




CNN Breaking News   
@cnnbrk



 Follow

Law enforcement sources: Arrest made in the Boston bombings investigation.  
[on.cnn.com/15fOGEEd](http://on.cnn.com/15fOGEEd)



RETWEETS  
3,463

FAVORITES  
358



11:56 AM - 17 Apr 2013

## Twitter is Breaking (the) News

Twitter is a no-doubt player in news media, but at what cost?

by **MIKE MULCAHY** ON APRIL 9, 2015

---

**T**wo years ago, as Americans tried to make sense of the Boston Marathon Bombings, Twitter became a go-to source for information.

It was then, like countless other times since Twitter's inception in 2006, that the social-media website powered by 140-word microblogs proved its ability to spread the word and provide information.

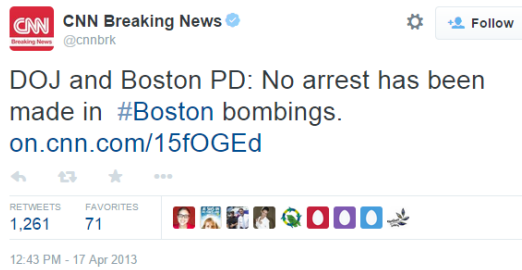
Take, for example, the tweet at top from the CNN Breaking News account (@cnnbrk) relating details of the aftermath.

That tweet was not only retweeted over 3400 times, but it was corroborated by the Twitter accounts of the Associated Press, the Boston Globe and Fox News in a shining example of the news media employing new media to disseminate information.

But the tweet wasn't even accurate.

Within an hour of reporting that law enforcement officials made an arrest, the CNN Breaking News account sent another tweet (see below)

noting that no arrest was made<sup>1</sup>.



However, in the world of 24-hour news media and by-the-second news coverage, such mistakes are all too common as news agencies, reporters and the vox populi vie to break news on Twitter in a ceaseless battle for attention and, ultimately, advertising dollars.

1. That was after the corroborating tweets were posted and after a statement to the contrary was tweeted by the Boston Police Department (@bostonpolice)

It's hardly a perfect situation for journalism as a field, but when the Fourth Estate is pitted against the specter of Chapter 11, accuracy takes a backseat – not unlike the alleged arrestee reported by CNN – to timeliness.

Since its debut in 2006, Twitter has seen it become one of the most popular networking sites on the Internet (Duggan, et al., 2015). It currently has over 288 million active users (Isaac, 2015) and claims 184 million mobile monthly active users (Protalinski, 2014).

Subsequently, with such a substantial number of users, Twitter has seen its popularity as a microblogging platform transform into a breaking-news service. Where once television and print news media broke news, Twitter has largely usurped that mantle as journalist's medium of choice for breaking news (Petrovic, et al., 2013).

And such a metamorphosis makes sense. Because journalists (or virtually anyone with the app) can tweet from almost anywhere at any time, Twitter affords journalists the ability to “live cover” events. Instead of covering an event and reporting it after the fact, journalists can now open their smartphone, snap a picture, type some words and break a news story as it happens.

However, therein lies the problem. Because Twitter is very popular and is a valued tool in breaking news, journalists will scramble<sup>2</sup> to break their story. According to Lauren Hockenson, a professional technology journalist:

Twitter is one of the best tools to use for reporting right now because it makes nearly every breaking news event accessible right from a computer. However, it has a serious disinformation problem — one that leads credible sources to give their readers incorrect news. Unfortunately, this will continue to be an issue as long as the desire to break the news conflicts with the necessity of vetting the news beforehand. (Hockenson, 2013)

2. Sometimes literally

This change in journalism from a deliberate yet prudently accurate procedure into a hasty and single-mindedly careless action has been spurred in part by Twitter.

And while Twitter isn't directly culpable for the unintentional misinformation like the CNN Breaking News tweet<sup>3</sup>, the news media's bottom line is certainly more to blame<sup>4</sup>.

3. Twitter didn't write the tweet, nor did it neglect to fact-check

This desire to be first, but potentially wrong, in reporting via Twitter is impelled by money.

4. Yes, the person who sent the tweet is to blame, but the argument is that that individual felt indirect pressure to break news via forces outside of Twitter

“Social media, specifically Twitter, has given news organizations a powerful incentive to break news quickly, yet fails to punish them for inaccuracy,” Huffington Post media consultant Dean Jayson writes. “Today, the org [sic] that breaks the news is rewarded with an immediate windfall of retweets and followers ... A strong social media presence goes hand in hand with pageviews which are the lifeblood of a healthy online advertising business” (Jayson, 2013).

And that's a fairly common viewpoint across the media space. With the advent of Twitter and this “me-first” mentality, the need for immediacy in journalism is the paramount concern, topping accuracy.

It's the fundamental cause behind CNN's inaccurate tweet<sup>5</sup>, and it's an issue that endemic to this new age of multimedia and multimodal journalism.

5. And the false corroborating tweets by the AP, the Boston Globe and Fox News

Yet, this epidemic of misinformation may still find its undoing within journalism. As accuracy is a key tenet of journalism, there is impetus to redouble efforts to more carefully scrutinize information and sources before tweeting and to move the emphasis of breaking news away from Twitter.

Media entities across the news spectrum have supported the need for accuracy, enacting guidelines for the professional use of Twitter.

In 2011, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) issued a guide of best practices for social media use, with “break news on your website, not on Twitter” as one of 10 “key takeaways” (Harlow, 2011a). Similarly, in Great Britain, the BBC and Sky News both instituted rules in 2012 discouraging journalists to break news stories on Twitter (Plunkett, 2012).

The consensus, at least for a number of mainstream media players, is to avoid Twitter as the way to break news. And while there's no doubt that there's no perfect answer, especially since miscues in reporting are innate to reporting, the goal has to champion accuracy in a world dominated by 24-hour, by-the-second news. •

## Works Cited

- CNN Breaking News. [cnnbrk]. (2013, April 17). Law enforcement sources: Arrest made in the Boston bombings investigation. <http://on.cnn.com/15fOGE4> [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/cnnbrk/status/324582239134416897>
- Duggan, M., Ellison, N., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015, January 9). "Social Media Update 2014". Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/>
- Harlow, S. (2011a, May 13). "New ASNE guidelines help journalists use social media, warn against dangers of Twitter". Journalism in the Americas Blog. Retrieved from <https://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/new-asne-guidelines-help-journalists-use-social-media-warn-against-dangers-twitter>
- Hockenson, L. (2013, April 16). "Boston Marathon Tragedy Exposes Twitter's Reporting Flaws". Mediabistro. Retrieved from [http://www.mediabistro.com/10000words/boston-marathon-tragedy-exposes-twitters-reporting-flaws\\_b18546](http://www.mediabistro.com/10000words/boston-marathon-tragedy-exposes-twitters-reporting-flaws_b18546)
- Isaac, M. (2015, February 5). "Twitter's Revenue Grows Despite User Stagnation". The New York Times. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/technology/twitter-earnings-active-users.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/06/technology/twitter-earnings-active-users.html?_r=0)
- Jayson, D. (2013, January 31). "Fixing Twitter's Breaking News Problem". The Huffington Post. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dean-jayson/twitter-breaking-news\\_b\\_2592078.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dean-jayson/twitter-breaking-news_b_2592078.html)
- Petrovic, S., Osborne, M., McCreadie, R., Macdonald, C., Ounis, I., & Shrimpton, L. (2013). Can Twitter replace Newswire for breaking news? Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence. Retrieved from <http://homepages.inf.ed.ac.uk/miles/papers/short-breaking.pdf>
- Plunkett, J. (2012, February 8). Don't break stories on Twitter, BBC journalists told. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/feb/08/twitter-bbc-journalists>
- Protalinski, E. (2014, February 5). Twitter passes 241m monthly active users, 184m mobile users, and sees 75% of advertising revenue from mobile. The Next Web, Inc. Retrieved from <http://thenextweb.com/twitter/2014/02/05/twitter-passes-million-monthly-active-users-x-million-mobile-users/>