

How Twitter is Changing Narrative Storytelling: A Case Study of the Boston Marathon Bombings

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Abstract

Understanding social media, an integral part of 21st century American life, is more important than ever. On the one-year anniversary of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, it is clear that Twitter was a primary source of information for many Americans, despite the vast inaccuracies tweeted by trusted sources throughout the days following the attack. This case study based on content analysis found that 10 authoritative organizations, including five news organizations, provided news and feature stories through their tweets – sometimes at the expense of accuracy to be first on their stories. They also posted tweets that ensured people’s safety during the crisis, enlisted help from the public, and offered perfunctory roles, such as sending out comforting messages for grieving people.

I. Introduction

American society is built on a culture of impatience. Americans focus on time — time wasted, time saved, time lost — using every spare moment to prevent missing a beat. The introduction of the 24-hour news cycle has made the demand for constant updates a prominent part of American culture. As social media’s presence in society grows, many news outlets are working to feed the “I want it now” desires of media consumers. In the event of a catastrophe, the demand for information becomes much stronger, but at a cost. The accuracy of breaking news may suffer for the sake of speed. For example, many news sources, including *Onward State* of Penn State University, CBS News and *The Huffington Post*, misreported the death of Joe Paterno hours before his actual death in 2012.¹ This same phenomenon has occurred numerous times in breaking news, and it shows the way society is changing as a result of the speed of news. Twitter is one of many tools changing the distribution of breaking news.

The Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013, were a major event in media coverage and in American society, and the coverage of this event has long since been a topic of discussion. This study explores how social media coverage of the bombings, specifically on Twitter, impacted the storytelling narrative.

¹ Brian Stelter, “Mistaken Early Report on Paterno Roiled Web,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 2012.

Keywords: Twitter, Storify, narrative storytelling, Boston Marathon bombings, social media
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This undergraduate project was conducted as a partial requirement of a research course in communications.

II. Literature Review

The literature surrounding social media and the Boston bombings centers on three main topics: narrative storytelling, social media in journalism, and stereotypes in media coverage.

Narrative storytelling

Narrative storytelling has been an important part of history as a whole, moving from oral history to written communication. Jeff Kisselhoff's *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* is an example of how narrative storytelling can be an effective form of communicating an event or a series of events. The book's description summarizes this idea: "The Box re-creates the old-time TV years through more than three hundred interviews with those who invented, manufactured, advertised, produced, directed, wrote, and acted in them."² This form of storytelling is the same form replicated through Twitter – hundreds, thousands, even millions of voices breathing life into a current event by giving their perspectives on that topic. Kisselhoff interweaves interviews and uses them, without any insertion of commentary, to tell the story of how television evolved. This is an incredible form of storytelling because it provides opinions from the era without an author's bias and without an editor picking and choosing what information goes into it. It is straight from the mouths of interviewees, and thus it tells a different story than one writer could manage alone. This intersection of opinions and facts is part of the beauty of Twitter as a source of news and commentary.

Tweeting stories has been a popular form of storytelling since Twitter first emerged in 2006. Storify has also been an important tool in that storytelling. Storify is a service that allows users to curate posts using information gathered from a variety of social media sources, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. This service allows people to select various social media posts and insert them into an online archive to supply greater populations of people with easier access to the information. News sources like the Pew Research Center, NBC News and NPR have done their own narrative storytelling via Storify. The Pew Research Center has used Storify to discuss news and social media through tweets and Facebook posts on how and why Pew's followers and fans get news on social media.³ NBC News utilized the service for a more hard-news compilation: live updates on the TSA officer who was shot and killed at LAX in November 2013. NBC News mainly used Twitter for live breaking news, but sometimes incorporated other links and Instagram photos into coverage.⁴ In 2013, NPR's Twitter account, @TodayIn1963, began documenting what had happened in real-time 50 years prior, culminating in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and its aftermath.⁵ All of these are strong examples of how Twitter narratives are becoming more common in media, both in feature pieces and in breaking news situations, and how Storify and other similar tools are preserving those pieces of history in one accessible place.

Social media in journalism

According to a 2012 report from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the percentage of Americans who get news from social media increased from 2 percent in 2008, to 7 percent in 2010, and to a whopping 20 percent of those individuals surveyed in 2012.⁶ As these numbers increase, it is apparent that social media interaction is a vital part of the news cycle for journalists and for civilians.

2 Jeff Kisselhoff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television, 1920-1961* (New York: Viking, 1995).

3 Emily Guskin, "How Do You Use Facebook and Twitter for News?," *Pew Research Center - Fact Tank*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/07/how-do-you-use-facebook-and-twitter-for-news/>.

4 "Live Updates: TSA Office Shot and Killed at LAX," *NBC News*, November 22, 2013, <https://storify.com/nbc-news/shooting-at-lax>.

5 Kat Chow, "@TodayIn1963 Captures Moments From A Historic Summer," *National Public Radio*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/06/12/190680446/-todayin1963-captures-moments-from-a-historic-summer>.

6 *Section 2: Online and Digital News*, In *Changing News Landscape, Even Television Is Vulnerable* (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, September 27, 2012), <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/section-2-online-and-digital-news-2/>.

Twitter is one of the top social media forums in use around the world today and is the 10th most visited website online.⁷ Because of the public nature of many Twitter accounts and the sheer number of users, Twitter has become a tool that spurs conversation, disperses information, and even delivers and breaks news. Twitter has been a way for journalists to connect with the masses during large-scale tragedies like the Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013, but it has also been a source of great confusion when those journalists publish incorrect content.

A study by Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon (2010) states that Twitter is not just a social network, but that the platform may also be a news source. “We have classified the trending topics based on the active period and the tweets and show that the majority (more than 85%) of topics are headline news or persistent news in nature.”⁸ If news takes up more than 85 percent of the topics discussed on Twitter, it’s safe to say that Twitter users are being bombarded with news in their feeds. The fact that a growing number of people get their news first from social media shows that Kwak et al.’s categorization of Twitter as a news medium could very well be accurate.

Hermida explains how social networks have changed the function of journalism and the idea of verification in his article, “Tweets and Truth: Journalism as a discipline of collaborative verification.”

“The development of social networks for real-time news and information, and the integration of social media content in the news media, creates tensions for a profession based on a discipline of verification. This paper suggests that social media services such as Twitter provide platforms for collaborative verification, based on a system of media that privileges distributed over centralised expertise, and collective over individual intelligence.”⁹

It is clear, as Hermida’s study states, that Twitter users value a greater number of observations rather than one seemingly reliable source’s information – in a nutshell, users want confirmation by many, instead of taking the word of experts. This ideology has presented a nest of potential problems for journalists reporting on a breaking news event via social media. It also offers a reminder that fact checking is still a worthwhile endeavor in breaking news reporting.

Another clear reminder of this fact is a *Nieman Reports*’ analysis of the interaction between social media and news media in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings. While this topic is quite similar to the discussion point at hand, the main difference between these reports and the current research is the act of delving into individual tweets and what they meant in terms of cultural impact as well as journalism. According to Qu, journalists “have three capabilities that are vital to the news ecosystem: broadcasting, credibility and storytelling.”¹⁰ Qu explains that these capabilities come with responsibility and the role of journalists is constantly changing as a result of social media.

The accuracy of tweets is often difficult to determine, although companies like Dataminr are getting better at pinpointing the accuracy of tweets in crisis situations like the Boston Marathon bombings and the explosion that shook East Harlem in March 2014. Ted Bailey, CEO of Dataminr, says aggregate Twitter data is helping reveal what happens on the ground.

“During breaking news events, even a small number of tweets can provide enough data for our algorithms to characterize the event and determine with high confidence the validity, relevance and actionability of rapidly emerging information . . . People acted collectively as an on-the-ground detection and sensory network, depicting the scene with granularity long before first responders or reporters arrived.”¹¹

Twitter is undeniably a force in the current landscape of news, but how does it function in the scheme of a large-scale catastrophe like the Boston Marathon bombings?

Social media was not a huge factor in the London Underground bombings of 2005 because it was still

7 *Twitter.com - Site Info* (Alexa, December 2013), <http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/twitter.com>.

8 Haewoon Kwak et al., “What Is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media?,” *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web*, April 26, 2010, 591–600.

9 Alfred Hermida, “Tweets and Truth: Journalism as a Discipline of Collaborative Verification,” *Journalism Practice* 6, no. 5–6 (March 27, 2012): 659–68.

10 Hong Qu, “Social Media and the Boston Bombings,” *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2013, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102871/Social-Media-and-the-Boston-Bombings.aspx>.

11 Ted Bailey, “How Twitter Confirmed the Explosion in Harlem First,” *GigaOM*, March 16, 2014, <http://gigaom.com/2014/03/16/how-twitter-confirmed-the-explosion-in-harlem-before-the-news-did/>.

in its infancy. Reading explored the effects of mobile witnessing in her paper, “The London bombings: Mobile witnessing, mortal bodies and global time.” Mobile witnessing is the phenomenon of using mobile phones to report news as it happens, and “global time arises from two major dynamics at work today: digitization and globalization. Together these dynamics are creating new affective logics within media, culture and society.”¹² With these two frameworks of mobile witnessing and global time in place, it becomes clear how the world is changing due to the digital, global and mobile age. Reading discusses the fact that because of mobile witnessing and digitization, the world is able to engage with what is happening almost immediately, especially when compared to a similar London Underground bombing in 1897. While this story spread internationally, this news did not do so with the urgency or rate that the 2005 bombings did because the spread of information was significantly slower more than a century earlier. Within the last 20 years, and even within the past decade since the 2005 bombings, the speed with which information is disseminated has increased exponentially. Cell phone photos and videos have made an enormous difference in the media’s coverage of both the London Underground and Boston Marathon bombings, and in the live updates of these events.

Stereotypes in media coverage

Many stereotypes in the media contribute to different framings of conversation in terrorist attacks. In a similar time period, Woods investigated the relationship between the public’s “perceived risk of terrorism” in the four years before and four years after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. Woods says, “Articles that associated the risk of terrorism with Islam had greater [perceived] risk levels than articles that did not,” which portrays the prominence of the assumed association between Islam and terrorism, and shows that the media had a strong impact on the image of Islam in relation to reporting on terrorism.¹³ It is quite possible that coverage, both on Twitter and in news media, of the Boston Marathon bombings included language stating that Muslims were the culprits in the bombings without any clear evidence. This was one of many misconceptions that confused journalists during the bombings and caused catastrophic mistakes from reporting too quickly without verification.

A great amount of media attention has come out of one particular tweet shortly after the Boston Marathon bombings. Rush, a columnist and occasional Fox News commentator, tweeted the following:

“@erikrush Everybody do the National Security Ankle Grab! Let’s bring more Saudis in without screening them! C’mon! #bostonmarathon.”

According to an article in the *Independent*, another Twitter user asked whether he blamed Muslims for the attack, and he responded, “Yes, they’re evil. Let’s kill them all,” a tweet he later deleted.¹⁴ While Rush maintained that his statement was a joke, some news outlets and individuals were outraged, while others joined the bandwagon, blaming Muslims as well. This shows the power of one tweet to change the direction of a narrative and of a stereotype to fully alter the way some audiences view a crisis.

III. Methods

This case study focuses on the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013, analyzing tweets from 10 Twitter accounts through the frame of social theory, which measures social behaviors and interactions to interpret social phenomena.¹⁵ Using some data gathered by Boynton within the hours shortly following the Boston Marathon bombings, the researcher used several of the top retweeted tweets as a basis for understanding the climate of the narrative. The researcher then created a narrative of the tweets from ten sources, which are as

12 Anna Reading, “The London Bombing: Mobile Witnessing, Mortal Bodies and Global Time,” *Memory Studies* 4, no. 3 (2011): 298–311.

13 Joshua Woods, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Terrorism: Elite Press Coverage of Terrorism Risk from 1997 to 2005,” *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 12, no. 3 (June 28, 2007), <http://ejournals.ebsco.com/Direct.asp?AccessToken=9I5I5IJ8X4J5D4RXKM5ZR XU9UJRJ8I41Q9&Show=Object>.

14 Richard Hall, “‘Muslims Are Evil. Let’s Kill Them All’: US TV Commentator Erik Rush Provokes Furious Reaction with Boston Bombing Twitter Rants,” *The Independent*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/muslims-are-evil-lets-kill-them-all-us-tv-commentator-erik-rush-provokes-furious-reaction-with-boston-bombing-twitter-rants-8575176.html>.

15 “What Is Social Theory?,” *Social Theory Applied*, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://socialtheoryapplied.com/what-is-social-theory/>.

follows:

The Boston Globe (@bostonglobe)

Boston Marathon (@bostonmarathon)

Boston PD (@boston_police) – handle has now changed to @bostonpolice

Cambridge PD (@CambridgePolice)

CNN (@CNN)

Fox News (@FoxNews)

JetBlue (@JetBlue)

Mass General News from Massachusetts General Hospital (@MassGeneralNews) – Includes all tweets from this period, many of which did not use any keywords

New York Post (@nypost)

The New York Times (@NYTimes)

These Twitter users were chosen based on their importance as a source of information from a public interest standpoint (Boston and Cambridge Police, Mass General Hospital), their role as a news organization trying – and sometimes failing – to communicate information swiftly and accurately (*Boston Globe*, CNN, *New York Post*, Fox News, *The New York Times*), their position as a corporate sponsor of the marathon itself in an attempt to gauge the behavior of a corporation in a crisis situation (JetBlue) and, finally, their function as the official Twitter source of information on the marathon (Boston Marathon). JetBlue was chosen in particular because it tweeted more than any other corporate sponsor with an active Twitter account during the five-day time period in this study.

These sources are meant to give a variety of perspectives on the issues at hand. These sources' tweets were collected in a Storify collection and were then analyzed as a whole, showing a full picture of the bombings and the subsequent manhunt. The tweets span from April 15, 2013, one hour before the bombs went off at 2:49 p.m. EDT, to the end of the manhunt for the Tsarnaev brothers on April 19. Tweets inserted into the narrative include all tweets by these sources during that timeframe that use any of the following words: "Boston," "marathon," "bombing," "attack," and "manhunt," unless noted differently above.

One tweet was included that is not from the sources on this list. PzFeed Top News (@PzFeed) tweeted during this period: "POLICE AND FBI URGING ANYONE WITH VIDEO OF THE FINISH LINE AT THE TIME OF THE EXPLOSION SHOULD PLEASE COME FORWARD." This was the most retweeted tweet in Boynton's data with 10,275 retweets in the hours following the bombings.¹⁶ PzFeed's tweet only has 142 RTs, making it likely that this account is not the original source of this tweet, a variable that was not included in Boynton's data. However, it is also the only tweet that is found in Twitter's search that matches this phrase.

Because of the enormous influx of people in a small geographic area in this situation, the live-tweeting of this event is different from many other disasters because people in a natural disaster or a more widespread attack would be more evenly dispersed throughout different areas. The sheer number of people at the finish line made the tweets about this attack different than other similar attacks because of the size of the crowd and its central location.

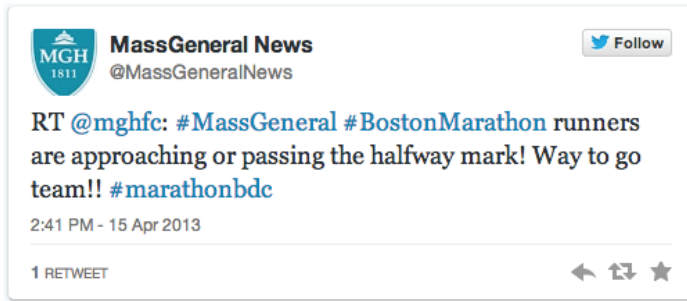
A case study like this one is important to the understanding of interactions on social media, particularly Twitter, in crisis situations. While many studies have been done on crisis reporting and media coverage, few have been recent enough to explore social media's impact on a particular crisis as pressing and timely as the Boston bombings.

IV. Findings

This is a summary of the hundreds of tweets from the ten sources listed in the methods section. It is broken down by timeframe across the days of the attack and subsequent manhunt, with one exception: inaccurate news reports were categorized separately because of their prevalence in this case.

16 G.R. Boynton, ed., "Boston Bomb Retweets Summary-Excel," April 15, 2013.

Before the attack: An ordinary live-tweeting scenario



Many sources were tweeting Boston Marathon-related tweets during the hours prior, ranging from *The Boston Globe* detailing why one columnist never wants to run a marathon again to a listing of top performers from past marathons. The above tweet from Massachusetts General Hospital shows the enthusiasm of the many live-tweeters at the marathon before the tragedy occurred at 2:49 p.m. April 15.

Real time of the attack



At 2:57 p.m., the first report from the ten sources listed came in regarding the bombings via *The Boston Globe*. Two minutes later, they fully broke the news.






News teams mobilized immediately, many citing the Globe or confirming their information with sources, like Fox News, which confirmed information with a Boston Marathon spokesman.



Fox News was also the first of these sources to tweet a link to its coverage. CNN tweeted that it had a producer on the scene and that there was live video on TV.






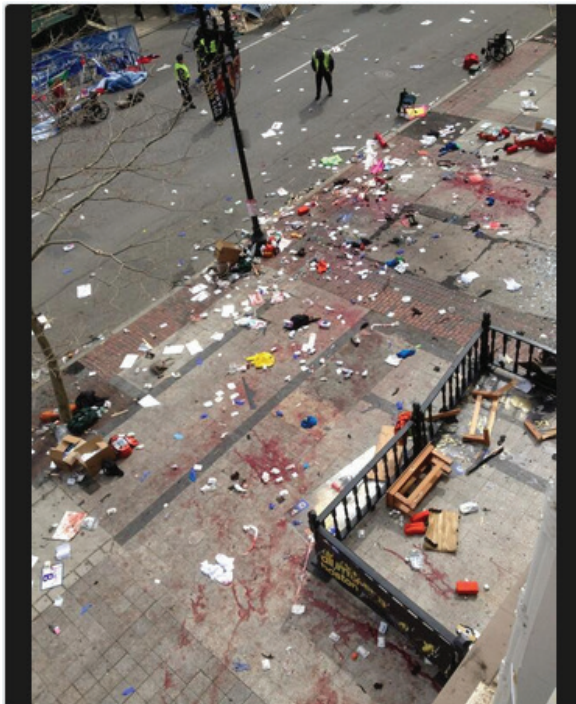
The Boston Globe tweeted the first picture among the ten sources.

 **The Boston Globe** 
@BostonGlobe 

#breakingnews RT @globedavidryan: boston marathon explosion

3:24 PM - 15 Apr 2013

1,177 RETWEETS 79 FAVORITES   



Following *The Globe's* tweet, the *New York Post* tweeted a much more graphic image of the aftermath.

 **New York Post** 
@nypost 

GRAPHIC photo from the scene at the Boston Marathon finish line
pic.twitter.com/mhKTly5aiF (via @brm90)

3:26 PM - 15 Apr 2013

792 RETWEETS 59 FAVORITES   



The Boston PD tweeted its first official confirmation 50 minutes after the bombing occurred. The Boston Marathon tweeted its first confirmation shortly after.

Many sources began tweeting the number of injured people reported. The figures were wide ranging, estimating 19 to 28 injured and two or three individuals dead. In the end, a total of three people were killed and 264 individuals were injured.¹⁷

The Boston Globe's interaction with the Boston Police on a direct level was apparent from its Twitter feed. Most of their tweets were confirmed with the police.

Boston Police publicized a press conference fairly quickly via Twitter. They then asked for tips, photos and video via Twitter to help the investigation. The Cambridge Police even joined in, telling people to contact the Boston PD with information. The BPD also asked people not to congregate in large crowds following the bombings.

Google's person finder was an important resource because *The Boston Globe* had just retweeted AP's story on the shutting down of cell phone use in Boston to prevent the detonation of more explosives. Many sources tweeted about the topic throughout the day, publicizing it for those who struggled to reach loved ones.

The Boston Marathon's tweets were mostly perfunctory. The source tweeted sparsely – only when information was pressing and immediately useful to people.

17 Deborah Kotz, "Injury Toll from Marathon Bombs Reduced to 264," *Boston Globe*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/health-wellness/2013/04/23/number-injured-marathon-bombing-revised-downward/NRpaz5mmvGquP7KMA6XsIK/story.html>.



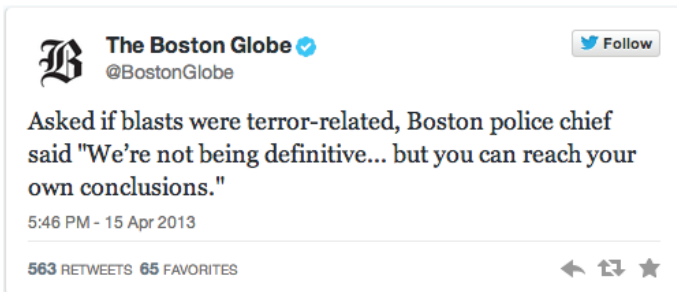
MGH (Mass General Hospital) took on a similar role as a perfunctory tweeter — tweeting only when necessary to inform the public of the goings-on.



Despite its occasional misspellings (“play to stay”), the Globe also became a valuable resource for marathoners, by providing more than just information for those who wanted it. The source gave actionable information that allowed people to function more normally in a time that was distinctly not normal.

CNN and Fox News soon reported that Obama would make a statement at 6:10 p.m. ET.

Posts in real time: Sources begin to review the aftermath



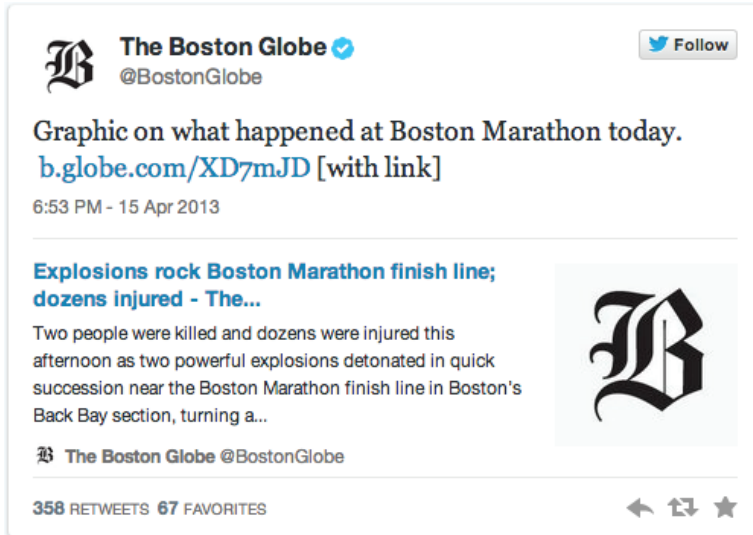
This tweet was the first of its kind during the post-bombing time period: It was a quote, and this comment told a story. This led to many sources beginning to do more in-depth reporting on the disaster.

The Marathon’s official Twitter account continued providing perfunctory information like where people could catch buses.

When President Obama’s speech began, many sources tweeted phrases and sentences from his speech. Others started to post stories about individuals who died.



CNN was the first to tweet that one of the victims of the bombing was an 8-year-old child. This story gained further attention as the days continued.



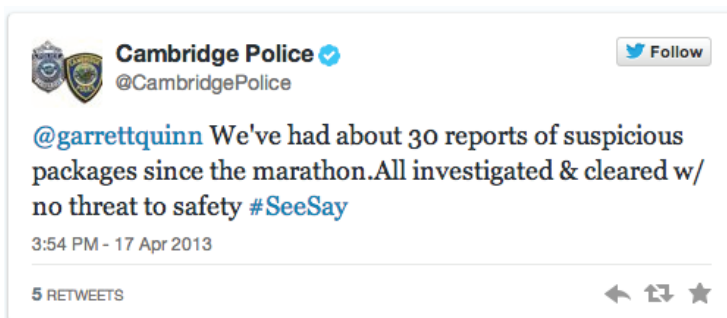
The Boston Globe tweeted a graphic of the marathon's explosions and was the first to tweet edited visuals that were not immediately distributed on the scene, like many of the photographs and videos tweeted earlier on the site. The edited visuals beyond the on-site media showed the news source's judgment in the post real-time period. It became clear to many — both because the site provided refined tweets like this and it also took down its paywall to provide even non-subscribers with information — that the *Globe's* newsroom was intently focused on delivering as much accurate news as possible to those who needed it.

witness reports from *The New York Times* and photos from *The Boston Globe*. The tweet below is reminiscent of another narrative-type story that came out the following morning.

Links to more narrative stories began to be tweeted around 7 p.m., with



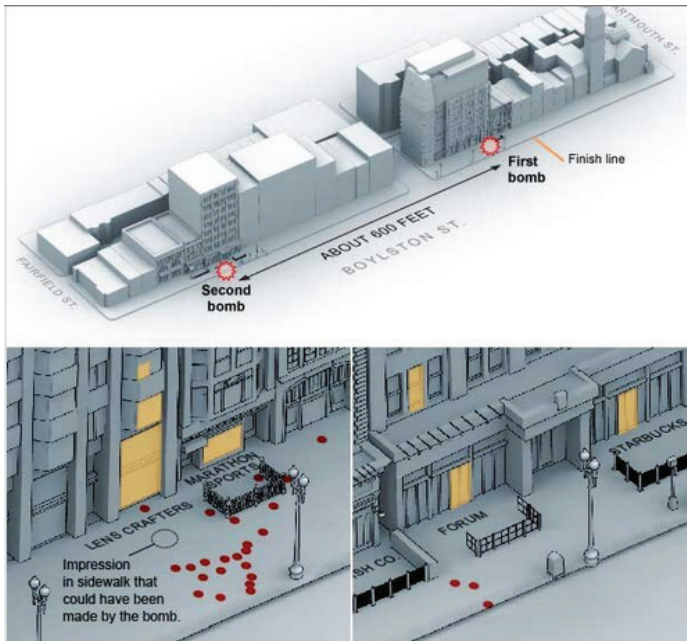
In the day after the attack, columns started pouring in; photos appeared from other newspapers that had paid tribute to the fallen city; and news sources tweeted photos of the home of Martin Richard, the 8-year-old boy who died in the explosion.



The Cambridge Police used their presence to keep people posted about suspicious reports and to remind the public if they saw something, to alter the proper authorities.



JetBlue continued to provide words of encouragement to the community as a sponsor of the marathon. This tweet was in response to a tweet from Robert Oliver, who said, “Thanks for being the best airline out there, standing with #Boston every step of the way. #TrueBlue,” and it was one of several tweets from people who thanked JetBlue for the company’s services.



The New York Times, after having more time to get teams together to create new visuals, started publishing interactive graphics, much like *The Boston Globe*’s.





By Andrew Ryan @GlobeAndrewRyan



The Boston Globe
@BostonGlobe

Follow

MT @globeandrewryan: Woman in Marathon jacket in front pew of cathedral with sunlight streaming through window
twitpic.com/ck7ghh

9:37 AM - 18 Apr 2013

66 RETWEETS 42 FAVORITES



The Manhunt: Sources respond to a second breaking news event



Boston Police Dept. ✓
@bostonpolice

Follow

Do you know these individuals? Contact boston@ic.fbi.gov or 1-800-CALL-FBI (1-800-225-5324), prompt #3
youtube.com/watch?v=M8oDXI...

5:24 PM - 18 Apr 2013



YouTube @YouTube

6,898 RETWEETS 374 FAVORITES



Throughout the tragedy, news sources on the ground attempted to shine a small light of hope to help raise the spirits of people in the area. The image above is just one of these images. A press conference took place with Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and President Obama in the cathedral a few hours later.

Later that day, the Boston Police posted images of the suspects, asking the public to send tips to a hotline.



In the middle of the night on April 19, CNN posted that the Boston Police were taking part in an investigation, which the department confirmed via Twitter less than an hour later.

The police department tweeted important information, including news on where the press should set up not to hamper the investigation, information on staying indoors in the Watertown area where the manhunt was taking place, and a photo of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the suspect on the run in the manhunt.



The department tweeted the photo out several times throughout the night, but few other news sources tweeted during those hours, except to state the same information: one suspect was dead and the other was armed, dangerous and still at large. *The Boston Globe* tweeted school and public transportation closures in the early morning. Hospitals were also on lockdown, according to *The Globe*.

Information about the suspects was tweeted throughout the day, including license plates of a possible car that Tsarnaev was driving. Even obscure information, like the fact that the suspects “followed [a] Harry Potter-hating Australian sheikh,” was tweeted by sources like Fox News.



An interesting development occurred when the Cambridge Police stopped tweeting because they didn't want the suspect to receive live-updates about what was happening. This was particularly attention-grabbing because, while it stopped some of the narrative storytelling, it showed how aware sources were that the new storytelling form was accessible to anyone, even the suspect authorities were trying to capture.

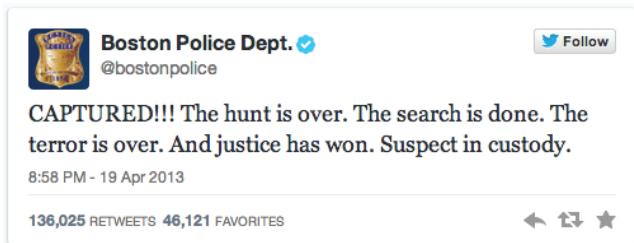


Sources that did not traditionally cover news provided relevant links for people seeking some sort of solace on Twitter. Mass General's tweets about coping with being stuck inside because of the bombings belong to one such form of non-traditional, but relevant, news.

At 7:05 p.m. on April 19, the first report that the suspect was captured was released on Twitter.



The Boston Police later followed this message up to verify and also sent out this tweet.



All these tweets combined to create a narrative of the Boston Marathon bombings and subsequent manhunt for the suspects who caused the tragedy. Twitter was an important tool for communicating information to the public.

Inaccurate news reports



This tweet by the *New York Post* was the first of many inaccurate posts by news media striving to be first to report news. The *Post* soon reported that the Boston PD confirmed another explosion at JFK Library. The police had not confirmed this information, and the “explosion” was actually a fire that was unrelated to the bombings.

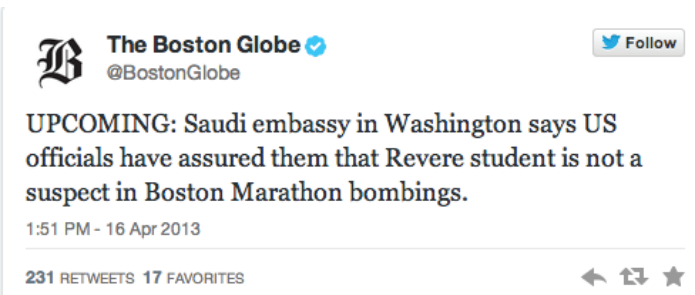
At 4:50 p.m., the *New York Post* tweeted the following message.



This tweet was not accurate, nor was a fair amount of information in the link that was tweeted, including “A law enforcement source confirmed to the *Post* that 12 people were killed and nearly 50 were injured in today’s blast,” when only three died. The information tweeted about the Saudi national was false and caused a great amount of backlash from people who believed the inaccurate report to be an instance of racial profiling.



Tweets like the *New York Post’s* serve as a strong reminder that if information is inaccurate, it can make a news source look untrustworthy and inept in the long run. These tweets themselves were not always inaccurate, but they were leading, and they made it easy to point the finger at an oppressed group in American society.



The Boston Globe debunked the *Post’s* reporting later that same day. CNN also stated later, “Investigators have found no foreign or al Qaeda connection to the bombings, U.S. official tells CNN . . .”

New York Post @nypost Follow

Authorities circulate photos of two men spotted carrying bags near site of Boston Marathon terror attack
nyp.st/101FZVT
 7:46 AM - 18 Apr 2013

Authorities circulate photos of two men spotted carrying bags near

IN FOCUS: Cops are seeking these two men (above) who were spotted near the site of the Boston blasts. (Aaron "Tango" Tang) The man in blue still has the bag...



New York Post @nypost

143 RETWEETS 13 FAVORITES

The *Post* is still shrouded in controversy over a non-Twitter transgression. Two men were photographed on the newspaper's cover with the words "Bag Men," which suggested that they were involved with planting the bombs. The men in the photo below were not suspects and had not been arrested or charged with a crime. They were simply identified by police as persons of interest.

The men had willingly gone to police on April 17, the day before this tweet, to explain their whereabouts and tell police that they were not involved. Media Matters for America and *New York Daily News* reported in early October that the Post settled its lawsuit with the two men. Information from these sources said that "neither side would disclose terms of the settlement."¹⁸

Fox News @FoxNews Follow

#UPDATE: Authorities searching apartment in #Boston suburb in connection to bombings fxn.ws/XDsKhL via @janawinter
 12:06 AM - 16 Apr 2013

FBI, Boston police say range of suspects, motives remains 'wide open'

The Boston Marathon headquarters has been locked down after an explosion was reported near the finish line, a spokesman told Reuters.



Fox News @FoxNews

386 RETWEETS 49 FAVORITES

Fox News' tweet about an apartment search in relation to the bombings did not lead to any arrests, but it goes to show how intensely and aggressively the media was covering every possible lead that could provide them a story.


CNN's tweet about "five viral stories about the Boston terror attacks that aren't true" was a precursor to a tweet by CNN that was, in fact, a viral story that wasn't true.

The Boston Globe @BostonGlobe Follow

BREAKING: Arrest in Boston Marathon bombing.
bostonglobe.com/?refresh=true
 1:53 PM - 17 Apr 2013

The Boston Globe

A leading news source for Massachusetts, breaking news, business, sports, health, arts & entertainment, politics, education, cars, jobs, real estate & more.



The Boston Globe @BostonGlobe

847 RETWEETS 64 FAVORITES

CNN @CNN Follow

Suspect arrested in Boston terror attack, source says:
on.cnn.com/15fo2LB
 1:58 PM - 17 Apr 2013

1,506 RETWEETS 134 FAVORITES

CNN and *The Boston Globe* both tweeted that a suspect was taken into custody on April 17.

After many news sources retweeted this, it was found incorrect when the Boston PD tweeted that no such suspect had been found.

18 Oliver Willis, "NY Post Settles Lawsuit over Infamous Boston Bombing 'Bag Men' Cover." Media Matters for America, October 1, 2014. <http://mediamatters.org/blog/2014/10/01/ny-post-settles-lawsuit-over-infamous-boston-bo/200974>.



The courthouse where the suspect was to be detained was evacuated shortly after due to reports of a possible bomb threat. A man had left gas cans in his car, which led to suspicion. An FBI briefing scheduled for that evening at the courthouse was then canceled, due to the supposed bomb threat.

These were just a few of many inaccuracies throughout the coverage of

the bombings. Eventually, the media reported matters correctly as the suspects were killed and captured, but many sources misreported news throughout the bombings.

A full compilation of the tweets in narrative form is available at <https://storify.com/marykatebrogan/boston-marathon-bombings>.

V. Discussion

Several patterns can be found in the narrative of these sources on Twitter. Of the types of tweets found in this data, most tweets can be categorized as one of the following: news, features, safety, informative messages, and perfunctory information.

News

News sources had a strong desire to be first and many left accuracy at the wayside because of this drive. CNN, the *New York Post* and *The Boston Globe* all had inaccurate reports during the aftermath of the crisis. This shows one of the pitfalls of narrative storytelling through Twitter: not all storytellers will be accurate in their information. But one benefit of the narrative storytelling aspect of Twitter is that others who are interested in a topic will question or correct information that is inaccurate, like the Boston PD did with CNN's mis-tweet about having a suspect in custody.

In an ongoing event like this — with the attack, the aftermath and the manhunt — it was compelling to observe the patterns of news organizations as they reported, and sometimes came to conclusions, on events as they occurred. The nature of this event was different from past crisis situations like Sept. 11 and the London Underground bombings because the Boston bombings were not perpetrated by suicide bombers. These were individuals who had planted bombs and walked away unscathed, which led to some news organizations trying to swiftly place blame on certain parties.

The tweet from Rush (“Let’s kill them [Muslims] all”) mentioned in the literature review is one extreme example of the underlying stereotypes that permeated this narrative in the way that news sources covered it. The *New York Post* has been accused of racial profiling of the plaintiffs in the libel suit the paper recently settled. As news organizations tried to piece together the aftermath and search for subjects, many of the underlying stereotypes of bombers came through in the news coverage of some sources, particularly the *New York Post*.

As Woods addressed in “What We Talk About when We Talk About Terrorism,” articles that associate terrorism with Islam incite more fear than articles that do not.¹⁹ This shows the permeability of racial profiling and stereotypes and illustrates why they are tactics journalists must avoid. This effect was not something that Rush or the *New York Post* seemed to have considered in their coverage of this the bombings.

Other sources simply prematurely tweeted about the capture of a suspect, which was likely a product of several factors: wanting to be first to report the news, providing constant coverage and waiting on a development, and a general desire by the American public — journalists included — for the suspect to be captured. News media outlets often wrote tweets as soon as possible following confirmation of information or sometimes without it. This led to making storytelling more difficult because people were unaware of what was true and what was inaccurate.

¹⁹ Joshua Woods, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Terrorism: Elite Press Coverage of Terrorism Risk from 1997 to 2005.”

While there were many mistakes, this type of narrative was different from past stories because of news sources' different function in this case. Many newspapers sought justice and searched for answers on their own, whether because they wanted more readership or because they felt it was their duty to the public to get to the bottom of the situation. News organizations contributed a great amount to the storytelling narrative of this disaster because of their enormous influence in the public sphere.

Features

In the days following the bombing, national news sources, such as *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*, took it upon themselves to discover gripping, emotional stories about the bombings. Case in point, the *New York Post* published a story about two brothers who both lost legs. There was also a story about Martin Richard, the 8-year-old boy who died from his injuries sustained at the finish line. These stories are different than many of the breaking news updates, but they were certainly valuable in telling the story in a new way that was more humane and that more readers could identify with.

Safety

The Boston Police and Boston Marathon officials worked with news sources to provide information about safety, particularly to make sure that people stay in their homes during the manhunt and not congregate in large groups following the bombings. This safety element is important to telling the story because it shows how authority figures were trying to keep the people calm, collected, and safe. It provides a new angle of storytelling as authorities worked to provide some control over the situation and gives a greater sense of calm to the community.

Informative content

Informational tweets were the specialties of sources like the Boston Police, Cambridge Police, Massachusetts General Hospital and the Boston Marathon's official Twitter accounts. These tweets were not quite as common as news or breaking news tweets, but they provided much-needed site information to people in need.

Massachusetts General Hospital tweeted about giving blood to help others, a tweet that likely went a long way to reaching people who were looking for ways to help. Tweets like this just gave valuable information to help people get through this tough time and move on with their lives as normally as possible— or even just get themselves out of a crisis situation.

Perfunctory information

Several sources provided perfunctory information. For example, a post from JetBlue, a marathon sponsor, said "Our thoughts go out to the victims of the Boston Marathon bombing." Most of these sources' tweets focused on customer service, but they would tweet intermittently that they were trying to do their part for the Boston community whatever way they could. These tweets are important to the narrative because they represent a large portion of the corporate contingent of Twitter, many of whom tweeted their sympathies to those affected.

Marathon sponsors' different types of tweets during the Boston Marathon bombings led to a new type of disaster coverage narrative that had never been used in any situation before. It led to an era of instant fact-checking by groups of individuals and, as Hermida theorized, a value of quantity of verification over quality of the source verifying the information, as even qualified sources, as shown in this study, are apt to be wrong on occasion. It led to a purer form of narrative storytelling with the opinions and observations of millions of individuals swirling about in a single platform, often unedited for the world to see. Speed has begun to combine with accuracy through the tweets of people on the ground who can provide a valuable service by simply telling others what they see or confirming the truth or falsehood of rumors for the good of society. While some media professionals warn that ill-intentioned people may claim to be on the ground and fabricate parts of a story, according to a Dow Jones News Fund copy editing program, professionals can easily clarify the validity of a source's statements in a crisis situation much the same as they have in the past, making sure those individuals are truly on the scene. Methods of verification via Twitter include direct messaging a source to inquire about his or her location and sending a reporter to that area to confirm that the source is there or simply sending a message asking the source to contact a reporter.

Twitter is changing narrative storytelling by providing users with their own personal outlet to discover and provide information that's important to any current event, including a catastrophe that affects the lives of many. The dawning of the age of Twitter as a source of understanding events as they unfold is still in its infancy, but this study illuminates some of the functions of tweets and how they are changing how stories are communicated to the public.

VI. Conclusion

Overall, there is a clear value in telling stories through Twitter, because of its permeability in a hyper-connected society. While some of the information may not be the most accurate because news organizations are often striving for speed and sacrificing accuracy, there is hope that more organizations will understand the importance of a clear and accurate social media presence during crises and disasters.

While this study is one of the first to analyze Twitter as a narrative storytelling tool in a catastrophe, it is doubtful that it will be the last. As social media's popularity grows, more and more users will wish to investigate the discussion of news in crisis situations using social media. Future studies may examine the Twitter conversations between sources and regular users on Twitter or may compare social media usage during crises with its use in normal times. Perhaps future researchers will be able to provide further insight into how social media changes news coverage in crisis situations as well.

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