

FOR RELEASE OCTOBER 6, 2015

News Coverage of the Papal Visit: Narrative Made Room for the Personal, Not Just the Political

Social Media Played Limited Role in Mainstream Media Coverage

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About This Report

This report examined the use of sources and social media in online news coverage of Pope Francis' visit to the United States. The study focused on coverage from 9 a.m. Eastern Standard Time on Sept. 22, 2015, (the day the pope arrived in the United States) until 9 a.m. on Sept. 26, 2015, (the day he left New York City).

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News Coverage of the Papal Visit: Narrative Made Room for the Personal, not Just the Political

Social Media Played Limited Role in Mainstream Media Coverage

BY Katerina Eva Matsu, Jesse Holcomb AND Amy Mitchell

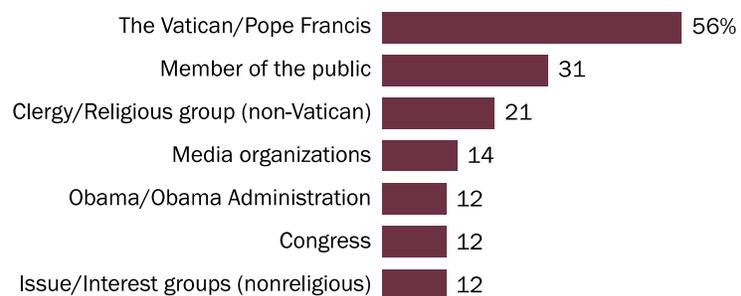
In covering Pope Francis' September 2015 visit to the U.S., the news media gave strong voice to the [hundreds of thousands](#) attending the events, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of news coverage of the first four days of the visit. But if the public helped tell the story of the visit through their smartphones and social media, that conversation occurred largely outside national media accounts. Instead, journalists relied mainly on personal interviews and encounters with the public to help shape their coverage.

Across 12 heavily visited U.S. news websites, the top sources cited in stories about the historic trip were Pope Francis himself – or an official Vatican spokesperson – followed by the general public. More than half (56%) of stories produced by these news websites quoted Pope Francis or an official spokesperson; 31% quoted a member of the public.

In the four-day stretch that included a public event with President Obama, the first ever Papal address to a joint meeting of Congress, and remarks that often touched on politically divisive issues, national politicians were a natural part of the story. But their statements did not dominate the narrative. Members of Congress were cited in 12% of stories, and another 12% included a quote

Pope Francis and Members of the Public Were Prominent Sources in News Coverage of U.S. Visit

% of stories that included each source type



12% of all 507 stories (60 in all) incorporated a quote, fact, or audiovisual from a social networking site

News coverage in 12 U.S. websites, 9 a.m. EST Sept. 22, 2015, through 9 a.m. EST Sept. 26, 2015. N=507

Note: Numbers do not add up to 100% because multiple source types may appear in one story. Source types less than 12% are not shown here.

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from President Obama or members of the executive branch. Presidential candidates were cited in 5% of the stories. In all, 25% of stories contained at least one of these sources.

Another element that stood out was that despite the sea of mobile phones visible at every stop, ostensibly [capturing moments ripe for sharing on social media](#), few social media moments found their way into the journalistic narrative of the visit. Overall, 12% of all 507 stories referenced a quote, fact or audiovisual from a social networking site. Instead, this was a large-scale news event with an abundance of on-site observers, including journalists who could both witness the event themselves and personally connect with others on the scene without needing to use social media as an intermediary.

These findings shed light on the dynamics of social media in our news environment. Past research by Pew Research reveals the critical role social media can play in informing the public about certain types of news events: Situations in which few individuals witness a controversial event, such as the police-involved shooting in Ferguson, Missouri; the fog of civil uprising or war, in which journalists do not have access to the scene, such as during the Arab Spring; natural disasters such as the 2013 tornado in [Moore, Oklahoma](#); and traumatic breaking news such as the shooting in [Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012](#). In these kinds of instances, journalists are to a large degree beholden to those on the scene to help tell the story. But in a highly planned and anticipated news event open to massive numbers of the public and the news media, the findings suggest that the social media activity – while still important in bringing people together and passing news and personal sentiments along – was not used to fill in pieces of the story.

These are some of the findings from a study exploring the voices heard in the coverage of the papal visit to the U.S., and the degree to which social media served as a source for journalists. The study is not meant to encompass all media coverage of the pope's visit but to offer a window into how these two dynamics played out in the stories published by some of the most-visited, broad interest news websites in the U.S. Researchers captured news coverage from Sept. 22 (the day the pope arrived in the United States), until the morning of Sept. 26 (the day he left New York City) across 12 websites, pulled from the top 25 sites listed in comScore's news and information category. In each story, researchers coded the presence of 17 different source types and whether for each social media was referenced. (Stories were included in the study if 50% or more of their content was about the pope's visit in United States, while those that were entirely a video, audio, slideshow, straight transcript or quiz were excluded.) Within each story, repeated citations of the same source category were coded only once. When the same source type was cited from different platforms, then both cases were captured as one source type from two different platforms, for example: A quote by President Obama that appeared on Twitter and a quote by President Obama in an interview in the same story were both included. The full methodology is available [here](#).

Visit Coverage Leaned Heavily on the Words of the Pope and the Public

Of all the stories about the pope's visit studied here, more than half (56%) included statements from the pope himself (or in a few cases one of his official spokespeople). Many quotes came from his speech before Congress on Sept. 24 and his remarks during an evening prayer service at New York's St Patrick's Cathedral the same day.¹

The pope was even more pointed in his remarks to Congress on Thursday, when he admonished them to treat people seeking refuge in America with humanity instead of fear: "We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories, trying to respond as best we can to their situation."

Source: The Guardian, "[For US Latinos Pope Francis's visit could not have come at a better time](#)", Sept. 24, 2015

Following the pope's own words were those from the general public. About three-in-ten stories (31%) cited or quoted a bystander, mostly as a witness to or participant in the events. In many cases, the comments from the general public showcased the personal experiences of these individuals.

"He's made the church more of an obtainable thing," said Nigel Stacy, a law student who arrived at the White House in the middle of the night to get a good place to stand for the arrival ceremony. "It's more relatable. You see what he does and you can see yourself emulating that."

Washington resident Theresa Wellman, who brought her mother and five children to watch the pope's parade through the streets of the nation's capital, called Francis "a breath of fresh air."

"He's changed the tone into a loving, merciful church to serve the poor," Wellman said.

Source: The Huffington Post, "[Pope Francis' First Whirlwind Day In U.S. Focused On Climate Change, Reconciliation](#)", Sept. 24, 2015

¹ Posted transcripts of speeches without any accompanying reportage were not included in this study.

National political figures were also a part of the coverage. Remarks from President Obama and the executive branch and from members of Congress each appeared in 12% of the stories studied. Statements from one of the 2016 presidential candidates appeared in 5%. Taken together, at least one of these national political actors was cited in 25% of the stories.

Some of these statements (most of which occurred during the pope's two days in D.C.) were not so much about politics as about personal interactions with and feelings about the pope. One [Yahoo story](#), for example, quoted President Obama's greeting with Pope Francis: "I believe the excitement around your visit must be attributed not only to your role as pope, but to your unique qualities as a person."

Some instances where a member of Congress was cited added a humanizing element to the story.

One [USA Today story](#) included Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's (D-Nevada) statement about the expected behavior of members of Congress during the papal address: "If there's applause during the speech, we can all applaud, but not the up-and-down stuff. I think that's not a dignified way to conduct ourselves."

House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) was quoted in [The Washington Post](#) describing the pope's visit as a "once-in-a-lifetime moment. A glimpse of grace."

And while local political leaders and officials such as mayors were referenced in 10% of the stories, much of that related to the logistics of handling the crowds, including security needs, as in a CNN story about NYPD's preparedness steps.

The New York City Police Department's threat assessment, obtained by CNN, is based on "open source" information and is part of a larger document produced by the police departments in the three cities the Pope will visit in his U.S. tour: Washington, New York City and Philadelphia.

"While most of the events will have limited access due to the need for people to obtain a ticket or invitation in order to attend, large crowds congregating outside event locations and using public transportation can be attractive targets for individuals and groups looking to carry out attacks," the NYPD assessment says.

Source: CNN, "[NYPD ready for potential attacks ahead of papal visit](#)", Sept. 23, 2015

Also cited frequently, in 21% of stories, were church leaders and religious officials, both Catholic and not.

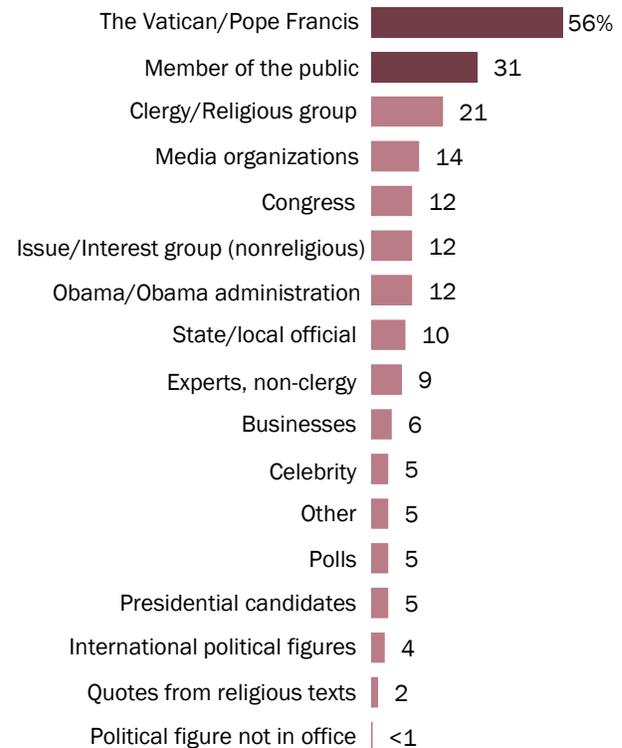
No other source type was cited in more than two-in-ten stories. For example, factual information and quotes from media organizations, including social media companies, were used as sources in 14% of the stories.

Karen Brady, 63, of Queens, N.Y., will hold a vigil outside the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility near Philadelphia seeking a blessing for her son, **according to the Philadelphia Daily News**. The pope will visit the prison Sunday at 11 a.m., but she doesn't expect to get inside.

Source: USA TODAY, "[Blessings from Pope Francis are sought from the profound to the mundane](#)", Sept. 23, 2015

A Range of Sources in Coverage of the Pope's Visit, with the Public Featured Prominently

% of stories that included each source type



News coverage in 12 U.S. websites. 9 a.m. EST on Sept. 22, 2015, through 9 a.m. on Sept. 26, 2015. N=507

Note: Numbers do not add up to 100% because multiple source types may appear in one story.

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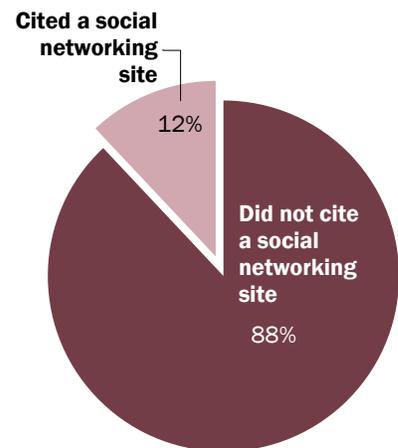
Social Media Played Limited Role in Papal Visit Coverage

In the past couple of years, Pope Francis has generated a social media buzz, [being active on Twitter](#) and with more followers than other popular celebrities. In light of his visit, a full set of [pontiff-related emojis](#) were created, the [White House used Periscope](#) for the first time to broadcast his arrival in Washington, D.C., and event attendees were seen again and again capturing moments on screen. Nevertheless, the news media did not use social media widely in covering his visit.

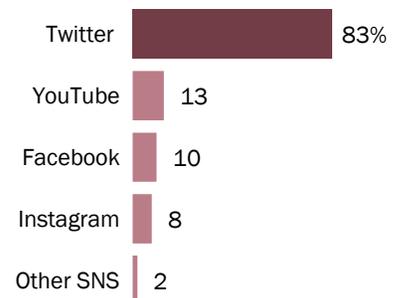
Just 12% of all 507 news stories studied cited a source from a social networking site. A vast majority of these stories (83%) used Twitter. Even though [Facebook has by far the largest U.S. user-base of any of the social networking sites \(66% of U.S. adults compared with Twitter's 17%\)](#), Facebook's 'walled garden' structure makes it harder for journalists to access and use it as a way of gathering information.

Social Media Played a Limited Role in Papal Coverage; Twitter Most Referenced

% of stories that incorporated a quote, fact or audiovisual from a social networking site



Of the 12% of stories (60 in all) that incorporated a post from a social networking site, % that used...



News coverage in 12 U.S. websites. 9 a.m. EST on Sept. 22, 2015, through 9 a.m. on Sept. 26, 2015.

Note: Numbers do not add up to 100% because multiple source types may appear in one story.

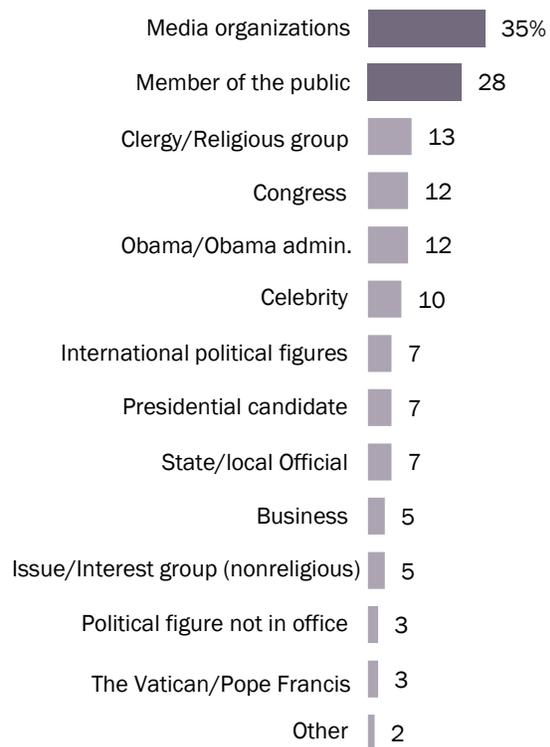
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When journalists did use social media in their stories, those references came from a broad mix of sources.

Most of all, journalists used social media in their stories as a way of drawing on their own tribe. Nearly four-in-ten, (35% or 21 total) stories with social media citations showcased posts from other media outlets. This included other journalists, news organizations or data points and facts provided by one of the social networking sites themselves.

Other Media and Members of the Public Most Common Social Media References

Of the 12% of stories (60 in all) that incorporated a quote, fact or audiovisual from a social networking site, % that cited...



News coverage in 12 U.S. websites. 9 a.m. EST on Sept. 22, 2015, through 9 a.m. on Sept. 26, 2015.

Note: Numbers do not add up to 100% because multiple source types may appear in one story. Three of the 17 source types categorized here – experts, polls and quotes from religious texts – did not appear to come from any social networking site.

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For instance, examples from the Huffington Post show the use of social media posts published by other media organizations, such as [Mashable](#) and the [local ABC affiliate in New York City](#).²

Nearly three-in-ten stories (28%) that incorporated social media included remarks by members of the public. Some of these posts were embedded in news stories and portrayed the [live events surrounding the pope's visit](#). A number of these were pictures that [bystanders took of themselves and the pope](#), or statements regarding the pope's speeches and activities.

[Members of Congress were a social media source](#) in 12% of the stories, the same portion as [President Obama](#) or a member of the executive branch.

Another 13% of stories with a social network citation referenced posts or comments from [members of the clergy](#), such as bishops, pastors and cardinals, as well as religious groups, some of which helped organize a number of the events in which the pope participated.

Notably absent from the social media references in stories about the visit were Pope Francis and the Vatican. Even though the pope is active on Twitter (@pontifex), he did not post any tweets during his visit to the U.S. The two Vatican-related social media citations that were included in online news stories were an older tweet of his used as an example of his participation on Twitter and an embedded [YouTube video of the live broadcast of his visit via the Vatican's official YouTube channel](#).

² Examples of the use of social media from different sources are included in the online version of the report found here: <http://www.journalism.org/2015/10/07/news-coverage-of-the-papal-visit/>

Methodology

This report examined the use of sources and social media in online news coverage of Pope Francis' visit to the United States. The study focused on coverage from 9 a.m. Eastern Standard Time on Sept. 22, 2015, (the day the pope arrived in the United States), until 9 a.m. on Sept. 26, 2015 (the day he left New York City), a time period that allowed researchers to study the majority of the visit coverage. Coding and data analysis were conducted by researchers Mike Barthel, Jeffrey Gottfried, Katerina Eva Matsa, Kristine Lu, Elisa Shearer, Galen Stocking and Nancy Vogt.

Sample Design

Twelve news websites were studied. As of August 2015, these sites are all included in the top 25 entities of comScore's news and information category. Researchers pulled the initial list of the top 25 digital properties and then removed those that are entirely devoted to weather (for example, weather.com), those which do not regularly produce original reporting around daily news (for example, about.com), and those that are non-U.S. (such as BBC and the Guardian). For listings that appear at a company level but have several distinct news entities such as Gannett, we "unrolled" the data to traffic levels of each individual news site (i.e. USA Today). From those, the 12 sites with the highest number of unique visitors for the month of August were selected for this study, ranging from newspapers to online-only outlets to broadcast TV.

The following are the news outlets included in this analysis:

Yahoo News
ABC News
The Huffington Post
CNN
USA Today
NBC News
Buzzfeed
CBS News
The New York Times
Fox News
The Washington Post
The Los Angeles Times

Note: The Washington Post, with both national and local elements in their coverage, produced substantially more stories than other outlets: 148 in total. The Huffington Post also produced

more stories than most other outlets: 74 in total. The other outlets produced an average of 29 stories.

Story Selection

The unit of analysis in this study was the story. Stories were included in the study only if 50% or more of their content was about the pope's visit to the United States (a small number of stories also addressed the pope's visit to Cuba, which preceded his arrival to the United States). To find the relevant stories in all websites, researchers used a specific set of keyword searches to collect potential stories.

Researchers searched Google News for each news outlet's main domain with the following terms to find potential stories:

Pope OR Francis OR Bergoglio OR "Holy Father" OR Papal

Every effort was made to collect the entirety of the content from each provider in its primary form.

Researchers manually captured and saved digital versions of the websites each morning between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. EST. In some cases where sites produced a large number of stories, content capture for a given day occurred over a longer period of time. Duplicate stories were removed, as well as stories that were not in English. Also excluded were stories that appeared in a different domain or URL. For example, researchers coded all related stories found in foxnews.com, but did not code those that appeared under foxbusiness.com.

Researchers then read each story to see if 50% or more of the story's content was about the pope's visit. The study did not include articles that were entirely standalone video, audio, slideshow, straight transcripts or quizzes that did not offer any content by the author of the piece. (Video, audio, transcript or slideshows embedded in a story *were* included in the study.)

Human Coding of Stories

The data in this study were created by a team of six experienced coders who were trained specifically for this project.

The two central variables in this study were source type and social media reference. Source type refers to a person, group, organization or publication cited in a story. Citations included direct or indirect quotes, interviews or labels, or references accompanying factual information. The goal was to identify the different types of sources that were present in the stories and not to provide a count of the total number of sources. With this in mind, researchers coded for the presence of 17

different source types. Within each story, a source type was coded only once, even if it was cited repeatedly. A source type could be present both as a social media reference and a non-social media reference and therefore both cases were captured as one source type from two different platforms.

The 17 different source types were:

- The Vatican/Pope Francis
- Clergy/Religious group (non-Vatican)
- Issue-based and/or interest groups (non-religion)
- Quotes from religious texts
- Experts, non-clergy
- Polls
- State/local official
- Obama/Obama administration
- Presidential candidate
- Congress as institution or member of the Congress (D & R)
- Political & government figure not in office (GOP, Democratic or other partisan)
- Member of the public
- Other media (includes social media companies, as distinguished from users)
- Celebrity
- International political & government figures
- Business
- Other

The social media reference variable indicates whether the source was taken from a social networking site. The social networking sites tracked in this study were: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, with all others coded as “other social networking site.”

Coders were given two sets of news stories to evaluate during the training period. Once internal agreement on how to code the variables was established, a first round of five stories were coded by all members of the coding team. The percent of agreement on each variable was:

Presence of sources cited — 89% or higher

Social Networking Site — 92% or higher

Finally, a second round of 25 stories were coded at the end of the study by all members of the coding team. The percent of agreement on each variable was:

Presence of sources cited — 82% or higher

Social Networking Site — 96% or higher

Throughout the coding process, staff discussed questions as they arose and arrived at decisions under supervision of the content analysis team leader.