

Whatsapping terror: How media applied instant messaging to cover Barcelona terrorist attack

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Audiences love live communication (Deuze, 2011), the possibility of reaching news in real time. Previous research focus on the reporting of natural disasters or emergency news like terrorist attacks show that the concept “news now” (Sheller, 2014) is an audience imperative in those contexts.

News flow can take advantage of mobile apps during the coverage of these extreme situations. In that way, push notifications have a great potential for media because companies need to publish successfully on mobile platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram to reach new publics (Wolf & Schnauber, 2014). Audiences get information without any previous request or perform searches, and information is delivered in a real-time environment. Political journalism has experienced the most with this immediate communication. In April 2014 BBC used WhatsApp and WeChat during the Indian elections to distribute news and to crowdsource information (Reid, 2014). This innovation was followed by similar initiatives to cover the referendum on Scottish independence (Channel 4, 2014), the US elections (The Guardian, 2015), or Spanish elections (Politibot, 2016).

Bauman’s (2000) liquid society is the objective public of this kind of content, characterized by mobility and the individualization of media consumption. Our paper analyzes how media adapted their publishing strategies to reach this public through mobile instant messaging during Barcelona terrorist attack coverage in August 2017. This type of social news and information flow is characterized by unpredictability, classlessness, and a lack of hierarchy (Rampazzo & Peret, 2017).

In order to reach this main goal we applied mixed methods, based on quantitative and qualitative techniques. Firstly, we designed a directory of Spanish media applying Whatsapp and Telegram to connect with audiences. Then we analyzed the content distributed by all national, regional and local media through these platforms from 17th to 21th August 2017. The first informative alert appeared 25 minutes after the van was driven into pedestrians in Las Ramblas. According to our results, 214 headlines in WhatsApp and Telegram were directly connected with the terrorist attack, but not all of them offered the appropriate tone and/or respectful emoticons. Most of the media made a great effort increasing the regularity of their messages during those days, but only the national media focused their MIM (Mobile Instant Messaging) strategy on the attack. Finally we classified the reaction into three types of content: last minute alerts, contextualizing news and solidarity content.

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