UCCS researcher: Social media and crisis communication [1]

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By Tom Hutton

UCCS media relations

The ?Captured? tweet issued by the Boston Police Department signaled more than just the end of an investigation and man hunt to an anxious nation, according to a UCCS researcher.

The 20 word posting on Twitter was an indicator of the growth of importance of social media in a crisis, according to Jeannette Sutton, senior associate, Center for Trauma, Health and Hazards, and colleagues from the University of California, Irvine. The members of the HEROIC project recently concluded that social media use by Boston-area government agencies during the April Boston bombing played an important public safety role. The researchers studied social media use before the bombing, immediately following the bombing and through the arrest of suspected bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

More than 137,000 people shared or retweeted the Boston Police Department?s April 19 message that read: ?CAPTURED!!! The hunt is over. The search is done. The terror is over. And justice has won. Suspect in custody.?

?It?s somewhat amazing how popular the message was,? Sutton said. ?It indicated how many eyes were focused on social media, looking for information during a time of crisis.?

By some estimates, 25 percent of Americans took to Facebook during the Boston bombing, reinforcing social media role as a dominant communication force. As Sutton told a writer forScientific American recently, having an effective social media strategy and tweaking it to fit any specific emergency is a crucial part of emergency preparedness planning.

The researchers found that social media messages from official sources such as public information officers for police, fire or other government agencies were shared with friends and colleagues, extending the reach of any individual organizations to communicate with people at risk; the goal of any emergency communication.

Sutton believes the National Science Foundation-sponsored research has important implications for homeland security efforts and shows that social media is an important part of official communication in an emergency. But, like other forms of communication, coordination of information between agencies is vital. Sutton recently spoke at a National Homeland Defense Conference to emphasize the importance of social media use and to share data that

social media isn?t just for sharing pictures and celebrity gossip anymore.

?Our analysis of messages across 29 targeted accounts showed great consistency in the content of the messages,? Sutton said. ?That?s an impressive feat in any crisis and is particularly challenging in the fast-moving world of social media.?

Sutton encouraged government agencies to become adept at using social media, not only understanding its abilities to be rapidly deployed to alert communities but also organizational tools such as hashtags and providing web links for more information.

The HEROIC project is a collaborative effort by researchers at UCCS and UC-Irvine to better understand the dynamics of informal online communication in response to extreme events. Through a combination of data collection and modeling of conversation dynamics, the project team aims to understand the relationship between hazard events, informal communication and emergency response.

For more information, visit http://www.heroicproject.org [2].

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