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CALIFORNIA

## In the coronavirus crisis, Newsom uses social media to raise awareness of the pandemic — and his profile



Gov. Gavin Newsom speaks during a news conference at the Governor's Office of Emergency Services in Rancho Cordova. (Rich Pedroncelli / Associated Press)

By PHIL WILLON, JENNIFER LU, SARA STOUTD

MAY 10, 2020 | 5 AM



SACRAMENTO — As Gov. Gavin Newsom delivered a somber briefing in late April about the devastation wrought by coronavirus, his personal Twitter and Instagram feeds never ceased to whirl.

Newsom's Instagram account teased an upcoming [interview about the pandemic with U.S. soccer star Megan Rapinoe](#) and praised a cadre of California doctors and nurses flying to New York, a COVID-19 hot spot. His Twitter account posted grim figures on virus-related deaths and a warning that Californians "MUST take this seriously."

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of viewers were tuned into Newsom's livestream on the state's coronavirus response posted to the governor's official Facebook and Twitter pages.

Newsom's social media dexterity has come to good use in the coronavirus crisis, helping the governor amplify his message on state policy during the pandemic and expand his political reach in ways unavailable to his predecessors.

The first California governor to fully embrace social media while in office and unleash it as an extension of the bully pulpit, Newsom has capitalized on viral moments, [enlisting celebrities as his surrogates](#) to persuade the state's residents to abide by his stay-at-home order and touting his frequent television appearances to discuss the pandemic on Facebook and Twitter.

Though they might seem to be impromptu missives fired off at all hours of the day, Newsom's tweets and other social media posts are part of a well-oiled machine, written and at times meticulously planned by staff and paid political advisors. That includes his stream of updates on the pandemic and, though now mostly on hiatus during the crisis, his chippy Twitter feud with President Trump.

"I think he's doing just about as well as anybody can do using those platforms," said GOP political consultant Tim Rosales, who ran the 2018 gubernatorial campaign of Republican John Cox, who lost to Newsom. "His approval ratings are going up among all groups, including Republicans. People feel he's connecting with them. It's not something that every executive and governor can do."

Since Newsom took office as governor, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have offered him an easy entree into national debates over gun control, healthcare, immigration and other issues consuming the American consciousness on any given day. His ubiquitous social media presence has elevated his profile coast to coast, adding to speculation about a possible future White House run.

Newsom and his team regularly turn to social media to promote his national television appearances on networks including CNN and MSNBC, as well as frequent guest spots on talk shows such as "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," "The Daily Show With Trevor Noah," "The View" and "Late Night With Seth Meyers" — the host recently drafted his brother, Josh Meyers, to [impersonate Newsom in a series of videos](#).



ICYMI @thejoshmeyers as Gavin Newsom  
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♡ 143 9:56 PM - May 1, 2020 ⓘ

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Veteran California Democratic political strategist Darry Sragow said Newsom has been much more effective using social media to expand his national profile than one of his close allies from the San Francisco Bay Area, former presidential candidate Sen. Kamala Harris. Newsom’s growing name recognition has given him a “political saving account” should he one day make a run for the White House, Sragow said.

“He’s creating options for himself. He’s smart to do that,” Sragow said.

The governor also hasn’t been shy about bringing in star power to help push his message on social media.

 **Gavin Newsom** ✓  
@GavinNewsom 

Listen to Larry David:

“You’re hurting old people like me. Well, not me...I’ll never see you.” #StayHomeSaveLives



Obviously somebody put me up to this 'cause it's generally not the kind of think I do but

♡ 31.8K 6:48 PM - Mar 31, 2020 ⓘ

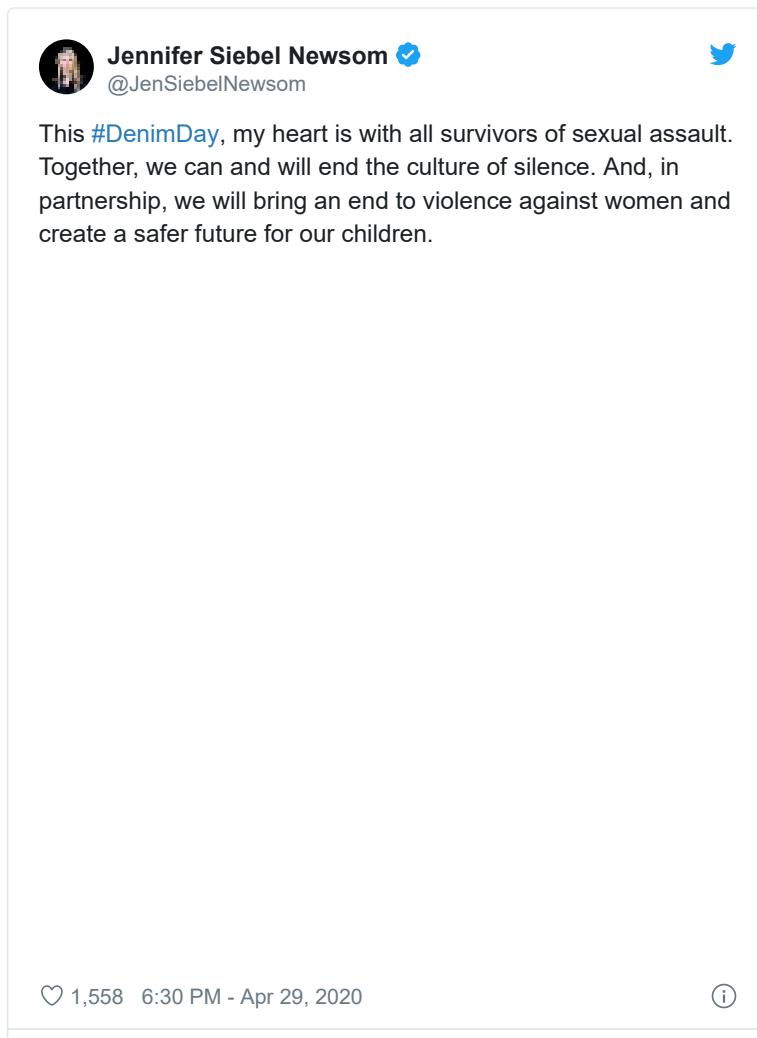
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Newsom recently assembled a team of celebrities for a social media public service campaign urging Californians to heed his stay-at-home order to stem the spread of the coronavirus. The governor enlisted “Seinfeld” collaborators Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Larry David, now of “Veep” and “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” respectively, to [pitch in](#) along with comedians Ken Jeong, Will Ferrell and Kumail Nanjiani. Rapper Snoop Dogg asked people to stay home. Football Hall-of-Famer Tony Gonzalez did the same.

Last year, [with Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James at his side](#) and HBO cameras rolling, Newsom signed a new law giving college athletes the right to paid endorsement deals. The governor’s office and political team plastered Twitter, Facebook and Instagram with two dozen posts about James’ support for the “Fair Play to Pay Act.” Newsom’s reelection campaign also unleashed a nationwide blitz of paid Facebook ads touting the law — and asking folks to chip in with a campaign contribution.

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During the coronavirus crisis, Newsom has used curated posts on Facebook and Twitter to help fine-tune and distill messaging from his loquacious daily news conferences on the pandemic. Newsom’s administration and supporters have turned “Meet this moment,” a favorite catchphrase of the governor’s often used during those briefings, into a hashtag on Twitter, with Newsom’s wife, First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom, donning a hat with the slogan [in a recent tweet](#).



604 people are talking about this



The governor has long worked to cultivate his image as a tech-savvy politician. “How to take the town square digital and reinvent government” is the subtitle of his 2013 book, “Citizenville.” And when [Newsom launched his first](#) — albeit short-lived — run for governor in April 2009, the announcement of his candidacy [came in a tweet](#).

Amanda Renteria, who was political director for former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign, said that Facebook and Twitter have transformed the way many Americans digest their news. And Newsom, who has millions following him on those platforms, is primed to take advantage of it, she said, especially through his daily live briefings on the pandemic.

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“He immediately began to communicate. That’s just been his style,” said Renteria, who ran against Newsom in the gubernatorial primary. “Over-communicating is really important to leadership. It’s exactly why Trump is Trump. He has figured out how to be camera-forward all the time.”

Before the pandemic, Newsom and Trump used those communication skills to slice and dice each other for more than a year, with Twitter as their battlefield of choice.

A Times analysis found that between March 1 and Dec. 31, 2019, Newsom tweeted more about Trump and his administration than any other governor in the country with two exceptions: former Democratic presidential candidates Gov. Steve Bullock of Montana and Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington.

For Newsom, the Twitter battle helped to cement him as a top leader of the Democratic Party’s resistance against the president. For Trump, accusing Newsom of allowing homelessness to go unchecked in California and failing to clear forest floors of flammable leaves and pine needles presented a reliable way to rile up his base.

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That feud has nearly disappeared from view since the pandemic hit, with both politicians offering each other praise on Twitter and at news conferences.

In late March, Newsom [lauded Trump for dispatching the Navy hospital ship Mercy](#) to the Port of Los Angeles to help free up capacity in Southern California hospitals for those stricken with COVID-19. He has also credited Trump for sending California much-needed specimen swabs for testing, as well as mobile military medical units.

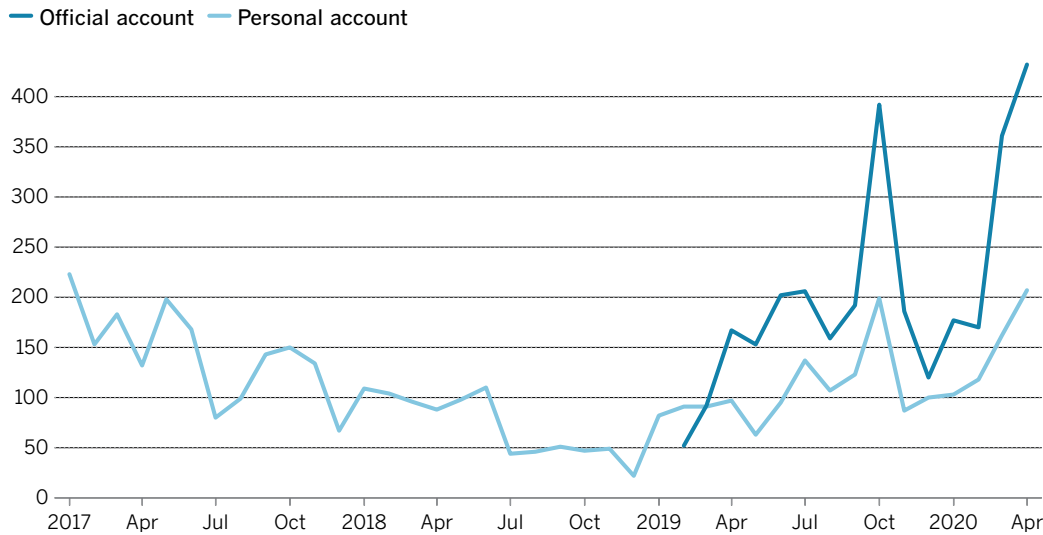
Trump has been just as uncharacteristically effusive.

“Governor @GavinNewsom of California has been very nice & highly supportive about the great job we have done, working together, for California,” [Trump tweeted on April 11](#).

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The thawed relations have since become fodder for a [Trump campaign reelection ad](#), which prominently features Newsom praising the president for his actions to help California respond to the coronavirus crisis.

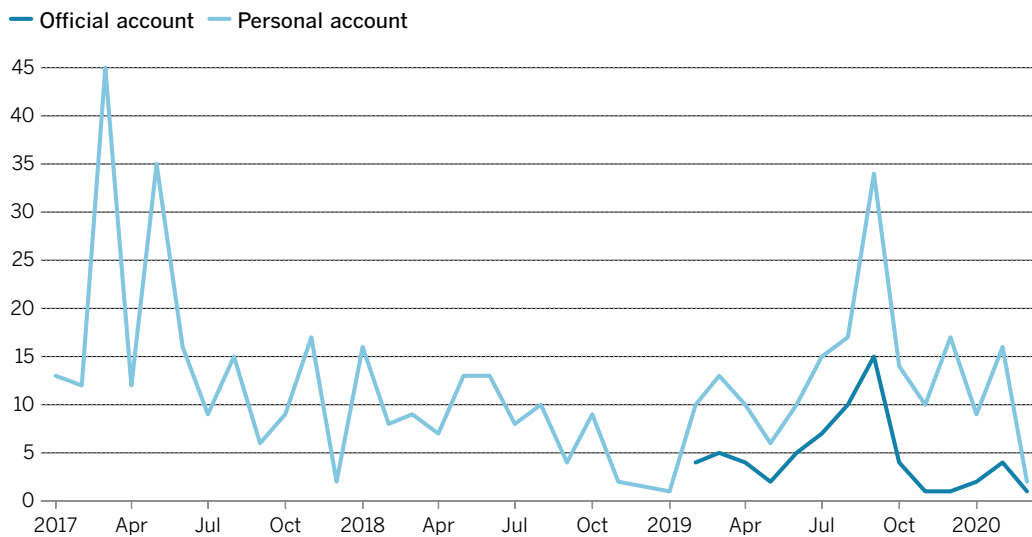
### How often does Gavin Newsom tweet each month?



Source: Twitter API

Jennifer Lu / Los Angeles Times

### How often do Gavin Newsom's tweets mention Trump each month?



Source: Twitter API

Jennifer Lu / Los Angeles Times

Along with Newsom’s personal accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, there are official accounts for the California governor’s office on those platforms. The Times made requests over several months to speak with Newsom about his social media operations, which he declined through a spokesman.

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Nathan Click, Newsom’s communications director, said the posts on the government accounts, which largely promote official announcements and livestream the governor’s events, are produced by Newsom’s government-

salaries communications staff. Click said Newsom's personal accounts on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are funded through his reelection campaign and managed by political advisors as well as governor's office staffers on their off-time.

He declined to say how many of the posts Newsom writes himself, and said the governor "channels his personal and general thoughts" on what is happening in the state and the rest of the world in directing his staff on what to post.

Having a team of staff members curate an elected official's online presence is not unique to Newsom. Many top politicians rely on aides and political consultants to run their social media operations.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan told The Times he rarely posts on Facebook and stays away from Twitter altogether, leaving it to members of his staff. But he does tell them what to say in those tweets, word for word. He credits social media for giving him a direct connection to constituents.

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"They see the real me," Hogan said during a visit to San Francisco for a National Governor's Assn. event in January. "If it was some sanitized version of somebody else, writing some really well-written eloquent piece that didn't sound like me, they would be — 'You know, he sounds like a politician.' "

Bullock said though valuable, social media has significant limitations.

"Often we people substitute the Twitterverse for the real universe," the Montana governor said at the event. "Most people's lives are too busy to give a damn about that stuff."

[A 2019 Pew Research study](#) found that 69% of Americans reported using Facebook, compared with 37% who used Instagram and 22% who used Twitter. Among other social media platforms, 28% of Americans said they used Pinterest, 27% used LinkedIn, 24% used Snapchat, 20% WhatsApp and 11% Reddit.

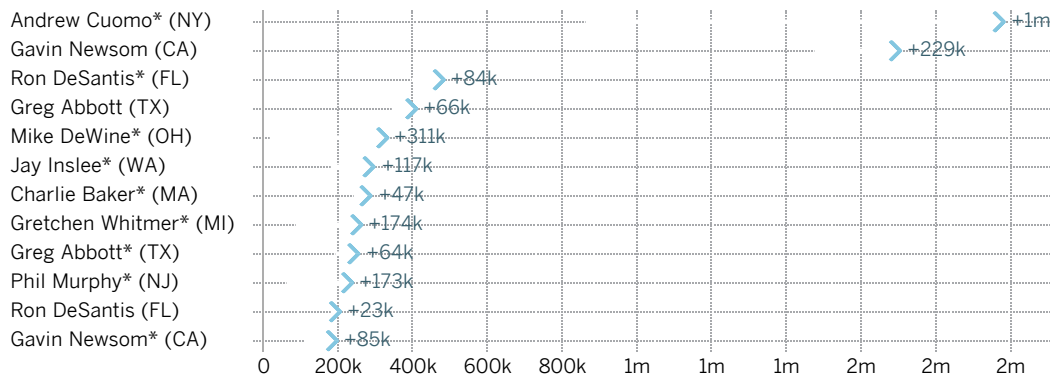
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Before the coronavirus hit, Newsom was by far the most followed governor on Twitter, with about 1.5 million followers on his personal account, and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo was a distant second, with about 863,000.

Cuomo, who has received widespread praise for his response to the outbreak, has since rocketed past Newsom and now has 2 million followers on Twitter. Newsom's following grew as well, to 1.7 million.

## Top 12 most-followed governors on Twitter

How governors' follower counts changed between Feb. 19 and May 1.



\* indicates official Twitter account

Source: Twitter API

Jennifer Lu / Los Angeles Times

“People are looking to their political leaders to provide information they can trust,” said Dr. Raina Merchant, an emergency room physician and director of the Center for Digital Health at the University of Pennsylvania’s Perelman School of Medicine. “There’s an incredible amount of anxiety out there.”

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With so many Americans relying on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms, social media has become the most direct way for elected officials and public health leaders to reach people with accurate information about the coronavirus, and to dispel rumors and misinformation, Merchant said.

“There’s just a lot more people who are on social media. So these types of conversations are very important,” she said. “Now it’s just become a part of our daily fabric.”

When it comes to campaigning, Facebook is the social media platform most relied upon by candidates, said digital strategist Michelle Jeung, co-owner of the political consulting firm MJE Strategies. Facebook allows politicians to “micro-target” advertising based on geography, gender, age, political party and interests.

“Twitter, that’s where you go to talk to reporters,” said Jeung, who worked for Newsom’s Democratic rival Antonio Villaraigosa in the 2018 governor’s race. “When you want to talk to voters, you go to Facebook.”

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In 2019, Newsom’s reelection campaign spent more than \$300,000 on digital ads and consultants, the committee’s biggest expense, according to the governor’s most recent campaign finance reports.

Just days after news broke in September that Trump planned to revoke a decades-old rule allowing California to set its own car emissions standards, a Newsom Facebook ad urged supporters to “fight Trump’s attack on the



environment.” Those who clicked on the ad were encouraged to “fight back” by donating to his campaign.

Other ads urged followers to support the governor’s efforts to enact rent control, oppose the death penalty, protect immigrants and push for universal healthcare.

But Newsom’s 2022 reelection campaign has not posted a new Facebook ad since October, and the governor’s political activity on social media platforms has all but evaporated. Instead, Newsom uses those accounts to retweet and post coronavirus updates and announcements from the governor’s office.

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Dan Newman, Newsom’s political strategist, said Californians expect to hear from the governor about the crisis at hand, not about politics.

“This is truly one of those cases where good policy is good politics,” Newman said. “If you’re a good leader in this crisis, you have to assume it will translate well politically.”

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Phil Willon

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Phil Willon covers Gov. Gavin Newsom and California politics for the Los Angeles Times. Willon grew up in Southern California and previously worked for the Tampa Tribune and the Capital in Annapolis, Md.



Jennifer Lu

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Jennifer Lu is a data journalist at the Los Angeles Times. Before joining The Times, she reported on environmental issues including air pollution, drinking water contaminants, and agricultural runoff. She graduated from the

University of Missouri with a master's in journalism and holds a degree in biochemistry from Brandeis University.

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Sara Stoudt

 Twitter  Instagram  Email  Facebook

Sara Stoudt was a 2019 intern with the Los Angeles Times' Data and Graphics Department.

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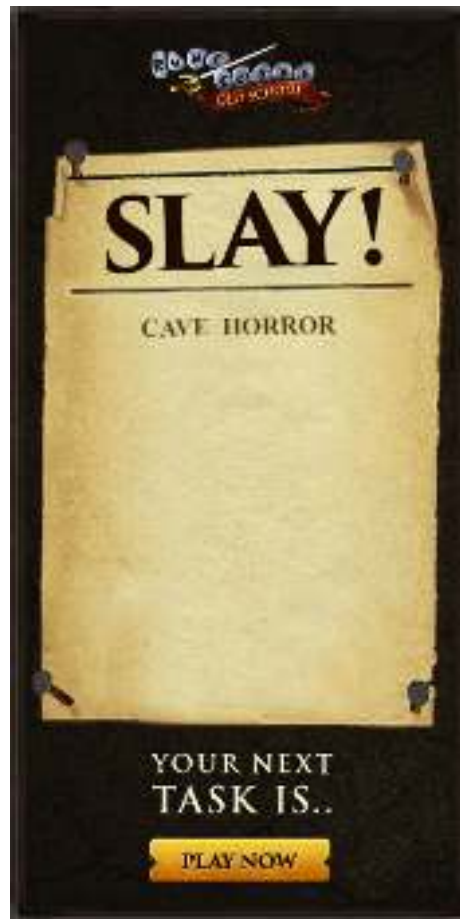
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