

Debunking rumors in Twitter to support the official communication efforts during the Barcelona 2017 Terrorist Attack: A VOST Case Study

Social Media has proven to be a useful Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as mass and peer-to-peer communication channel before, during and after disasters and emergencies. User generated content provides a broader coverage and more up-to-date information of crisis events than traditional media. Many emergency management agencies are embracing social media as a channel for alerts, warnings, and as part of their mass communication strategy. It empowers emergency organizations to communicate directly with citizens. However, its use is not exempt of problems. Data quality becomes a great challenge while using user-generated content specially from social media. Rumors, misinformation and malicious information disseminated through social media can endanger citizens and first respondents. One active group using social media, specially Twitter, to support communication and decision-making is VOST (Virtual Operation Support Team). Their aim is to monitor and share reliable information through social media while helping to identify fake news and supporting emergency agencies.

The objective of this study was to analyse the process followed by VOST to support the official sources to debunk rumors and misinformation during a terrorist attack. On the 16th of August 2017, an ISIS terrorist drove a van into a crowd in Las Ramblas (Barcelona) killing 13 people and injuring 130 others. The study employed a mixed method approach, where data were collected using a combination of source of evidence including tweets analysis, participant observation, newspaper articles analysis, and interviews. The case study benefits of the use of the Critical Decision Making Method as part of the interview process. Participants were presented with different probes to better understand their decision making process before debunking a piece of information using Twitter.

This paper presents the results of this case study. It showcases the importance of the role of VOST to support official sources while working as message amplifiers and debunking rumours. The findings would be important consideration for the support of emergency stakeholders during future terrorist attacks. The research reflected in this paper strives to help emergency management practitioners to develop best practices and better understand the potential support of Virtual Operation Support Team.

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