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Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?

By JAY CASPIAN KANG

On an overcast day in early May, I traveled to suburban Philadelphia to visit the family of Sunil Tripathi, the deceased 22-year-old Brown University student who, for about four hours on the morning of April 19, was mistakenly identified as Suspect No. 2 in the [Boston Marathon](#) bombings. The Tripathis had just arrived home after nearly two months spent in Providence, R.I., where they went to organize the search for Sunil, who disappeared on March 16. When I entered the house, Judy Tripathi, Sunil's mother, asked me for a hug. In a shattered voice, she said, "I need hugs these days." We sat at the kitchen table and talked, and at one point Judy handed me a photo of a young, smiling Sunil, caught in the motion of throwing a ball. "Look how happy he looks," she said. For the next two hours, she and her husband, Akhil, and their daughter, Sangeeta, described what happened to them in the early-morning hours of April 19, and how the false identification of their son derailed their ongoing search for him and further traumatized their lives.

At 5 p.m. on April 18, three days after the bombs went off at the marathon finish line, the F.B.I. released grainy photographs of two suspects. For the past month, the Tripathis had been renting a house and spending their days working with F.B.I. agents, Brown administrators and an organization dedicated to finding missing persons. Early on in the search, the family created a Facebook page called "Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi," which included video messages from family and friends and recent images of Sunil — walking the beach with his older brother, Ravi; attending his sister's graduation ceremony; posing with his mother at a Phillies game.

Minutes after the world first saw the suspects' photos, a user on Reddit, the online community that is also one of the largest Web sites in the world,

posted side-by-side pictures comparing Sunil's facial features with the face that would later be identified as Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. The pictures were accompanied by speculation about the circumstances surrounding Sunil's disappearance and the F.B.I.'s involvement in his search. By 8 p.m., three hours after the F.B.I. released the suspects' photos, angry messages began to appear on the Tripathi's Facebook page, and at 8:15 Ravi received a phone call from a reporter at ABC News in New York, who asked if Sunil had been spotted in Boston and if Ravi had seen the F.B.I. photos of Suspect No. 2. Ravi, unclear at what she was getting at, told her there had been no word from Sunil. As the minutes passed and the volume of threatening Facebook messages increased, the Tripathis finally called their F.B.I. contact in Providence, who assured them that nobody within his office believed that Sunil was Suspect No. 2.

The family had been told that missing people sometimes go to libraries or other places with free Internet service, where they type their own names into search engines to track their cases. The Facebook page was created with the hope that if Sunil searched for himself, he would find loving messages from his family and friends. Now they worried that he would see what was being written about him and take drastic measures to harm himself. Around 11 p.m., at roughly the same time that the news came out that Sean Collier, a 27-year-old police officer at M.I.T., had been shot and killed, the Tripathis closed the page so that no more messages could come in.

The removal of "Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi" was noted by several people in the media, including Sasha Stone, who runs an inside-Hollywood Web site called Awards Daily. At 10:56 p.m., Stone tweeted: "I'm sure by now the @fbipressoffice is looking into this dude" and included a link to the Facebook page. Seven minutes later, she tweeted: "Seconds after I sent that tweet the page is gone off of Facebook. If you can cache it . . ." For Erik Malinowski, a senior sportswriter at the Web site BuzzFeed, the takedown of "Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi" was noteworthy enough to pass along. At midnight, Malinowski, whose Twitter following includes a number of journalists, tweeted: "FYI: A Facebook group dedicated to finding Sunil Tripathi, the missing Brown student, was deleted this evening." Roughly 300 Twitter users retweeted Malinowski's post, including the pop-culture

blogger Perez Hilton, who sent Sunil Tripathi's name out to more than six million followers. From there, the small, contained world of speculation exploded on every social-media platform. Several journalists began tweeting out guarded thoughts about Sunil's involvement. If the family had taken down the Facebook page, the reasoning went, it must mean that the Tripathis had seen their missing son in the grainy photos of Suspect No. 2.

At 2:43 a.m., a Twitter user named Greg Hughes (@ghughesca), who was previously tweeting things like, "In 2013, all you need [is] a connection to the Boston police scanner and a Twitter feed to know what's up. We don't even need TV anymore," shifted the now-fervid speculation to established fact: "BPD scanner has identified the names," Hughes tweeted. "Suspect 1: Mike Mulugeta Suspect 2: Sunil Tripathi." (Hughes has since all but disappeared from the Internet, and where he got this information is unclear.) Seven minutes later, Kevin Galliford, a journalist for a TV station in Hartford, relayed the same information to his own followers; Galliford's tweet was retweeted more than 1,000 times in a matter of minutes. The next multiplier came from Andrew Kaczynski, another journalist at BuzzFeed, who sent out the police-scanner misinformation to his 90,000 followers and quickly followed up with: "Wow Reddit was right about the missing Brown student per the police scanner. Suspect identified as Sunil Tripathi."

At 2:57 a.m., with many people following the case on the Internet now convinced that the Reddit community had it right from the start, Luke Russert, a reporter for NBC News and son of the late Tim Russert, tweeted out a photo of the younger Tsarnaev with the commentary: "This pic kinda feeds Sunil Tripathi theory." The Internet fate of Sunil Tripathi was finally sealed minutes later when @YourAnonNews, a Twitter news feed connected to the hacker collective Anonymous, tweeted out Tripathi's name to the hundreds of thousands of people who follow the account. By 3 a.m., in many heavily trafficked corners of the Internet, it was accepted that Sunil Tripathi was Suspect No. 2, and Reddit had got there first.

Like so many words within the Internet's lexicon, "Reddit" contains multiple, amorphous meanings. As a business entity, Reddit is a Web site controlled, in part, by Advance Publications, the multibillion-dollar

company that owns all of Condé Nast's magazines as well as newspapers. The people who run the site define "Reddit" as both a noun (an online community) and as a reflexive verb (to take part in that community) — even though the community is no single entity, but instead made up of thousands of disparate online tribes, many of whom perceive Reddit as a haven from the propaganda of the mainstream media and as the world's most important vehicle for democratized, crowd-sourced journalism. As Luke Russert tweeted: "It's still early w unconfirmed reports, but if Redit [sic] was right with the Sunil Tripathi theory, it's changed the game 4ever."

The way Reddit works is simple. A post from a user is either "upvoted" (also known as earning "karma," because you've submitted a link that benefited the Reddit community) or "downvoted." Everything on the site starts off in a subReddit — the term given to one of Reddit's roughly 5,000 active discussion categories. If a post accrues enough "karma," it will be promoted to Reddit's front page, where it will be seen by everyone who comes to the site.

The front page of Reddit is sacred ground for content producers everywhere — a link to a site that appears there translates to tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of page views — enough so that just about every major publication, at some point, has tried to figure out how to clandestinely promote its work on Reddit. According to the online-traffic tracker Alexa, Reddit generates more traffic than The New York Times, Fox News and Skype, with approximately 70 million unique visitors a month and around five billion page views. These numbers, while impressive, speak to only a portion of Reddit's influence. Because there are so many discussions taking place on Reddit, and because so many of them are of journalistic interest and involve members with real expertise, the site is not just a compilation of information but also an important venue for writers and editors looking for source material.

Despite its size and influence, Reddit employs only 28 people. The company's offices are two glass-walled boxes found at the back of a large, long-tabled, dog-friendly communal work space in Lower Manhattan. Depending on the day, somewhere between four and six Reddit employees are at work there. Large, conceptual problems do exist at Reddit — for

example, many new users find the site impossible to navigate, creating a bottleneck through which only dedicated, Web-savvy users can pass — but the day-to-day tasks at Reddit are mostly mundane. Erik Martin, who last year made Time magazine’s list of the world’s 100 most influential people, is Reddit’s general manager, spokesman and all-purpose problem solver. On the morning of my visit, he seemed mostly occupied with writing a blog post promoting Reddit’s worldwide meet-up day, when thousands of Redditors (as the site’s users are called) would converge in public spaces around the globe. The day before, after noting that Asa Butterfield, the star of the coming film “Ender’s Game,” contributed to a hot comment thread about a recently released trailer, Martin persuaded Butterfield to conduct one of Reddit’s “Ask Me Anything” sessions, an interview series that has featured Snoop Lion, Psy, Bill Gates and Barack Obama.

According to the site’s mythology, its founders — Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian — met during their freshman year at the University of Virginia and quickly formed a bond over their shared love of video games. One of Ohanian’s professors supposedly asked him why students had chosen to take his class, and Ohanian’s response was, “I want to make the less.” By their senior year, Huffman and Ohanian, like so many entrepreneurs before them, were seeking profitable tech solutions nagging problems of college life. One day, while pumping gas at a filling station, Huffman had the sort of simple, almost comical eureka moment that has driven so many successful start-ups. He was hungry and ordered a sub from the gas station’s sandwich shop but realized that he could not pump gas and get his sandwich at the same time. But what if you could order the sub while pumping gas via your mobile device and make better use of those minutes spent standing and pumping?

Huffman and Ohanian put together a company called Red Brick Solutions, and in the spring of 2005, they spent their break in Cambridge, Mass., where the highly influential start-up guru Paul Graham was giving a talk. Ohanian persuaded Graham to get a cup of coffee with them, and a few weeks later, Huffman and Ohanian pitched their idea to Y Combinator, Graham’s new start-up fund. Y Combinator’s board ultimately rejected the food-ordering idea, but Huffman and Ohanian impressed them as entrepreneurs worth investing in. During one brainstorming session,



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Graham expressed his admiration for [delicious.com](#), a site that compiles bookmarks on the Web and contained a function called Delicious Popular that aggregates links that have been bookmarked by multiple users. The problem with Delicious Popular was that the disparate bookmarking habits of the public made the list too unfocused and arbitrary to be suitable for any specific group's needs. Huffman and Ohanian were fans of Slashdot, a site that caters to the interests of those in the tech field. Their idea for Reddit, then, was to combine Slashdot with [delicious.com](#) and create what Graham called "the front page of the Internet." Despite the grandiose description, Huffman said, "we wanted to make it a place where techy people like me, Alexis and Paul Graham could go and find content that interested us."

Reddit started in June 2005. At first, the only posts on the site came from fake accounts created by Huffman and Ohanian. That December, the two were joined by Aaron Swartz, the tech visionary who committed suicide in January. Swartz was working on his own Y Combinator project, a blogging platform called Infogami, when Graham suggested that Reddit and Infogami merge into one company. Swartz moved into Huffman and Ohanian's apartment in Somerville, Mass., and began working with Huffman on building an infrastructure that would service both Infogami and Reddit. In many of the dozens of articles written about Swartz after his death, he is credited with founding Reddit, but according to Huffman, Ohanian and Graham, this is not true. Still, among a large population of people, Swartz has become a symbol of the struggle over freedom of information on the Internet. And his association with the early days of Reddit is in part why the site has a reputation as one of the last strongholds for the unfettered exchange of ideas.

The relationship between Huffman and Swartz soured almost immediately. According to Huffman, Swartz never seemed interested in Reddit, his work habits were unpredictable and he proved difficult to motivate. During a crucial time in Reddit's early development, Swartz decided he wanted to write a book about child rearing and sequestered himself in his room and refused to come out until he had read every book he could find on the subject.

After his death, anecdotes about Swartz's manic mood swings have been used to paint the picture of an impulsive and troubled but ultimately beautiful mind. These same qualities made him a nightmare as a co-worker. Graham admitted to me that bringing Swartz onto the team was a mistake. When Condé Nast began looking into a possible acquisition of the site, Huffman and Swartz were no longer on speaking terms, and they agreed that after the sale of Reddit, Swartz would quit the company. On Oct. 31, 2006, Condé Nast bought Reddit. Huffman immediately moved to San Francisco to begin working in the offices of Wired, a Condé Nast magazine. Ohanian stayed on the East Coast. Swartz eventually made his way to San Francisco and hung around the Wired offices until his conflict with Huffman became untenable. One day in early February 2007, Huffman confronted him and asked why he hadn't quit the company yet. Swartz told him that he wouldn't quit unless he received a promise in writing from Condé Nast that he would not be sued if he quit. An agreement was produced, and Swartz left Reddit that day. Huffman never spoke to him again.

After Swartz's departure, a lot of things conspired to turn Reddit into a traffic behemoth. One by one, Reddit's main competitors began to fail (by early 2011, delicious.com and Digg had both been sold for an Internet pittance) while link-sharing as a practice continued to grow. Reddit was there to eat up much of the traffic.

Since the sale to Condé Nast, Reddit's traffic has grown by more than a factor of 100. Huffman, Ohanian and Swartz all were paid well for their contributions, but nothing compared with what the company is worth today. The early sale was in part motivated by what Graham, Huffman and Ohanian saw as a toxic relationship with their young, precocious programmer. "If we knew what we were doing," Huffman said, "we would have fired Aaron. We would have raised a lot of money and done our thing."

Despite the astronomical growth, Reddit's community still reflects the values of its founders and all those early, self-propagated posts. Video-game and programming subReddits are still among the most popular threads on the site. The other major driver is, of course, pornography. "Gone Wild," a subReddit that allows users to post naked photos of themselves, has

416,000 subscribers, though that number reflects only a tiny portion of the people who visit the page. Martin estimates that about 20 percent of the content on Reddit is N.S.F.W. (not safe for work), but emphasizes that this also includes “Trees,” Reddit’s dedicated marijuana-loving community. Regardless of the accuracy of Martin’s estimate (many experts think the porn traffic is much higher), the popularity of subReddits like “Gone Wild” and the now-banned “Creepshots,” which featured photos of girls taken without their knowledge, helped create a profile of the typical Redditor as a nerdy, pervy, compulsively masturbating pothead. But Reddit kept growing — the number of Redditors doubles every 12 months — and as more people got hooked on accumulating karma, new avenues for upvotes emerged. At some point in the past two years, the site’s population density reached a point such that wherever there was breaking news, there would be Redditors available to crowd-source the incoming information, much of it coming from other Redditors who could supply firsthand accounts and raw images.

In this regard, the July 20, 2012, movie-theater shooting in Aurora, Colo., was Reddit’s finest hour. Because the incident happened just after midnight, early reports were sporadic and largely inaccurate. On Reddit, a handful of moderators opened up threads for any and all news about the shooting. As the night progressed, those became an invaluable resource for journalists and citizens who wanted to follow the story in real time. A Redditor who was shot in the theater posted a photo of himself in the emergency room and even provided a shot of his bullet wound. Other reports from inside and outside the theater came flooding in. The comprehensive timeline of the Aurora massacre on Reddit included accurate figures on the number of people admitted to area hospitals, the names of confirmed victims, links to relevant charitable organizations and crisis phone numbers for people who were searching for loved ones. The site might still attract hoaxers and peddlers of misinformation, they knew that, but the logic was that through the instant feedback of thousands of upvotes or downvotes, Reddit could winnow out the good from the bad and provide an accurate report of what was happening. “People will always be driven by scoops,” Paul Graham said to me. “It’s why The Drudge Report exists. Reddit allows anyone to become Matt Drudge.”

Between 3 a.m. and 4:15 a.m. on April 19, Sangeeta Tripathi received 58 phone calls on her cellphone. Many of the reporters who left messages did not mince words. Several named her brother Sunil as a suspect in the bombing and asked if his family wanted to deliver a statement to either clear his name or to provide an explanation for why he had attacked an American city. More interview requests were left on the answering machine back home in suburban Philadelphia. Akhil Tripathi, Sunil's father, allowed me to listen to some of them. The last call, from the radio-talk-show host Pete Santilli, went as follows: "It is a high level of importance that I get in touch with you because Sunil Tripathi's name has been used over the Boston Police Department's scanners. His name was sent out all over the scanners as the Suspect No. 2. . . . There are some anomalies that we would like to discuss with you — very important ones. For instance, the Facebook page was taken down at 11 p.m. for Sunil Tripathi. We're kind of concerned about that, given that the police officer was shot at 10:30. . . . Please call me so we can share information, gather information and relay information, of course. You're going through a very tough time, I know, and when you wake up to this message, I'm sure you're going to be quite shocked."

At 5:16 a.m., Pete Williams of NBC announced that Sunil Tripathi was not a suspect, but speculation on Twitter continued. Around 6:45 a.m., after the Tripathis had received hundreds of threatening and anti-Islamic messages (though they are not Muslim) and after Suspect No. 1 was announced dead from injuries sustained at the shootout in Watertown, Mass., The Associated Press revealed the full name of Suspect No. 2: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. But the Tripathi family's troubles were not over. Akhil's colleague, who had been helping with the search, called a homeless shelter in Philadelphia to see if Sunil had been there and was told that the shelter did not aid terrorists. According to the Tripathis, the private missing-persons organization that was working with the family informed them that Sunil's association with the Boston bombings had ruined their business. Still traumatized, the Tripathi family decided to redouble their efforts to get out the word about Sunil's disappearance. This meant going back to the same media who had been calling them all night. "We were very hurt and very scared and very angry," Sangeeta said, "but we couldn't afford to share those opinions with the media, because we were looking for Sunil. You

realize how the power dynamics are so strong. We had to keep all of our anger and displeasure off the record.

“Almost every news outlet that came to us said the same three things,” Sangeeta added. “The first was, ‘How was that night?’ The second was, ‘Is Sunny still missing?’ And the third was, ‘This is a silver lining because now you’re getting his name out.’ It was interesting to see how formulaically they processed that arc. The costs to somebody who is in a fragile state are immense and not undone by a casual apology,” she said. “This is precedent-setting for what will happen for other individuals.”

Judy Tripathi added: “All the sentiment and help we had received to help find Sunil switched over and said he was a terrorist. And you know the irony is — ” she paused to choke back tears. “Sunil was so gentle, and he was a victim of all that damn scandal, and he was a victim of his depression. It was just so ugly.”

On April 23, a body was pulled out of the Providence River. Using dental records, authorities confirmed that it was Sunil Tripathi.

The general refrain from the journalists who helped propagate the misinformation went something like this: Breaking-news reporting has always been chaotic, and it’s more so now because the overall volume of misinformation, loosed by millions on Reddit and Twitter, has ballooned out of control. Andrew Kaczynski of BuzzFeed wrote a morning post-mortem on the site, along with a colleague, Rosie Gray, who had also tweeted about Sunil Tripathi. Neither mentioned their own involvement in spreading the wrong name, and Kaczynski has since deleted his incriminating tweets.

On Monday, April 22, after a long, personal correspondence with the Tripathi family in which Martin apologized on behalf of Reddit and pledged to help with the ongoing search for Sunil, a public apology went up on the site. “After this week,” Martin wrote, “which showed the best and worst of Reddit’s potential, we hope that Boston will also be where Reddit learns to be sensitive of its own power.”

Martin's private apology, sent to the family via Facebook, came after hours of debate within Reddit's brain trust about what to do with the "Find Boston Bombers" subReddit and how to make sense of the site's supposed role in the Tripathi family's nightmare. Reddit enjoyed record-breaking traffic numbers during the Boston coverage, and the company has always considered itself "content agnostic," meaning that as long as what's being posted is legal, Reddit will not intervene and take it down. "We wanted to honor law enforcement's request for help from the public and figure out if there was a way Reddit could contribute," Martin told me. "We didn't want to intervene in what we thought was a process that might possibly do some good."

Just minutes after the explosions went off on Boylston Street, a Reddit user named `_supernovasky_`, inspired by the fast-moving diligence that Reddit displayed during Aurora, quickly created a thread titled, "There was just an explosion at the Boston Marathon — Will use this to live update." For the next six hours, `_supernovasky_` compiled all the incoming information. Dozens of other Redditors created competing threads, including "Find Boston Bombers."

When asked why he, a graduate student in sociology, felt the need to play breaking-news reporter on the Internet, `_supernovasky_` said, "We get these upvotes — these worthless points that go by your name to show how much you've contributed — and I guess I just wanted to keep my contributions going."

"Reddit provides a service that people want," `_supernovasky_` added. "News has become filtered, bureaucratic and slow. Reddit is the opposite of that. It's fast, unfiltered and transpired. There will be always a need for that sort of information."

This gospel of decentralization and pure aggregation comes with its very own idols — and plenty of castigated false ones. On dozens of subReddits, every mistake by a major news organization was proof that the new order had arrived. One of the heroes of that new order is a man named Jackal, who runs Your Anonymous News, one of the most influential voices to be associated with the hacker collective Anonymous. When I walked into the

crowded cafe in Denver where he proposed we meet, a heavily bearded man in his late 20s greeted me. He wore a pair of thick glasses that magnified his wild eyes. When I asked if he was the head of Your Anonymous News, he seemed to resist the elevated title. Not because he feared being identified or persecuted, but because Jackal is an anarchist, and so being called the boss of anything, even something you created and control, just didn't sound right.

Talking to someone in Anonymous sometimes feels like a silly metaphysical game. They will tell you nobody is ever "in" Anonymous, because Anonymous "does not exist as an organization," therefore, as Jackal explained, @YourAnonNews both *is* and *is not* a part of Anonymous. He admitted that he has befriended and communicates with other members of Anonymous, but then he told me, with a hint of self-righteousness in his voice, that nobody is a "member" of Anonymous. (At one point, Jackal suggested that I was Anonymous because I had come to Denver without telling anyone why.)

Technically speaking, @YourAnonNews is a Twitter account with more than 1.1 million followers. Jackal says the account picks up an average of 7,000 followers a day and receives 700 interactions a minute, an incredible rate of growth and activity for a crowd-sourced news service. By years end, @YourAnonNews is very likely to surpass the Twitter following of most major American newspapers. The account is followed by hundreds of journalists, myself included. For those who dream of a post-Snowden utopia where no government and corporate secrets are protected, @YourAnonNews is one of the only trustworthy news sources out there.

Around 20 people work at @YourAnonNews. Most are off-site, but some come to Jackal's house in downtown Denver, either to learn the news-mining techniques favored by @YourAnonNews or to help maintain the Twitter account. Jackal and his associates use search engines and thousands of RSS feeds to stream information from every possible source on the Internet. There is no set criteria for the articles chosen by the site's curators, nor does Jackal exert any editorial control over the account, except this: raw data, whether in the form of an Instagram photo from a tornado site or a tweet from a person in the middle of a news event, is of

higher value than a reported article from a news source.

Jackal said he started @YourAnonNews because he wanted an outlet for his anarchist political beliefs. He said he believed in the value of the mainstream media and expressed a hope that everyone read everything out there and formed their own opinion. But he also said that the mainstream media was peddling false, force-fed narratives filed by reporters who never did anything but attend staged news conferences, and that it was his mission to call attention to events the mainstream media was unwilling to call attention to. As examples, he brought up the conflict over the independence movement in West Papua in Indonesia and “this whole Snowden thing.” When I pointed out that no single figure was more covered by the mainstream press in recent days than Edward Snowden, Jackal said that the kind of coverage mattered more than the number of words expended. Nobody in the media seemed concerned about *why* Snowden leaked the N.S.A. documents, he said; they chose to focus instead on his flight plans and his supposed criminality.

Jackal contained contradictions. While extolling the virtues of open information and the value of a free-in-every-way news source, he also said that his ultimate goal was to have editorial content from @YourAnonNews up on a mainstream site like The Huffington Post. And despite the claim that it values unfiltered images and tweets above all else, a vast majority of its reports come from the mainstream media. When it joined the chorus on the morning of April 19 and blasted the name of Sunil Tripathi out to its hundreds of thousands of followers, the rationale was that the information had been confirmed by several other “trusted sources.” When asked who those “trusted sources” were, Jackal admitted to not really knowing the specifics but assumed that they were journalists working for major media outlets.

The future of @YourAnonNews may soon be even bigger and more conflicted. Sometime next month, Jackal and his associates plan to start a Web site that will include videos, editorials and firsthand reported items. The popularity of @YourAnonNews has put Jackal in contact with hundreds of sources from around the globe, and he plans to set up local bureaus of Your Anonymous News in highly unstable countries. Sometime

this fall, Your Anonymous News Athens should be up and running.

Jackal said on several occasions that he did not know the first thing about standard journalistic practices. When I asked if the increasing scale of his operations would instill in him some new sense of journalistic responsibility, he said: “I don’t think I should take myself more seriously at all, because that would move us further from the original intention of the site. I still think it’s funny the account has over a million followers.” After a pause, he added, “But because I’m a responsible adult, I have to put in measures to make sure Your Anonymous News doesn’t become a monster.” As for his organization’s role in spreading the name of Sunil Tripathi, Jackal said: “My first reaction was: ‘Oh, [expletive]. What did we do?’ But it’s a tough spot, because we want to be first on breaking news. But then something terrible like that happens, and you want to rethink things. Ultimately, being anarchists, we believe you can do whatever you want as long as you’re happy.”

So where do things go from here? Clearly, the ability to instantly gather the firsthand accounts of so many individuals near the site of any breaking-news event is a huge and significant development in the way we generate and take in the news. And yet, at the risk of sounding like an obsolete mass-media apologist, there’s a reason that good journalism traditionally involves a healthy dose of skepticism, and what we saw with the Sunil Tripathi debacle is what happens when two different media spheres — each somewhat ignorant of the rules that guide the other — collide. One mistake by, say, a journalist working for a local TV news station in Connecticut allows rumors percolating in the most speculative depths of Reddit to be repurposed and broadcast with alarming speed and authority. These days, all information runs wild. Dylan Byers, a media reporter at Politico, helped spread the false police-scanner information on Twitter. When asked why he had felt the need to pass along information he could not confirm himself, Byers said he does not necessarily endorse everything he retweets. “When I tweet that CNN is reporting that authorities have someone in custody and then 10 minutes later tweet that NBC is tweeting that nobody was in custody, I’m not saying one is right and the other is wrong. Instead, I’m using Twitter as a tool to get out what information is out there and tracing it back to the source.”

Byers's explanation works only in a space where everyone understands exactly what the rules are and why. On Reddit, everyone understands how the system works, and everyone is motivated by the desire to be first with information, even if that information is partial or momentarily mistaken in the assemblage of a breaking story. Byers's mistake came when he assumed that what he was reading on a stranger's Twitter account was worth sharing without any additional commentary. If enough people with trusted media affiliations touch a bit of information on Twitter, it starts to resemble a fact. Of course, the "fact" that Sunil Tripathi's name had been read over a police scanner was no fact at all. In [an excellent post-mortem](#) written immediately after the debacle, Alexis Madrigal of The Atlantic included the scanner recording. It contains no mention anywhere of Sunil Tripathi.

It helps to envision modern journalism as a kind of video game. If you're part of the Internet media, everything you put out into the world comes with its own scoring system. Tweets are counted by retweets and favorites, stories are scored by page views and Facebook likes. A writer's reach and influence is visible right there, in the number of his followers and the number of "influencers" who subscribe to his or her feed. If you're wondering why so many writers and journalists from such divergent backgrounds would feel the need to instantly tweet out unconfirmed information to their followers, all you have to do is think of the modern Internet reporter as some form of super Redditor — to be silent is to lose points. To be retweeted is to gain them. We do it for the "karma."

"We were on the other end of that pressure, and it was very palpable and very ugly," Sangeeta Tripathi said to me in the kitchen of her parents' home. The Tripathis struck me as an unfailingly civil family, who took great care to craft their statements. Sangeeta, whose work in public health takes her to African countries for six months out of every year, seemed particularly concerned with how the media organizations who made the mistakes might change their policies. "I think a lot of the apologies were fueled by guilt," she said. "Don't just say sorry and this is a weird, extreme case and move on. We need to try to be more careful and intentional about the way we treat each other through our various platforms."

Many of the reporters who helped spread Sunil's name apologized in one

form or another. Kevin Galliford, the TV journalist in Connecticut, told me he apologized directly to Akhil. Sasha Stone wrote a heartfelt blog post apologizing for her tweet on Awards Daily. Marcus DiPaola, a freelance journalist who happened to be on the ground in Cambridge and Watertown during the early morning hours of April 19, posted a set of journalistic guidelines that he hoped would help his fellow Redditors exercise more caution in the future. As of this printing, DiPaola's guidelines are still the most upvoted comment in the thread.

“The loss of personal privacy is an inherent issue to the Internet as a whole,” Erik Martin told me. “If you go out in public, you should expect that your photo is going to be taken somewhere by either the traffic cameras on the street or by some creepy-ass guy who takes your photo when you're not looking. Twitter has a creep factor, Facebook has a creep factor, but nobody ever really talks about that. They only talk about those things when they show up on Reddit. In reality, it's everywhere.”

Alex Angel, Martin's colleague, added: “I just don't understand why the blame was put on us and not on the outlets that did shoddy reporting. Reddit is just a bunch of normal people who are basically chattering. Major news sources put out the bad information without any verification, but we got all the blame. No one but Reddit was really held responsible.”

To blame Reddit is to pretend that the platform is the problem. A hive mind may have existed on Reddit during the early days when the community was small and self-selecting, but now that traffic has reached 70 million visitors a month, asking “Reddit,” whatever that might mean, to police its own news content seems to misunderstand the problem. The Sunil Tripathi debacle isn't really a “new media” problem, much as those who think of themselves as members of the “old media” might like to see it that way. This is what media is now, a constantly evolving interaction between reporters working for mainstream companies; journalists and writers compiling and interpreting news for online outlets; and thousands of individuals participating on their own in the gathering and assembling and disseminating of information. It's a tremendously messy process, at times thrilling and deeply useful, and at times damaging in ways that can't be anticipated. How it all gets straightened out, how some rules might become

codified, is going to take a while.

“One thing we’ve been struck by is how porous the space is between social media, the media and law enforcement,” Sangeeta said. “We assumed that if random people on Twitter were sitting in their pajamas saying, ‘Here’s this kid missing in Providence that’s skinny, and here’s something horrible that happened because of a kid who’s skinny,’ that speculation would be contained within a certain space.”

Judy Tripathi said, “Whatever started this, the fact that adults in media, Reddit or wherever ran with it is just — ” she placed her hand on her throat and paused to collect herself. Then she whispered, “Incredible.”

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