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Whom to Listen to? Trusted Source and Retweet Behavior of the NYC Marathon and Hawaii False Alarm

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Whom to Listen to? Trusted Source and Retweet Behavior of the NYC Marathon and Hawaii False Alarm

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, huge losses financially and to human lives have brought the focus on crisis management back to the forefront of discussions globally. Crises, such as terror attacks, disturb the social order, as well as impact communications between stakeholders and authoritative organizations ([Dowling 2000](#)). The response to such acts can damage an organizations' reputation and legitimacy ([Patriotta, Gond, and Schultz 2011](#)), and thus reduce their social capital ([Adler and Kwon 2002](#)). Due to the devastating nature of terror attacks, information dissemination is extremely important. Responsible organizations are more than ever interested in learning the rules of how people acquire and disseminate information.

Global terrorist activities toward tourists are increasing. Ever since the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing ([Wikipedia 2013](#)), terrorism has become a recurring theme globally and influences how destinations and event organizers can be impacted by disasters. On October 31, 2017, five days ahead of the New York marathon event, a terrorist-controlled truck accelerated onto a bike path at lower Manhattan and killed eight people and injured twelve people ([Keneally 2017](#)). This was titled the "deadliest terrorist attack in New York City since 911" ([Berg 2017](#)). What was important was that the tragedy occurred days in advance of a huge citywide event. This created uneasiness and an ongoing threat to both contestants and spectators planning to participate.

Similarly, on January 13, 2018, a false missile alarm text was sent to residents and tourists of the state of Hawaii which read: "Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill." This sparked a wave of panic across the state. The incident was worsened by a 38-minute delay before a correction alert was issued ([Drezner 2017](#)). The main concern with this false alarm was that it has the potential to undermine public confidence in the governmental alert systems and result in a reduced effectiveness during real crises.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how these two cases highlight the need for governments and tourism agencies to identify where the traveling public may turn to in times of crisis and what messages they might receive. This study intends to compare twitter communications during crisis situations. To understand the role of trusted source, this study uses twitter as a target platform, using retweet behavior to reveal how different information sources are presented to the public, and how they may impact attitudes and behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital and Social Media Network

Social capital is considered to be the sum of "social resources" ([Lin 2002](#)), which are acquired by participating in social networks. Social capital is also believed to be facilitated from actions initiated within social structures ([Coleman 1988](#)), from which actors can gain benefits. As a form of capital, social capital comes from each actor's investments in their own networks. For individuals to gain comparative advantages between different networks, according to structural holes theory, one should stand as a mediator between two or more closely connected networks ([Burt 2004](#)). The "gatekeeper" ([Burt 2009](#)) typically transfers information from one network to another,

because novel information is most likely to be transferred through these “weak ties” ([Granovetter 1973](#)).

Twitter can be considered a social network site, mainly because it allows users to connect to each other and also publicize their profiles in an online network ([Ellison 2007](#), [Recuero and Zago 2016](#)). Kaigo (2012) suggests that Twitter has become a base to construct social capital and it plays a pro-social role during crisis ([Kaigo 2012](#)). Essentially, social media forms a virtual social network that allows individuals to bridge their social capital. Social media users thus can generate more social ties ([Zhao 2006](#)) for the construction of social capital through virtual networks. Also, the use of social media is related to one’s social capital level. Shah (2001) found that information use on the internet is positively correlated with the production of social capital, while social-recreational usage is negatively correlated ([V. Shah 2001](#)).

Guided by social capital theory and structural holes theory, we assume that individuals tend to follow and retweet the information from authority organizations which have greater social capital. Also, emergency responders tend to be actively engaged in social media networks and search for informational loopholes to build greater social capital for future communication.

Crisis Communication on Twitter

Possessing 330 million active users globally ([Twitter](#)), Twitter has been considered an important information distribution channel during crises ([Cameron et al. 2012](#), [Cassa et al. 2013](#), [Mills et al. 2009](#), [Hughes and Palen 2009](#), [Kaigo 2012](#)). By attaching photos, locations and documents, tweeter is able to effectively communicate the severity and range of a crisis ([White 2010](#)). Imbedded within the networking nature and its two-way communication ability ([Terpstra et al. 2012](#)), Twitter forms a solid platform to monitor information dissemination how information is spread during terror attacks.

A key motivator for Twitter users is getting information in a timely way ([Mischaud 2007](#), [Java et al. 2007](#)). Tweets sent during mass emergencies also contain more displays of information broadcasting and brokerage ([Hughes and Palen 2009](#)). Heverin and Zach (2010) analyzed 6000 tweets and found out that citizens are the major authors (91.5%), and that 79% of the messages published were information-related ([Heverin and Zach 2010](#)).

In the field of twitter user’s behavior, Romero et al. (2011) argue that a majority of Twitter users are passive information consumers, not willing to share and create information on the network ([Romero et al. 2011](#)). However, there is also evidence showing that general Twitter users seem to have evolved over time to offer more of an information-sharing purpose ([Hughes and Palen 2009](#)). Anyhow, retweets’ information should be highly valued and explored. This study will mainly focus on the retweet data to discover the pattern of crisis communications during terror attack.

The main purpose of this study was to examine tweets in times of crisis in terms of trusted source (retweeted messages) and content during different phases of the crisis. Crises are said to go through four phases: reduction, readiness, response and recovery. Some have suggested this is a phasic approach to managing a crisis and that you move from one phase to the next in a temporal fashion. Responses to the crisis occur during all phases of the crisis however most frequently they occur during (response) and after (recovery) the crisis event. Thus, based on the above discussions, two research questions were put forward:

RQ1: What are the most trusted sources (as operationalized by retweets) during terror attacks?

RQ2: Does the retweeted information vary by the terror attack phase of the crisis?

METHODOLOGY

Structured Twitter data monitoring and collection was carried out. Data collection was performed by RapidMiner Studio, equipped with a pre-written data mining operator specifically intended to collect tweets from Twitter. The attributes acquired were: original tweet text, tweet created time, total retweet counts for each tweet, language, source and user information.

The case of the New York Marathon: The terrorist attack stroke on October 31, 03:04 pm and lasted for four minutes until recognized by the police ([Keneally 2017](#)). After four days, on November 5, the NYC marathon event began from 9:20 am until the afternoon. To better monitor the variations of the twitter users' reaction and make accordant comparisons, one more day of twitter data was collected after the terror event. Using keywords "2017 New York Marathon attack", 3,150 twitter records were collected between October 31 and November 6, 2017. Thus, retweets and tweets were captured in the recovery phase of the crisis.

The case of the Hawaii False Alarm: The false alarm text message was sent out by the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency (EMA) at 8:07 am (HST), January 13, 2018. To reveal the most relevant and authentic emergency response from twitter, the study only applied the data generated on January 13, before 9:00 am (HST), when the false alarm was corrected. Thus, tweets and retweets were captured in the response phase of the crisis.

For RQ1, descriptive analysis was conducted where tweets were put in Excel and analyzed based on frequency, account, retweet. The most highly retweeted account and the most frequently mentioned accounts were listed out.

For RQ2, the mostly retweeted tweets were listed with content analyses conducted to elicit the topic of the tweets.

RESULTS

Finding the Themes: Most retweeted tweets

For NYCM, there were 122,595 retweets in total. The most popular tweets focused on four topics: 1) news of the trunk attack; 2) announcements that the events will run as scheduled; 3) extra security to be offered for the event; 4) encouragement and cheering for participants. (See Appendix 1). For the Hawaii alert, there were 328,714 retweets in total. The most popular tweets focused on: 1) over 50% of the recopies of the original false alarm mentioned Hawaii Customer Visitors Bureau (CVB) official account; 2) the correction of the false alert; 3) grateful for the fact that it was a false alarm. (See Appendix 2)

From the topics, we observed that urgent terror attacks like the Hawaii case tend to hold the publics' focus on the attack itself, and that personal emotions are more expressed in the information. In potential terror attacks such as the NYCM case, objective information is more likely to be disseminated than subjective emotions. We also noticed that among all the retweets on the Hawaii alarm, the official Twitter account of Hawaii CVB was mentioned immensely at the very first stage of communication. When the first crisis responder, EMA was absent, the public began to search for an alternative authority for secured confirmation. Unfortunately, the CVB made no response to the massive amount of requests.

Trusted Source: Mostly retweeted/mentioned accounts

The top 10 retweeted accounts for both events are individual accounts, indicating that the social media users tend to share information from individual sources rather than official public accounts, no matter whether it is for information dissemination or for aftermath discussions.

The top 10 mentioned account for NYCM were mostly media accounts, while the Hawaii event consisted mostly of individual accounts, however one of these was an elected official. This indicates that in emergency communications during critical terror attacks, people tend to read and share the information from known sources, while conversely, in an aftermath terror attack, people tend to look at information from media.

Another interesting phenomenon was that although CNN was mentioned 65,376 times (81.6% out of the top ten total) in the top ten retweets, their direct number of retweets was only 268, falling out of the top ten retweeted sources. This begs the question: if retweet is a measure of trusted source- how can this be interpreted? Perhaps, this might be explained by Granovetter’s social weak tie theory: where the social media tie from large media platforms (like CNN) to individuals are comparatively weak, however when platforms have novel information to share, they will still be recognized by the citations from strong ties within the social media network ([Granovetter 1973](#)).

Table 1 Top10 retweeted account for NYCM

| Information Source | Account Type | Retweet Counts |
|--------------------|--------------|----------------|
| pendulum5884 | individual | 604 |
| Marcelo Moura | individual | 497 |
| Real_Infinity95 | individual | 459 |
| NY Nite Owl | individual | 399 |
| Ruth Maia | individual | 382 |
| Neus | individual | 366 |
| rashid al dosari | individual | 356 |
| Lotraine Hubertus | individual | 336 |
| Susan | individual | 326 |
| Nevin Singh | individual | 318 |

Table 2 Top10 retweeted account for Hawaii Event

| Information Source | Account Type | Retweet Counts |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Tulsi Gabbard | Individual (elected official) | 22699 |
| Hawaii EMA | governmental | 15782 |
| ?? | individual | 2112 |
| Joe | individual | 1560 |
| ryan robbins | individual | 1530 |
| Rachelle Pavlova | individual | 1322 |
| {~_~} * | individual | 1202 |
| ENDUT! HOCH HECH! | individual | 1138 |
| natalie ✦* | individual | 1138 |
| MDS | individual | 1109 |

Table 3 Top10 mentioned account for NYCM

| Mentioned Account | Account Type | Retweet Counts |
|-------------------|--------------|----------------|
| CNN | media | 65376 |
| CBSNews | media | 5809 |
| ABC | media | 3553 |
| thehill | media | 1853 |
| USATODAY | media | 1082 |
| BuzzFeedNews | media | 756 |
| nymarathon | organizer | 498 |
| runnersworld | media | 466 |
| AIBoeNEWS | media | 400 |
| NBC | media | 284 |

Table 4 Top10 mentioned account for Hawaii Event

| Mentioned Account | Account Type | Retweet Counts |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| hawaii | government(CVB) | 182250 |
| trishquema | individual | 32857 |
| Tulsi Gabbard | Individual (elected official) | 22699 |
| stopalready23 | individual | 21200 |
| hawaiigirl3 | individual | 16302 |
| Hawaii EMA | government | 15782 |
| baobaejin | individual | 5125 |
| arawnsley | individual | 4872 |
| RVAwonk | individual | 4488 |
| dezzyybearr | individual | 3510 |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Large-scale terror attacks can generate negative impacts on the host destination and the tourism industry ([Pizam and Smith 2000](#)). Building up effective crisis communication channels and formulating pertinent strategies needs to be a process rather than a one-time operation.

Understanding the perceived credibility of the source of the message in concert with the content of the message is critical. In today's environment where social media plays a critical role in crisis communications, understanding these variables within the context of social media is even more important. Thus, this study looked at the 2017 New York Marathon and the 2018 Hawaii False Missile Alarm, as cases to understand retweet behavior during the two-different terror attacks.

Through analysis of the real twitter data, we found out that the trusted source for the public varies by the phase that the crisis is in. During the response phase, the public tended to source information from strong social ties ([Granovetter 1973](#)), such as elected officials, acquaintances, friends, families. However, when it came to the recovery phase, the public was more likely to acquire and share information from the media. Although it was acknowledged that individuals received information more quickly and easily from their "strong social ties", attention should focus on guiding the public to connect to stronger social media vertices, to offer instant and novel information during the response phase of the crisis.

Also, the content shared on Twitter during crises varied by phase of the crisis, which is understandable and follows theory. During a crisis response phase (Hawaii case) tweets tended to have more subjective emotional in content. As well, the content of the tweets focused more heavily on the event. During the recovery phase, things were reversed.

These findings suggest that emergency responders and media as credible sources may and should alter their messages depending on the phase of the crisis. Similarly, during the response phase, credible sources which tend to be dominated by individuals or publics should find ways to weave more objective and informative information into the messages. These source providers can gain more objective information from the "official source for information." Also during the response phase, crisis information tended to be more emotional and subjective.

Furthermore, findings from this study suggested limited contributions from governmental organizations. This is disappointing! The emergency responders, government and/or tourism destination managers needs to build more bridges and deeper bonds with residents and visitors so they can gain more trust. This trust is important particularly during times of response. Given there are two ways to build social capital ([Putnam 2001](#)), emergency responders should build up more unique links with different social networks in order to gain more novel information. It is also required that responders invest resources to maintain those networks ([Burt 2009](#)).

Pizam (1999) pointed out that once the crisis happens, the best way to cope with it is to initiate cooperation between government and tourism industry officials, plus ensure a partnership of governments and the local community. ([Pizam and Smith 2000](#)). Developing a structural relationship via social media between these leaders and the residents and tourists is one way to establish and reinforce social ties and build social capital.

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APPENDIX 1: Top 30 Retweeted Tweets for NYCM

| Tweet Content | Retweet |
|--|----------------|
| RT @Scavino45: "New York City Marathon organizers say Sunday race will still take place despite terror attack" #NYCStrong?? | 32347 |
| RT @CNN: After terror attack, a resilient city rises up to support its runners via @CNNopinion | 28396 |
| RT @CNN: The New York City Marathon will go on as planned this weekend -- but with beefed-up security | 22748 |
| RT @NYGovCuomo: Governor Cuomo thanks the National Guard and holds a security briefing ahead of the New York City Marathon | 5916 |
| RT @CNN: Heightened security is being put in place for Sunday's New York City Marathon | 5564 |
| RT @CBSNews: More than 50K people are signed up for the New York City Marathon on Sunday & the NYPD is increasing security plans: | 3350 |
| RT @cnnbrk: Authorities increase security for New York marathon | 3180 |
| RT @cnni: After terror attack, a resilient city rises up to support its runners via @CNNopinion | 2520 |
| RT @ABC: NEW: NY Gov. Cuomo announces increased deployment of security personnel ahead of tomorrow's New York City Marathon. | 1989 |
| RT @thehill: New York marathon to continue with enhanced security after terror attack | 1853 |
| RT @cnni: The New York City Marathon will go on as planned this weekend -- but with beefed-up security | 1670 |
| RT @WSJ: Heightened security in New York for this Sunday's marathon | 1368 |
| RT @CBSNews: "We've enhanced security for [the New York City Marathon] also. It's going to be a very safe event," NYPD Chief Gomez says htt... | 1274 |
| RT @CBSNews: In wake of truck attack, authorities plan huge police presence for Sunday's New York City Marathon | 1156 |
| RT @ABC: Police ramping up security for New York City Marathon after deadly truck attack. | 960 |
| RT @cnni: Heightened security is being put in place for Sunday's New York City Marathon | 897 |
| RT @BuzzFeedNews: NYC attack: • 5 Argentinians, 2 Americans, 1 German killed • 9 still hospitalized • "Enhanced" security for marathon | 756 |
| RT @USATODAY: New York Marathon: International runners undaunted after terror attack. | 713 |
| RT @AlBoeNEWS: The New York City Marathon will go on as planned on Sunday despite today's terror attack in Manhattan - ESPN | 400 |
| RT @RTSportNews: New York City Marathon will be held as planned despite Manhattan terrorist attack | 400 |
| RT @USATODAY: "The marathon will go on because New York goes on," governor says. #NYCTerroristAttack | 360 |
| The New York City Marathon will go on as planned this weekend -- but with beefed-up security | 330 |
| RT @runnersworld: .@nycmarathon officials are monitoring security following the terror attack in NYC today | 256 |
| RT @CNN: Amid heightened security following last week's terror attack, runners conquer the New York City Marathon | 228 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| RT @ABCPolitics: Police ramping up security for New York City Marathon after deadly truck attack. | 224 |
| RT @runnersworld: .@nycmarathon officials are monitoring security following the terror attack in NYC yesterday | 210 |
| “New York City Marathon organizers say Sunday race will still take place despite terror attack” #NYCStrong?? | 196 |
| RT @NBCNewYork: Here's what you need to know about the increased security measures around NYC following Tuesday's attack | 187 |

APPENDIX 2: Top 30 Retweeted Tweets for Hawaii False Alarm

| Tweet Content | Retweet |
|--|---------|
| RT @hawaii: Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill. | 182250 |
| RT @trishquema: Ballistic missile threat to Hawaii - not a drill. Tell me someone just pressed the wrong alert button. | 32857 |
| HAWAII - THIS IS A FALSE ALARM. THERE IS NO INCOMING MISSILE TO HAWAII. I HAVE CONFIRMED WITH OFFICIALS THERE IS NO... | 22699 |
| RT @stopalready23: HAWAII IS RECEIVING A BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. THE TV AND PHONES ARE SAYING THIS IS NOT A DRILL. | 21200 |
| RT @hawaiigirl3: What?! A ballistic missile?! #Hawaii | 16302 |
| NO missile threat to Hawaii. | 15782 |
| RT @baobaejin: Hawaii got a ballistic missile threat but there's nothing on tv and our sirens didn't go off??? What's going on damn | 5125 |
| RT @arawnsley: Before we get too far down this road, remember that Hawaii has recently been testing its new missile alert system. | 4872 |
| RT @RVAwonk: There's a ballistic missile threat and Hawaiians are being told to seek shelter immediately... and WHY IS NO ONE TALKING ABOUT... | 4488 |
| RT @dezzyybarr: WHY DID I JUST GET A EMERGENCY SAYING THERES A BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII N ITS NOT A DRILL.... ????? | 3510 |
| RT @davidwolman: I'm in a parking lot in Waimea, Hawaii right now and everyone's phones are buzzing with a warning about an incoming missil... | 1944 |
| RT @rveIvts: AO I JUST GOT AN ALERT THAT THERE IS A BALLISTIC MISSILE TOWARDS HAWAII WHAT | 1856 |
| RT @davidadamian: Ballistic missile threat to #Hawaii? Just got this alert on my phone! #northkorea | 1495 |
| RT @TimFernholz: Pentagon duty press officer is not able to comment on any missile threat to Hawaii. | 1428 |
| RT @ZacZarbis: I just got an amber alert of a ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii | 1230 |
| RT @peterdaou: What on earth is going on with this ballistic missile threat to Hawaii everyone is sharing? | 1100 |
| RT @mnishi41: 「hawaii missile」で検索すると多数同じ書き込みが。なにが起こったんだろう..... | 1026 |
| RT @easytyga: Did anyone else's iPhone just tell them there's a ballistic missile headed for Hawaii and to take cover immediately? | 960 |
| RT @LindaNagata: Phone just had an emergency alert. Ballistic missile threat in #Hawaii. | 792 |
| RT @ajreid: A *lot* of people are tweeting about receiving an "inbound missile" alert in Hawaii | 740 |
| Ballistic missile threat inbound to Hawaii. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill. | 729 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| I'm in a parking lot in Waimea, Hawaii right now and everyone's phones are buzzing with a warning about an incoming... | 648 |
| RT @RaulRules808: @HawaiiNewsNow just received a "Ballistic Missile Threat Inbound To Hawaii. Seek Shelter. This is not a drill" message on... | 369 |
| RT @richardhine: People are tweeting about a ballistic missile threat to Hawaii | 322 |
| Ballistic missile threat to Hawaii - not a drill. Tell me someone just pressed the wrong alert button. | 319 |
| HAWAII IS RECEIVING A BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. THE TV AND PHONES ARE SAYING THIS IS NOT A DRILL. | 265 |
| There's a ballistic missile threat and Hawaiians are being told to seek shelter immediately... and WHY IS NO ONE TA... | 264 |
| What?! A ballistic missile?! #Hawaii | 247 |
| RT @MarkJWestpfahl: Phones in Hawaii have been receiving ballistic missile emergency notifications to their phones in the last 10 minutes.... | 200 |
| RT @TimInHonolulu: TV is broadcasting the attack warning. It is not a drill. US @PacificCommand is reporting a ballistic missile attack on H... | 189 |