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Kidnapping WhatsApp – Rumors during the search and rescue operation of three kidnapped youth

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ABSTRACT

During terror attacks, information with unknown credibility might circulate and people use rumors to compensate for information gaps. On 06.12.2014, three teenagers were kidnapped from a bus station in the West Bank and found dead after several days. A gag order was issued, causing interest in alternative sources of information. This study investigated how information spread through WhatsApp during the search operation using a participatory research approach. 13 rumors circulating on WhatsApp were collected, nine of which were verified, and found to be true. A web-based survey revealed that 61.1% of 419 respondents received information regarding the kidnapping through WhatsApp; 38.9% through Facebook. Sources of two rumors and participation of emergency authorities in rumor dissemination were identified. Some rumors originated from the family and community of the abductees, while other WhatsApp messages included information and names of two abductees, which were not public at the time. When emergency authorities share unconfirmed information, it is perceived as more credible than information spread by citizens. During the operation, official representatives did not correct or refute any rumors. Locating the source of a rumor is challenging and thus it is important to actively investigate rumors in real-time in order to locate the source.

1. Introduction

People are natural information seekers. During an emergency they search for facts through both official and unofficial sources, utilizing common and familiar channels (e.g. telephone, email or text messages) (Stiegler, Tilley and Parveen 2011; Palen & Liu, 2007) and seek any available venue for information, including newspapers, television, and the Internet (Boyle et al. 2004). However, due to the high availability and accessibility of the social media, people rely primarily on social networks to obtain information (Palen & Liu, 2007). Abbassi et al. (2010) showed that during a crisis, people searched for information related to their specific neighborhood and community, and activated even weak ties in their social networks in order to retrieve it.

During armed conflicts or terror attacks, information with unknown credibility, from official or unofficial source might circulate. According to Lewandowsky et al. (2013), two types of inaccurate information originate from official sources during armed conflict: Misinformation, which is "information presented as truthful initially but turns out to be false" (488); Disinformation that constitutes "outright false information that is disseminated for propagandistic purposes" (488).

Rosnow, Yost & Esposito (1986) stated that the more stressful a situation is perceived to be, the more urgently people will seek to clarify it and in order to alleviate their own anxiety.

Social media are used during emergencies to distribute relevant, critical information to the public and the authorities, and may be simultaneously used to distribute rumors, misinformation and unverified data, which propagate rapidly (Mendoza, Poblete and Castillo 2010; Bird, Ling and Haynes 2012; Hagar, 2013; G 2013, Gupta, Lamba, Kumaraguru, & Joshi, 2013). Heverin and Zach (2012) argued that social media tools such as microblogging can play a vital role in collective sense-making during crises. Where official information is lacking, social media can operate as

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backchannels for communication and contribute to the dissemination of false and inaccurate information (Sutton, Palen and Shklovski 2008). During Hurricane Sandy, a storm which devastated parts of North America in 2012, 'hostile' entities distributed rumors and fake photos, which propagated virally through social media and caused panic and chaos (Gupta et al. 2013;; Hagar, 2013). Immediately after the Boston Marathon bombing, a terrorist attack which killed 3 and injured hundreds in 2013, individuals published misinformation on Twitter including accusations and inaccurately identified the bombers (Cassa, Chunara, Mandl, & Brownstein, 2013; Starbird et al. 2014).

People use rumors to compensate for information and knowledge gaps in order to explain the event (Rosnow, Yost and Esposito 1986). This frequently happens during times of uncertainty and fear or in the absence of relevant and available information (Ma, 2008). Dervin's (1983) theory of sense-making assumes that people constantly face cognitive gaps in their worlds and try to fill them by communicating and interacting with others. Formerly, rumors propagated from mouth-to-ear, a process that took considerable time to reach large crowds (Hagar, 2013). As long as the information was not verified, it was considered a rumor. Kwon, Cha, Jung, Chen, and Wang (2013) classified rumors retrospectively into three categories – true, false, and unknown, after official information was published. (Kwon et al. 2013). A rumor can be defined as information or story that is initiated and distributed without confirmation of its credibility or foundation; i.e. without checking whether it is true or false (Ma, 2008). Ahren and Sosyura (2014) argued that a rumor consisting of speculation may be accurate at the time of its publication, but become false at a later stage. Rosnow, Yost & Esposito (1986) stated that people disseminate two types of rumors during times of stress and uncertainty, those containing disturbing information, and those containing comforting or wishful information.

Evidence reveals that people dismiss misinformation if they are suspicious of its source (Lewandowsky et al. 2013). Researchers suggest that the masses act as "collaborative filters of information" (Mendoza, Poblete and Castillo 2010).

Limited research has been conducted on the propagation of rumors through social media during emergencies. Mendoza, Poblete & Castillo reported that individuals tend to question false rumors on Twitter, while tweets providing true information tend to be validated by 95.5% of the readers. Starbird et al. (2014) investigated correction of misinformation via microblogging after the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. They explored three rumors (later found to be false) that were spread on Twitter in the aftermath of the incident. Their main finding suggested that "corrections to the misinformation emerge but are muted compared with the propagation of the misinformation" (p. 654).

WhatsApp is a social network messaging application for smartphones that allows users to communicate easily. According to a blog post published in April 2014 by WhatsApp, they have exceeded 500 million users globally, who share more than 700 million photos and 100 million videos daily (WhatsApp, 2014). In 2015 WhatsApp gained 200 million additional users and reached a total of 900 million global subscribers (Koum and Zuckerberg 2015). Users can send texts, images, videos, short voice messages and free calls to other users. WhatsApp users can create groups, each with up to 100 members and numerous administrators.

WhatsApp is a very popular messaging tool in Israel. According to a survey conducted in 2014, 92% of smartphone owners in Israel use WhatsApp, 86% on a daily basis (The Marker 2014). Many families have created a group to communicate and update each other. WhatsApp has also 'infiltrated' the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and is widely used to exchange information, updates and general gossip. Following cases where sensitive information was published by IDF personnel on WhatsApp, the Information Security Department banned its use in February 2014 (Dvorin, 2014). Nonetheless, it is difficult to enforce such a ban; thus, soldiers continue to use it. WhatsApp is used frequently by all first responder organizations as a communication platform. These organizations include the Israeli Police, Fire and Rescue Authority, and Emergency Medical Services. At present, these organizations use WhatsApp as a formal communication channel to disseminate notifications and updates to their personnel on local, regional and national levels. Although effective risk communications are a mandatory component of emergency management, security authorities often use a gag order to prevent information leak to the public.

For the purpose of this paper, any information that circulated through social media concerning the event was considered as a rumor, or unverified information, until proven to be true or false. This paper uses a participatory action research approach in order to understand how rumors spread via social media during terror events.

2. Methodology

2.1. The terror incident

On the night of June 12, 2014, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped from a bus station. A few minutes after the kidnapping, one of the abducted teenagers managed to call the police emergency line and whispered the words "I was kidnapped". The police dispatch operator thought it was a prank call and did not follow required procedures. More than 4 h later, when their families reported their sons as missing, search operations were initiated. During the early morning hours, the IDF applied for and subsequently issued a gag order on the abduction and search operations concerning the three teenagers (Horowitz, Roth and Weiss 2014). On July 1, 2014, the operation concluded with the discovery of the bodies of the three teenagers (IDF Spokesperson, 2015, Lapin, 2014).

Throughout the morning of June 13, there was a buzz in Israel that 'something is happening' or has happened in the security domain. From noon, various people began to receive WhatsApp messages mentioning the kidnapping of two teenagers somewhere in the West Bank. As no information was available to the public, many rumors began to circulate on social media.

This study was conducted to investigate how information, both true and false, spread through WhatsApp during the days of the abduction. The objective was to identify the paths of rumor initiation and propagation through social media and to understand its mechanisms during a highly sensitive security operation.

2.2. Research tools

In order to study the rumor propagation process, we had to establish a way to receive the rumors circulating on WhatsApp. On the morning of June 15, we posted a request on one of our personal Facebook profiles asking people who had received any information on the kidnapping through social media prior to the official announcement of the IDF spokesperson on Friday June 13 at 17:00, to contact us.

The "detective work" done to trace the source of rumors was based on a methodology described by Scanlon (1977). The current research and data collection were conducted during the actual event.

A number of people posted replies on the wall stating that they received information and some sent private messages. We used snowball and chain-referral sampling methods to recruit