

# Michael Chertoff and Dallas Lawrence: Investigating Terror in the Age of Twitter

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In an incredibly short span of five days last week, America went from a nation under attack by terrorists to one made proud as law-enforcement agencies quickly identified the suspected Boston bombers and tracked them down. The attack, the investigation, the manhunt and the swift resolution were unprecedented. So too was the way that law enforcement employed digital tools to do its job.

A dozen years ago when the terrorists struck on 9/11, there was no Facebook **FB +0.04%** or Twitter or i-anything on the market. Cellphones were relatively common, but when cell networks collapsed in 2001, many people were left disconnected and wanting for immediate answers. Last week in Boston, when mobile networks became overloaded following the bombings, the social-media-savvy Boston Police Department turned to Twitter, using the platform as a makeshift newsroom to alert media and concerned citizens to breaking news.

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Law-enforcement agencies around the world will note how social media played a prominent role both in telling the story and writing its eventual conclusion. Some key lessons have emerged.

One is that misinformation—always the bane of law enforcement during emergencies—now spreads instantaneously. Boston police, recognizing the problem, took to social media to correct the record quickly. Early in the investigation, on Wednesday last week, news outlets such as CNN incorrectly reported that an arrest had been made. The story appeared at 1:46 p.m. ET on CNN's blog and was tweeted minutes later. Tens of thousands of social-media posts quickly shared the news of the arrest, and word was spread further through cable-news broadcasts. This was one of many inaccurate reports that spread across the Internet.

Within the hour, the Boston Police Department Twitter handle (@Boston\_Police) posted a tweet correcting the media's claims. The tweet generated more than 10,500 shares on Twitter, ensuring that the mistaken arrest report lost steam. The episode es-

established the BPD's social-media channels as the go-to source for authoritative information that transformed media coverage of the bombing investigation from that point forward. News outlets even took to re-tweeting the police department's posts.

Boston police didn't just use social media to correct errors. The department recognized that the news media were starved for information as the investigation continued. The traditional periodic law-enforcement news conference isn't enough to feed the news cycle—which is not so much 24/7 as 1,440, the number of minutes in a day.

Media outlets hunger for news updates, videos and short 140-character quotes to fuel their own social and digital channels. The flow of information from the Boston police discouraged the media's overreliance on unofficial sources.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the bombing investigation was the way that law enforcement employed social media to actually aid the investigation, not merely to manage the news and inform the public. Moments after photos and video of the Boston Marathon bombing suspects were posted to FBI.gov, the government's website nearly crashed from the crush of visitors. BPD posted all of the official photos and video to social media to compensate for the lagging website and to encourage their online distribution. Many people shared these posts online—with some posts re-tweeted 16,000 to 17,000 times.



Reuters

Each one of these "shares" on social media increased the visibility of the pictures and video that were key to identifying and locating the suspects—and to letting the suspects know that their images were everywhere. That knowledge is likely what prompted the Tsarnaev brothers to bolt from hiding.

The ubiquity of social media had its unsettling effect on law enforcement agencies during the investigation. Police departments across the country are by now well aware that criminals use social media too, whether bragging about crimes on Twitter or even posting YouTube videos that ultimately prove helpful to prosecutors.

Early Friday morning, some Boston-area residents began sharing details of the investigation they gathered by listening to police scanners on social media. As the search continued, people also posted photos and videos marking the location of law enforcement. These folks might have thought their posts were harmless or even somehow helpful, but they could have provided suspects with information they needed to evade law enforcement. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, after all, was on Twitter in the days following the bombing.

During the search for Tsarnaev, Boston police went on social-media outlets to post requests that the public "not compromise officer safety/tactics by broadcasting live video of officers while approaching search locations." Almost instantly, major media outlets from MSNBC to Fox News began admonishing their on-air guests to avoid mentioning specific details of the hunt.

The Boston Marathon bombing was a horrific crime, but it offered many lessons for law enforcement and for the country. Some of them were reminders of what we knew too well in the aftermath of 9/11—that militant Islam, for instance, wants to spill blood in America by any means possible. But some of the lessons were new ones. Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis and his department set a social-media standard for security emergencies that will benefit law-enforcement agencies everywhere, and the people they serve.

*Mr. Chertoff, former secretary of Homeland Security in the George W. Bush administration, is chairman of the Chertoff Group, a security-advisory firm. Mr. Lawrence, chief global digital strategist for Burson-Marsteller, was a spokesman for the military coalition in Iraq during the Bush administration.*

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