Don’t shoot the messenger

10 messaging apps publishers and broadcasters should test
With the number of messaging app users rocketing, we take a quick look at 10 that have potential opportunities for news publishers to explore...

WhatsApp, Kik and Snapchat aren’t big news anymore.

Messaging apps have been around for several years now and in 2015 their user numbers overtook those of social media networks. However, news organizations are still grappling with how they can use these platforms to reach new audiences.

It was in April 2015 when Business Insider reported that the combined user figures for the big four messaging apps (WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and Viber) had surpassed those of the big four social networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram). And these user figures are in the billions, with staggering projected growth.

By 2019, more than one-quarter of the world’s population will be using mobile messaging apps, according to an eMarketer forecast.

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1 http://www.businessinsider.com/the-messaging-app-report-2016-4-23
2 http://www.businessinsider.com/the-messaging-app-report-2016-4-23
Several other messaging apps have since increased in prominence, including Kik, Snapchat and Line. Media companies have been looking at ways they can use these platforms to reach new audiences - particularly the millennial and post-millennial generations.

Although messaging and chat applications have been around for some time, harnessing them as news delivery platforms remains a less developed opportunity. There are lots of competing messaging apps to choose from, and some work in vastly different ways.

Understanding where the apps fit into the lives of users is the essential first step. Messaging apps facilitate conversation, so dialogue with the user is often the focus: ‘What are you interested in?’, ‘What’s trending?’ and ‘What topic do you want news for?’ are common starting points.

Some messaging apps enable the use of chat bots to automate the process of sending news items to users. These artificial intelligence (AI) programmes use a narrow, text-based conversation and interrogate the user on their interests then suggest stories. They can also send daily messages with the main headlines along with links, and a browser will open within the app allowing the user to view the content. Some news organizations are being even more inventive with bots.
“CNN has done a particularly great job here,” he says. “They build custom experiences based on the platform, and for Kik, that means teens.

During the Olympics, instead of sharing news coverage, they (CNN) invited users to take a walk in Rio and talk with locals and tourists to get a better feel for the city. And for the election, they educated users on topics like the electoral college and provided realtime updates on election day. It was the first time that I learned about the election results through a bot, and it certainly won’t be the last.”

Sometimes, engaging with a chat bot can seem a little counter intuitive compared to typing ‘www.bbc.co.uk’ or ‘www.wsj.com’ into a web browser, but that isn’t the point. What publishers are aiming to do is reach audiences on the platforms chosen by those audiences.
A brief look at 10 messaging apps and some news activities on them.

Facebook Messenger
1 billion monthly active users July 2016

Direct messaging used to be part of the main Facebook platform but was pared off into a separate app for smartphones and tablets a few years ago.

Many news organizations are using chat bots to send links and headlines to users and suggest stories based on user queries. They include The Guardian, Sky News, Canada’s Global News, Australia’s ABC and The Wall Street Journal. The New York Times had a bot and reporter Nicholas Confessore send out election updates during the U.S. presidential race last year.

4 http://www.recode.net/2016/7/20/12232130/facebook-messenger-one-billion-users
WhatsApp
1 billion monthly active users
Feb 2016*

Acquired by Facebook in 2014, WhatsApp was developed by former Yahoo employees and had 500 million users sending 10 billion messages a day at the time of the sale. Facebook has doubled that user base and last year saw the BBC use the app to reach young African users with content for and about that audience – people who might feel alienated using other platforms.

The Guardian and Vogue have both used WhatsApp around an event. For Vogue, it was New York Fashion Week, while the Guardian used it for user-generated content from pupils about their GCSE and A Level exam results.

WeChat/Weixin
846 million monthly active users - Oct 2016*

It’s an exciting time for China’s most popular chat app. It’s easy to see why due to the suite built-in functionality – video calls, group chat, file sharing, shopping, banking, booking taxis, ordering food, hospital appointments and…news updates.

Bots can be developed for the platform, one of the most famous is Xiaoice, who reads the weather for her WeChat contacts. The bot has even become the first AI newsreader, with a live programme on Dragon TV. News organizations looking to appeal to audiences in the Chinese market could benefit from including WeChat in their plans.

*source: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/tech/2017-01/24/content_28038940.htm
*source: https://venturebeat.com/2014/09/05/microsoft-xiaoice/
Viber Messenger
800 million registered users
Nov 2016

Enabling users to make voice calls over the internet, Viber was perceived as a competitor to Skype. It facilitates text messaging, but the big attraction for publishers is its Public Chat section.

Like Snapchat, there is an area called Discover where BBC.com, The Washington Post, The Huffington Post and others push out images, links, and sometimes brief comments, to followers of their chats.

Developed in Israel, the app was sold to the Japanese company Rakuten in 2014.

Snapchat
150 million daily active users
Sept 2016

Used as a way of sending pictures and videos, which can be decorated with stickers, borders and fancy text treatments, Snapchat also delivers news and cultural content to its users via its Discover section.

The Daily Mail, The Sun, BuzzFeed, Sky Sports, Vice, The Economist and National Geographic are among around 30 companies who have slots. The type of content these digital publishers produce varies - videos, images, music, animations and infographics come together in polished reports. Companies share a percentage of their advertising revenues with Snapchat.

The payment model for Discover was revised in October 2016, whilst simultaneously diminishing the prominence of publisher content and raising ongoing concerns over platform control over publishers’ content. Using the chat functionality to reach audiences with stories is also trickier in Snapchat. Still, publishers primarily use it to reach and engage with younger audiences and test in a pure mobile environment.

Kik Messenger
300 million registered users
May 2016

Kik was born in Canada and its chat bots are picking up popularity. Besides chatting with friends, you can engage with 20,000 chatbots on the service that: lead you through a murder mystery, present fashion and beauty advice, play games, bring you top news stories and more. Yahoo News and CNN both have news bots on Kik.

Telegram Messenger
100 million monthly active users
Feb 2016

This messaging app comes with high levels of encryption – for users who are concerned about privacy. It also has a free blogging platform called Telegraph, designed for long-form publishing. It’s currently difficult to find any news outlets on the platform.

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10 http://www.reuters.com/article/us-rakuten-viber-idUSBREAID07M20140214
12 http://www.recode.net/2016/10/7/13204052/snapchat-stories-discover-update
13 https://techcrunch.com/2016/08/03/kik-users-have-exchanged-over-1-8-billion-messages-with-the-platforms-20000-chatbots/
14 https://telegram.org/blog/100-million
**Line**
218 million monthly active users
Apr 2016

Line is a Japanese messaging app and an important platform for publishers wishing to reach audiences in Asia where messaging apps first outstripped social media.

Line wants to push more visual content as well as breaking news. The BBC, Wall Street Journal and the Economist have been putting their content on Line and building audiences. As the Economist’s deputy community editor Denise Law told Digiday last year, it’s more about building the brand and reaching young Asian users who wouldn’t otherwise visit Economist.com. However, the content is in English rather than Japanese.

**Kakao Talk**
49.3 million monthly active users
May 2016

With messaging, group chat, video and voice calls (as well as shopping), the South Korean app Kakao has a large user base across the region - the vast majority of whom reside in its founding country.

As with the apps previously listed, Kakao has a Discover section that includes news, yet publishing via Kakao is not open. Also, the app allows users to become friends with brands and seeks to strengthen its advertising earnings.

**Skype**
300 million monthly active users
Mar 2016

Purchased by Microsoft in 2011, Skype is known for its internet video and voice call functionality, but isn’t immediately thought of as a messaging app. However, it is also used for that purpose.

Like Facebook and Kik, Microsoft and Skype are investing in bot technologies. Skype unveiled conversational bots for UPS and Expedia in December 2016, and there’s speculation about promotional bots for films like Doctor Strange. It’s not hard to imagine news bots appearing as potential Skype contacts before too long.

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16 https://www.techinasia.com/line-q1-2016-dependent-four-countries
17 http://digiday.com/publishers/the-economist-line-app/
We just launched a Bot Studio, thanks to a grant from the Knight Foundation.

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