

# How the F Train Breakdown Hit Social Media

Sarah M. Kaufman and Joanna Simon  
NYU Rudin Center for Transportation  
June 2017

Subway riders are often frustrated by the lack of notifications about long and unexpected delays, despite the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's efforts at using social media. The MTA's official subway Twitter page (@NYCTSubway) is monitored twenty-four hours per day and primarily posts service alerts. The subway Twitter feed has less than 700,000 followers, about 12 percent of the daily ridership. Furthermore, each post is rarely retweeted more than twice, limiting the reach of information. The MTA announces planned work on its Facebook page, but is only followed by 40,000 followers, less than one percent of riders. The MTA's social media broadcasts do not reach most subway riders with essential information. The chart below shows that the MTA has the largest number of Twitter followers of the major mass transit systems in the United States (690,336), but only represents 12.3% of daily subway riders. Here is how the MTA's social media compares with that of other major U.S. transit systems:

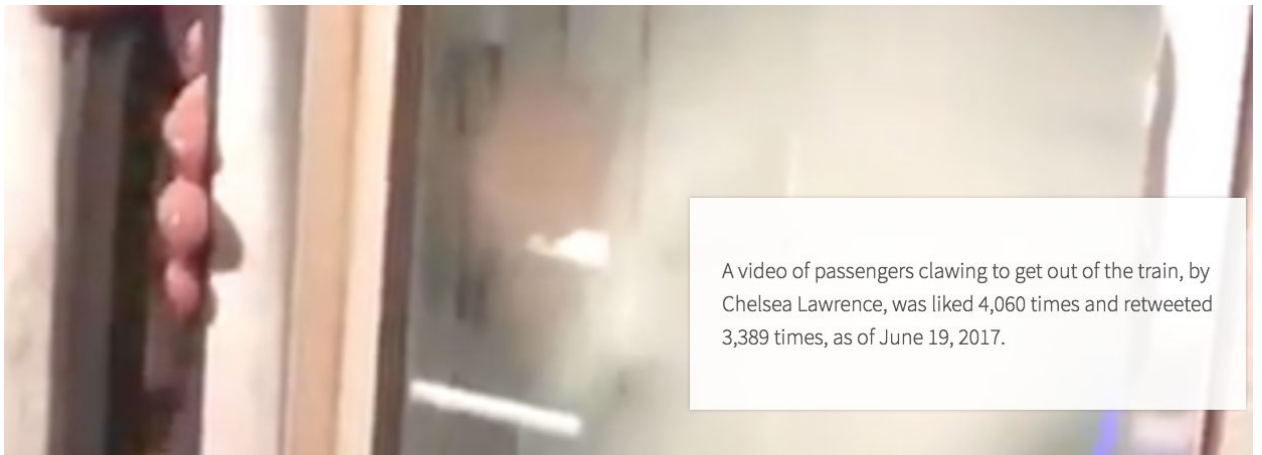
<b>Transit System</b>	<b>Twitter Handle</b>	<b>Daily Ridership</b>	<b>Twitter Followers*</b>	<b>Twitter Followers as a % of Daily Riders</b>
MTA Subway	@NYCTSubway	5,700,000	690,336	12.3%
Chicago Transit	@cta	1,660,000	188,492	11.4%
Boston MBTA	@mbta	1,277,200	271,936	21.3%
Washington Metro	@wmata	748,800	239,389	32%
Bay Area Rapid Transit	@sfbart	433,394	260,269	60.1%

\* As of June 19, 2017

The need for rider information was highlighted on June 5, 2017, when a rush-hour F train was stuck underground in a tunnel for nearly an hour between the West 4th Street and

Broadway-Lafayette Street stations. Riders were told that the delay was due to “train traffic,” although they later learned the train was stopped due to mechanical issues.

As passengers waited in a train without lights or air conditioning, they shared their experiences on social media. Their social media posts vastly surpassed any information provided by the MTA. More than 100 Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter posts were made from passengers on-board the train or at the Broadway-Lafayette platform. They reported "People...clawing at the windows trying to breathe the air" and the experience as “pure hell.” One post, retweeted nearly 4,000 times, described “passengers dripping with sweat begging to get off.”



This account of the train's interior posted on Facebook by Sandy Claus Michael was shared 2,500 times on multiple networks:



However, the MTA's only social media post about the incident was a standard delay bulletin about 30 minutes later, leaving those on-board the train and at the stations uninformed.

The one-hour F train mechanical breakdown was an extreme, but not rare, incident. The MTA must improve its social media communications systems. The MTA has released a statement indicating that the issues experienced in this event are a major priority for mechanical improvements. However, the MTA should also focus on its communications with riders. With the onset of overdue repairs and maintenance activity, the MTA should also improve its social media outreach to riders.



**NYU Rudin Center for Transportation**

[www.NYURudinCenter.com](http://www.NYURudinCenter.com) // [@NYURudin](https://twitter.com/NYURudin) // [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/NYURudin)

