

The use of social media in the Swiss towns and cities



This study collected data on the use of social media in the 147 Swiss towns and cities having a population of over 10,000 inhabitants¹. The data reflect social media use on November 7, 2018.

The towns and cities were spread over the three linguistic regions of the country in the following proportions: German-speaking Switzerland (107 out of 147 – 72.8%), French-speaking Switzerland (36 out of 147 – 24.5%) and Italian-speaking Switzerland (4 out of 147 – 2.7%). Most were small towns of between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants (101 towns – 68.7%).

Social network usage measured in this study focuses on the 5 platforms which, according to numerous studies, are most heavily used: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram². Snapchat was excluded from this study since its use in the towns and cities analysed was almost nil. The results show that, in our database as a whole, 61.5% of towns are active on at least one social media platform.

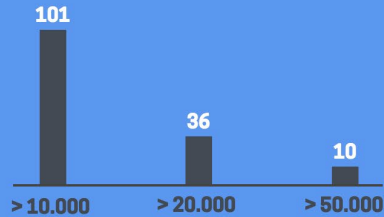
1. Adapted from the *Annuaire statistique de l'Union des villes suisses 2018* (79th edition). The commune of Bernex, which had 10,263 inhabitants as of 30 September 2018, was added to the 146 towns and cities in the *Annuaire*.

2. The State of Social Media in Government. Hootsuite's annual report on social media trends in government (2018).

Number of cities by language region



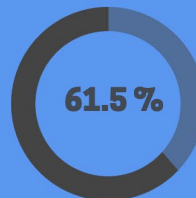
Number of cities by population segment



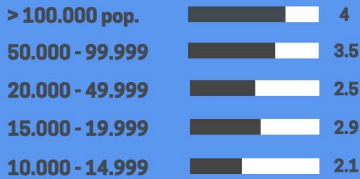
Social networks taken into account in this study



Percentage of cities active on at least one network



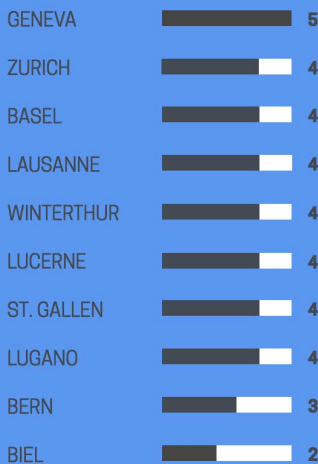
Average number of networks per city



Percentage of cities on at least one network



Number of networks used in the ten most populous Swiss cities



Larger Swiss cities (>100,000 inhabitants) on average were present (i.e. had an account) on 4 out of the 5 platforms selected for this study. This proportion decreases in lower population-size segments, except for towns having between 15,000 and 19,999 inhabitants, which were generally more active than those in the next higher category (20,000 to 49,999 inhabitants). However, the demographic progression was followed as regards the percentage of towns present on at least one social media platform, which progressed linearly with population size.

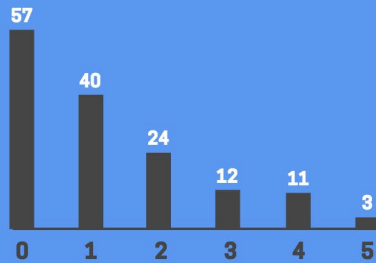
With the 10 largest cities all being present on social media, it is instructive to observe use of the various platforms from a quantitative point of view. While Geneva is active on all the 5 platforms, the great majority of cities use 4. Only Berne and Bienne are present on 3 and 2 platforms respectively.

A significant portion of Swiss towns are not registered on any social media platform (57 towns – 38.8%), while 40 towns (27.2%) are registered on one platform. Note that being registered does not necessarily mean that there is any activity in an account. For example, of the 65 towns with a Facebook account, only 57 of them (87.7%) are active on that platform¹. The findings with regard to other platforms were similar, except for LinkedIn, where we were unable to distinguish between presence and activity.

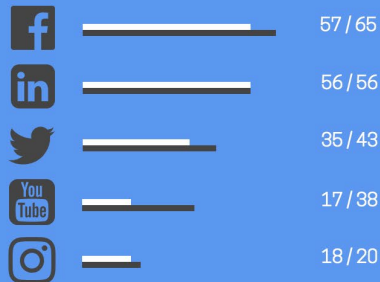
Clearly, however, social media adoption has undergone a distinct increase over the past 3 years. Between 2015 and 2018, Twitter in particular has become increasingly popular, with 48% more towns present on the platform. The same phenomenon can be observed with YouTube (+43%) and Facebook (+39%).

1. The distinction between a town that is present on social media and one that is active is based on whether it was active within the past month on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and within the past three months on YouTube. We were not able to measure activity on LinkedIn.

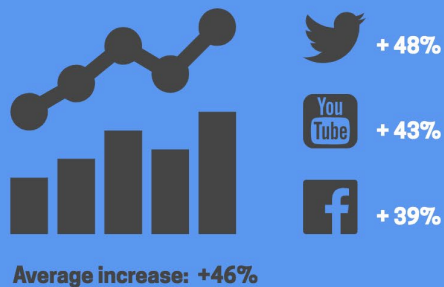
Number of cities with a presence on 0 to 5 social networks



Number of cities active/present on each social network



Percentage growth in presence on 3 social networks between 2015 and 2018



Percentage of cities active on at least one social network by language region



Number of active/total cities in German- and French-speaking regions

	German-speaking	French-speaking
	32/107 (29.9%)	24/36 (66.7%)
	38/107 (35.6%)	17/36 (47.3%)
	24/107 (22.4%)	10/36 (27.7%)
	8/107 (7.4%)	8/36 (22.2%)
	6/107 (5.6%)	10/36 (27.7%)

Average number of users, by language region (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)



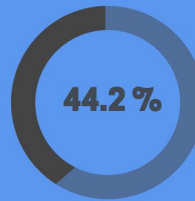
Presence on social media is greater in French-speaking Switzerland, where over 70% of towns and cities are registered on at least one platform (compared with 51.4% in German-speaking Switzerland). Demographics largely explain this difference, with German-speaking Switzerland having a larger number of small towns, particularly those with between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. Size also plays a role in the case of Italian-speaking Switzerland, where only Lugano and Bellinzone are active, mainly on Instagram.

Most towns and cities are only minimally active on YouTube and Instagram and, more surprisingly, also on Twitter. The preferred platforms are Facebook and LinkedIn. Facebook, incidentally, has the greatest number of users on both sides of the Sarine. Instagram comes in second place with the French-speaking population, while in German-speaking towns Twitter has the greatest number of users after Facebook.

Unsurprisingly, Facebook is the most heavily used platform, with 65 Swiss towns and cities having an account (44.2%), of whom 57 are active (38.8%). Presence on this platform mirrors demographics (like the presence on at least one platform noted on page 3), with proportions diminishing along with population size, except for cities having between 20,000 and 49,999 inhabitants. These cities account for more users than those having between 50,000 and 99,999 inhabitants.

The growth curve of presence on Facebook shows substantial growth in the number of cities having accounts between 2009 and 2011 (from 6 to 28). This rising trend has continued since 2011 in spite of a slowdown. The average number of users has also grown, today reaching an average total of 24,626 in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants and 9058 in cities and between 50,000 and 99,999 inhabitants

Percentage of cities with a Facebook presence

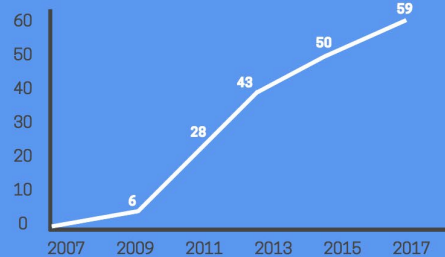


65 cities are on Facebook (44.2%)

57 cities are active on Facebook (38.8%)



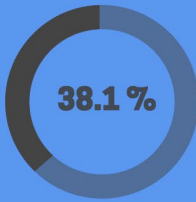
Facebook presence growth curve



Average number of users by population segment (in active cities)



Percentage of cities with a LinkedIn presence



56 cities are on LinkedIn (38.1%)

56 cities are active on LinkedIn (38.1%)



Average number of users by population segment



Number of users in active cities of over 50,000 inhabitants



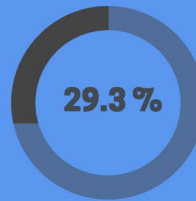
More surprisingly, LinkedIn is greatly favoured by Swiss cities, with 38.1% of them having an account. However, this platform is less popular in small and medium towns and cities (less than 50,000 inhabitants), except those having between 15,000 and 19,999 inhabitants (42.1%). In cities of over 50,000 inhabitants, LinkedIn usage is very high at 75%, rising to 83.3% in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants.

The average number of users is high in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants, and considerably lower in cities in lower-population segments, including the category of cities having between 50,000 and 99,999 inhabitants. This finding is reflected particularly strongly in the 8 largest cities that are active on LinkedIn, except for Winterthur and Berne, which occupy the last two positions.

Less than one third of Swiss towns and cities have a Twitter account (29.2%) and only 23.8% are active on that platform. While Twitter is often seen as the most suitable platform for sending out effective communications and engaging in dialogue with citizens, only 36 cities use it actively. Take-up of this platform was relatively slow in the years following its launch (in 2006), but progressed strongly between 2009 and 2013, and then again between 2015 and 2017.

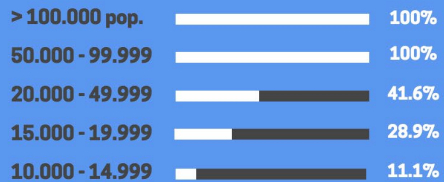
The average number of users remains low in less populated towns and cities, but has risen strongly in large urban centres. However, it remains very low in comparison with the success of Facebook. These results must be analyzed in the light of the percentage of towns and cities that have a Twitter account, which is no higher than 11.1% in towns with less than 15,000 inhabitants.

Percentage of cities with a presence on Twitter

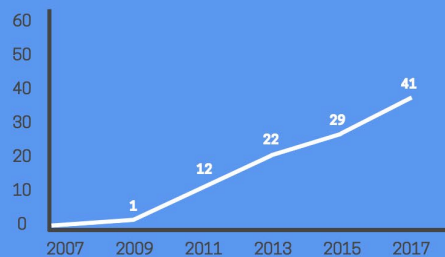


43 cities are on Twitter (29.3%)

35 cities are active on Twitter (23.8%)



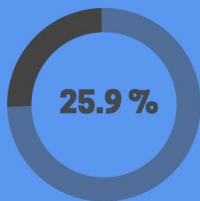
Twitter presence growth curve



Average number of users by population segment (in active cities)



Percentage of cities with a presence on YouTube



38 cities are on YouTube (25.9%)

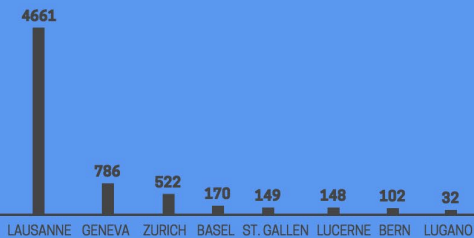
17 cities are active on YouTube (11.6%)



Average number of users by population segment



Number of users in active cities of over 50,000 inhabitants



Although more than a quarter of Swiss towns and cities have a YouTube account (38 cities – 25.9%), many of these are not active on the platform (21, or 55.3%). This total is considerably higher than the figures observed for Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. The 10 largest Swiss cities almost all have a YouTube channel (9 out of 10), but the proportion decreases strongly in cities of less than 50,000 inhabitants.

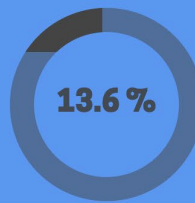
The average number of subscribers is the city less than on the other platforms. Only cities of over 100,000 inhabitants show an average total of more than 1000 subscribers, largely carried by the YouTube channel of the City of Lausanne (4,661). Apart from Geneva and Europe, all other towns and cities have fewer than 220 subscribers.

In view of its recent surge in popularity, Instagram remains little used by Swiss towns and cities, with only 20 having an account (13.6%) and 18 of them being active (12.2%). Unsurprisingly, large cities are most heavily represented, although towns and cities with between 50,000 and 99,999 inhabitants have a higher rate of adoption (50%) than urban centres with over 100,000 inhabitants (33.3%).

Among the 18 Swiss cities that are active¹ on Instagram, Lugano makes the heaviest use of this new platform. Its account has more than 9000 followers, a much higher proportion than other localities. Next come Geneva (6969), Neuchâtel (5672), St-Gallen (5672) and Baden (2186). No other town or city has an account with over 2000 followers. These results show that certain cities of average size that are less active on other platforms seem to prefer Instagram and enjoy a wider audience on this network.

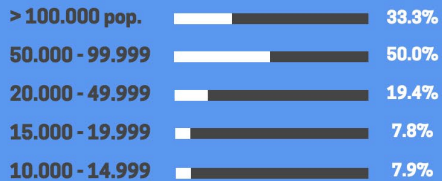
1. Statistics on Bellinzzone could not be gathered on November 7, 2018.

Percentage of cities with an Instagram presence

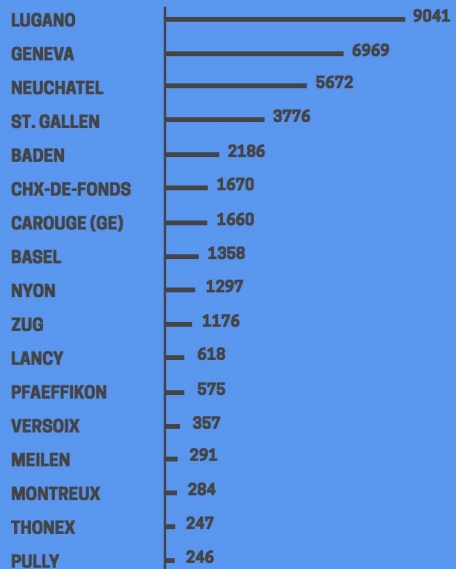


20 cities are on Instagram (13.6%)

18 cities are active on Instagram (12.2%)



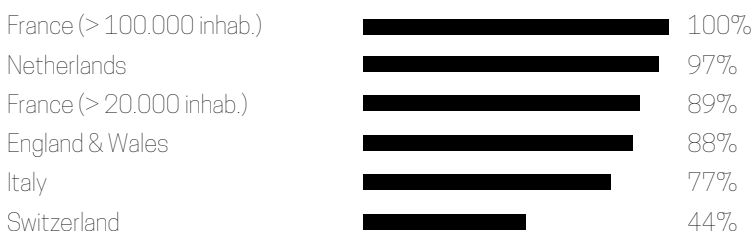
Number of users in cities that are active on Instagram



International comparisons are frequently hazardous because of the different structure of States, and because of different methods of data collection. It proved exceedingly difficult to find studies covering all towns and cities and their activities on the 5 selected social media platforms using selection criteria similar to those of our study. However, a number of studies produced by academic researchers, consulting firms and institutions enabled us to make various observations for comparison purposes.

An Italian study dated October 2018 showed that 99 cities out of 107 (93%) were present on at least one social media platform¹, a high proportion that was also reflected in French cities of over 100,000 inhabitants (100%) of those having between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (92%)². 77% of Italian cities have a Facebook account. This percentage rises to 80% in the 377 local governments of England and Wales³, and to as much as 89% in cities in France having between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants (100% in cities of over 100,000 inhabitants).

A study conducted in the Netherlands in January 2019 showed particularly high results for the 318 Dutch municipalities surveyed⁴: 100% of them use at least one social media platform, and all have a link to Twitter on their website. The figures are also very high for Facebook and LinkedIn (97%). YouTube lags slightly behind with 89%. YouTube also has less success in England and Wales (68%) and in Italy (66%). As an illustration, cities having a presence on Facebook in the countries mentioned above can be represented as follows:



1. FPA: *Ecco le città italiane più social*. iCityLab (Florence, 17-18 ottobre 2018).

2. F. Confino (2018). *Web et médias sociaux : où en sont les collectivités locales ?* 3 décembre 2018.

3. *A list of all councils in England and Wales and their main social media links*. Local Government Association.

4. B. Faber, T. Budding & R. Gradus (2019). *Keeping in touch with citizens online: social media usage in Dutch local government*. Tinbergen Institute Discussion Paper TI 2019-001/VIII.

Adoption of social media platforms by Swiss towns and cities remains timid for the moment. Facebook has by far the greatest success, doubtless because it was the first platform available and because its format lends itself well to public communication. Surprisingly, Twitter is used far less, although its format also is well-suited to certain communication needs of cities.

Even in cases where a platform is adopted, the low number of followers and/or an absence of activity by the city point to limited enthusiasm for this new communication standard. However, a constant increase can be observed in the number of users of the main platforms, as in the average number of platforms used by towns and cities. This rather slow rate of adoption raises as many questions about the way in which cities communicate as about the usefulness of exploiting these new platforms. A forthcoming complementary scientific study will examine these issues specifically.

All the computer graphics in this leaflet and the leaflet itself can be obtained free of charge in electronic format (PDF) directly from the authors.

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