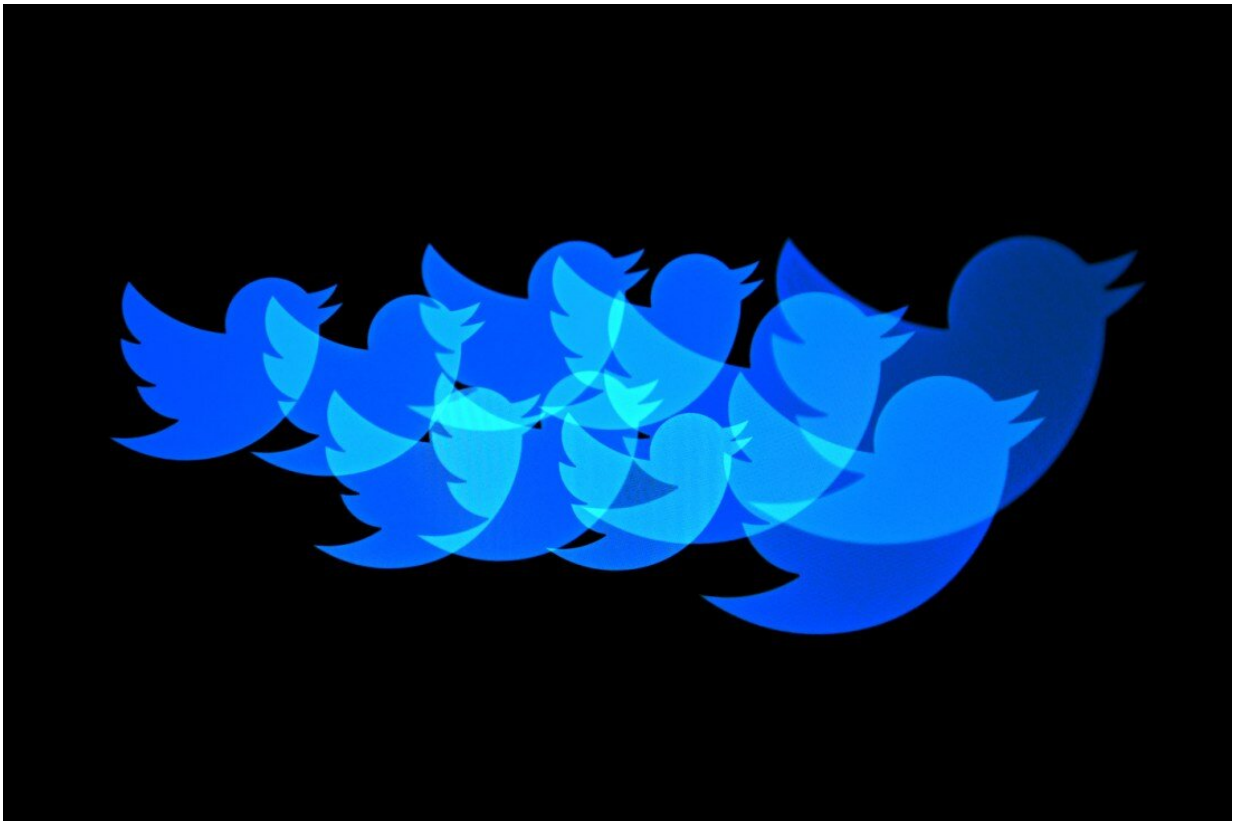


# Researcher, disaster relief groups might have to pay Twitter for critical data

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Credit: Matthew Modoono/Northeastern University

The social media platform Twitter used to share "precise, complete and unbiased data from the public conversation" with developers, academics, students and nonprofit organizations for free.

That is changing. Twitter's development team announced on Feb. 8 that the platform will soon start [charging \\$100 a month](#) for low-level use of [application programming interfaces](#) (APIs), or tools used to access data that users chose to share with the world.

None of the other major social media platforms offer similar API access. Facebook [limited access](#) to API after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, although some data from Facebook public accounts is available for free through a Meta tool called [CrowdTangle](#).

Since Instagram like Facebook is owned by Meta, its API use is limited as well and mostly intended for businesses and creators. TikTok announced in 2022 that it was developing research and content moderation APIs but the platform has not launched those products yet.

"Everybody [in the [research community](#)] is absolutely concerned about what's going on," says John Wihbey, associate professor of media innovation and technology and director of graduate programs at Northeastern in media innovation and [data communication](#), journalism and media advocacy, about the Twitter API changes. "What actually the terms will be and whether the API will be robust is totally unknown."

Researchers in computational social science, data science and social [data science](#) who work with large sets of data are in crisis mode, Wihbey says. They are trying to preserve the data they already have and figure out the new terms that are being rolled out.

Twitter is also essential in crisis situations, Wihbey says. As it happened this month after the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, many people trapped under the rubble turned to social media to send requests for help.

"By adding an access fee, Twitter is closing off a critical source of [real-](#)

[time](#) information for rescuers who could have used the platform to geolocate victims, organize aid deliveries and monitor ongoing crises around the world," says Daniel Aldrich, Northeastern professor, director of the university's Security and Resilience Program and co-director at the Global Resilience Institute.

Twitter's decision to charge for data access will be a major setback for humanitarian aid organizations, disaster response teams, groups working to improve the common good and save lives, he says. Other social media platforms don't have the reach, real-time updating and geolocation features of Twitter.

Aldrich believes this move by Elon Musk, the owner of Twitter, as well as the decision to charge money for verified account status are some of the ways to raise revenue from the "beleaguered" platform.

Twitter already had tiers for users who pay for APIs to get wider access to data, Wihbey says, so he is not surprised that the business is moving away from free access.

Data is increasingly becoming a valuable natural resource, he says, that fuels the digital economy, knowledge economy and applications of the future. With the development of AI-powered chatbots that use [neural networks](#) and deep learning and scrape the internet for data, proprietary data like real-time Twitter API data could become extremely expensive and will have companies competing for them, he says.

One can argue that there is a public utility dimension to Twitter and other social media platforms and, therefore, regulators and policymakers might want to ensure data access at crucial moments.

"We're at a real crisis moment, potentially," Wihbey says. "Could this actually be the kind of tipping point where Congress finally gets its act

together and passes something?"

He thinks it is possible that meddling with the Twitter APIs could be the last straw for many advocacy groups, think tanks and academic coalitions, which could kick them into a gear. But the problem is that these are private companies.

Wihbley says that the issue of transparency around the social media platforms is bipartisan, with people on both sides of the aisle in favor of regulating them. In 2022, Democratic U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Cory Booker of New Jersey and Democratic U.S. Rep. Yvette Clarke of New York introduced the Algorithmic Accountability Act aimed at overseeing software, algorithms and other automated systems.

"I would be all for some kind of legislation that ensures third party access to at least a sample of the data," Wihbey says. "Researchers, as part of civil society, should be able to look into the black box of these platforms, and make insights that might be useful to the public, to journalists and to policymakers."

He doesn't doubt that the [tech companies](#) will lobby very hard against additional regulations, but oftentimes they, too, benefit from partnerships with researchers and watchdog groups.

Twitter is also very popular and important in Brazil, India and Japan, Wihbey says, and they might require some access to APIs in future as well.

"Europe would be the other obvious place, and Europe's done a lot of regulation in this way," he says.

[One of the tweets](#) from the Twitter development team said that "a new form of [free access](#) will be introduced as this is extremely important to

our ecosystem" without further explanation.

In the case Twitter doesn't offer an affordable alternative API access to researchers, Wihbey says, some fairly well-endowed research institutions will probably pay for data. Some nongovernmental organizations and people with more constrained resources, however, will find it difficult to pay.

Larissa Doroshenko, a postdoctoral teaching associate of communication studies at Northeastern, used Twitter data in her [research on Russian disinformation](#) during its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and for other projects.

She says that previously it was easy to use API for someone like her as it had a user-friendly interface for queries.

But the changes to access will create inequality among academics, Doroshenko says. Those who have grant funding will be able to pay for API access as part of research expenses, she says, but younger academics without funding, including her, or graduate students will be shut out.

"As a graduate student, you might work in a lab, but they might not be purchasing the data that you want," she says.

Wihbey is also concerned that with current layoffs in the tech industry and at Twitter there may not be enough engineering resources to conduct the maintenance that APIs need like any other big technical systems.

On Feb. 13, the Twitter development team tweeted that the launch of the new API platform is being delayed for a few days.

"There has been an immense amount of enthusiasm for the upcoming changes with Twitter API," the tweet said.

Many of the replies that followed were [not enthusiastic](#).

Provided by Northeastern University

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