourself, "Does this person have the legitimacy to make the claim? Are they actually there at the protest taking this photo or did they re-post somebody else's photo?" These are things found in traditional journalism too. It's important to have a firm grounding in journalism ethics and storytelling. Those rules don't change for social media. We just apply them to the new formats.

Attribution is really important to us. We saw that people were taking photos and video from other sources and downloading them and adding them to their own blog. Then it loses the link to the original source. We always link to the original source whether it's a quote or photo or video. That's what's great about the web, using a link to the original source and show readers where you are getting your information.

Sometimes people attribute Storify but we're a platform. We're not a news source in the traditional sense we're providing the information from the original sources.

In terms of politics, politicians are using social networks more and more as they see this as a way to talk to their constituents without using the media. Sometimes they're breaking critical news on social media, posting policy too. In fact, major campaign news breaks now on social media. No news organization can put a person at every single polling place, but now we potentially can hear from people anywhere, anytime. It's really amazing. Let social media help inform your coverage.

We've seen stories spread very quickly but turn out to be hoaxes because they weren't checked out. There is a race to get things and stories out quickly. We need journalists to fact-check things. You can have an interaction with your audience and have them help you fact-check.

For Your Reference

Here is a list of links and websites to help you investigate stories and find out more about newsgathering and dissemination practices:

Poynter.org
Storify.com
Mashable.com
Muckrack.com
Storyful.com
Opensecrets.org
Buzzfeed.com

Spot and understand trends:

Trendsmap.com
Topix.com
Topsy.com

There are also the traditional, and more commonly used, sites:

Twitter.com
Facebook.com
LinkedIn.com
Reddit.com
Tumblr.com
Instagram.com
National and International Broadcast News Organizations (i.e. ABC, CBS, CNN, NBC, BBC World, El Jazeera)

Places to crosscheck information:

Twexplorer (search hashtags)
Snopes.com
Factcheck.org
Politifact.com

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