

How the Boston Marathon explosions reveal the two sides of Twitter

For breaking news, Twitter is invaluable: first with so much. Then it becomes a torrent of misinformation – first with so much junk

[Simon Ricketts](#)

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 16 April 2013 10.50 EDT



The scene near Copley Square, captured by Twitter user [@boston_to_a_t](#) Photograph: twitter.com/boston_to_a_t



There is a quiet that descends in a newsroom when a big story breaks.

Forget the Hollywood clichés of cigar-chewing editors shouting invective across the office, holding the front page, pounding their fist on a desk, while necking coffee and painkillers. When a story – a big story – appears, there is an initial buzz of conversation, a quick assessment of the gravity of developments. There are a few nods. A couple of beckoning head-raises and that's when it starts.

Televisions are spun round on their stands, phones are pushed back on to their cradles, spectacles are nudged firmly up noses and notebooks are turned to a fresh page. And we listen.

We listen to each other. We listen to what our colleagues are saying. We listen to what our competitors are saying. We listen to the noises from our sources, we listen to broadcast media. We listen to the news wires. We listen to the public on the scene; we listen to the bloggers and the campaigners.

And, yes. We listen to Twitter. But not as much as we used to.

Twitter has often been touted as the "first with news". From the miniscule to the massive. From Stephen Fry being stuck in a lift, to the Arab Spring rippling across North Africa, it is the instant source of a story, the first gurgle from a tap. The only way to find out what's *really* happening, according to some. But I'm beginning to think that so-called truth is losing some of its polish.

I follow about 700 people on Twitter. I actually "watch" about three times that amount. I have lists of people I don't follow. In other words, I can see them, without having to follow them. News people, experts, specialists, comedians, doctors, police officers, bloggers and bohemians. I've been on Twitter for more than three years. I like to think I've found much of the gold within its mines.

When the first tweets about the [Boston marathon explosions](#) popped up in my timeline, I went over to my newsroom colleagues. I told them what was happening. And the process began. And I watched Twitter.

It used to be the way, maybe three years ago, that Twitter's immediacy, its intimacy, its impact, would drive these stories forward. There would be witness accounts, friends and family providing first-hand evidence, phone pictures, soundbites, reactions that informed the narrative.

That freshness, that vitality, entranced news gatherers. Because there it was, the word on the street. Not filtered through spokesmen, not edited by PR professionals, not sieved by a reputation manager. But I think it might be changing.

One of the theories you learn when you train to be a journalist is the "funnel" of news. Imagine a funnel. It's getting all the information about a certain news story poured into

it – from the top. Wild rumours and hard facts. Witness accounts alongside back-of-a-cigarette packet theories,

The funnel is the journalist. And the funnel's job is to take all the information, from the crazy and the correct, and pour it, with a measure of control, into the story. Take out the impurities, crush up the lumps, and make the resulting article a distillation of the thousands of snippets, with no errors.

It seems to me, very often these days, that Twitter is the funnel is turned upside down. All of those disparate ingredients are poured into the nozzle. The narrow part. And they are not filtered, not regulated, not tested. But they come out of the wide part of the funnel. They are spread across a large area. Indiscriminately.

And that's how Twitter appeared to me on the night of the [Boston](#) marathon bombs. Let's look at just some of the information that came out of Twitter in the short few hours after those concussive blasts knocked marathon runners and spectators literally off their feet.

- 1) The main brunt of the casualties were families from the Newtown massacre.
- 2) There was an explosion at the JFK library in Boston, it was connected to the original blasts.
- 3) A Saudi Arabian national has been arrested over the bombs.
- 4) A Muslim, with shrapnel wounds is being guarded in hospital as a "person of interest".
- 5) Blood donors were needed. People need to give blood. (This tweet is a regular when any disaster happens. It's nearly always not true, but to press "retweet" on this one feels like a civic duty.)
- 6) A Boston marathon account is going to donate cash to the cause for every time it gets retweeted.
- 7) Marathon runners who saw the disaster carried on past the finish line and kept running – straight to the hospital to give blood.
- 8) There were five devices planted on the day.

Then let's get on to the reactions or theories from "well-placed" commentators.

- 1) It was Patriot's Day. This is when rightwing supremacists consider their time to act. After all, Timothy McVeigh committed the Oklahoma bombing at the same time in 1995.
- 2) It is an act of terrorism by Muslims. (Interesting distinction, by the way, how an act by Muslims is "terrorism" while an act by a homegrown American is an "atrociti".)
- 3) Those jumping to the conclusion that it is foreign terrorists are racists.
- 4) Those jumping to the conclusion that it is American "activists" are slanderous.

Stop there a minute. That is 12 pieces of information. Twelve. All of them, read individually, sound authentic. Can be identified with. They are highly plausible, or at least comprehensible.

But not one of them – at the time of writing – have been proved to be true. They are facts that aren't facts. They are morsels of information that could be made from cardboard or concrete. We know nothing of their roots, nothing of their provenance. Just that they have been spread far and wide.

It doesn't matter that some – or none - of those above "facts" may turn out to be true *later*. They weren't true *then*.

The odd thing is, while highlighting the downfalls of this instant media and its use in news, I can understand it. There is human need to feel involved, concerned, part of the conversation. We all saw those poor people, struggling across a finish line, only to be blown backwards by the force of a truly shocking explosion. We all want to say "I'm the kind of person who is appalled by this," but in doing so, it can so sometimes come across as trite.

While we all try to make sense of a senseless killing, we often try to say what we think is right. There is a seemingly compulsory obligation to say something "proper". But that can often come with the unspoken hope of popularity.

Do a Twitter search on the words ["running towards"](#) to see what I mean.

This is not to condemn Twitter. Just to contextualise it. I see so much good on Twitter, so many positive stories and actions, that I would never write it off. I just sense an

evolution. A reframing. An acknowledgement that, as it grows, it has become more unwieldy.

Sometimes, I think perhaps I'm old-fashioned and prefer to get my news when it's verified. When it's been through the funnel. When people who are trained take time to consider, contextualise and commentate.

But maybe, this just comes from a man who has watched a horrific atrocity unfold in front of him. While trying to find cogent comment about it. Attempting to shape informative and useful words from an empty, aggressive act of brutality.

The point is, perhaps that Twitter for a news-gatherer – in my experience – has very often become the "canary down the mine". It senses the gas leak first, mostly correctly. And then it dies.

It is a signal. A switch. A warning light that only does one job. And then, it becomes largely useless.

And perhaps, it is time to realise the change. Perhaps, it is time to take a breath before retweeting the first thing you see, the first thing you hope is true. You may not agree, of course. I just felt it was worth pushing my stick in the sand at this particular point in time.

Oh, and that tweet at the top of this piece? It was stolen from the original tweeter and used by many others on Twitter as "the right thing to say". Which probably proves I might be wasting my time.