



The Boston Marathon Bombing and Faster Breaking News

By Christopher B. Hopkins

Fifty years ago, Americans were jolted from pre-Thanksgiving festivities by fateful “breaking news” from Dallas, Texas – only to actually witness, days later, Oswald shot to death on live television.

Anyone alive in November 1963 recalls how they learned of the news. The instant media, prolonged coverage, and live images made everyone spectators to history, if not seemingly participants. Since then, with 24-hour news coverage, nearly every major news event has been immediately accessible and visible to the public: from President Reagan’s attempted assassination to Columbine to September 11 as well as a cavalcade of natural disasters and reactor meltdowns. We see everything live and instantaneously.

The recent Boston Marathon bombings, however, may prove to be a defining moment in how, *and how fast*, Americans obtain “breaking news.” This is not the first time people have flocked to the internet for news. But the Boston attack was the first time where users, by massive numbers, culled and researched crowd photos to assist in the search; witnessed gunfire through YouTube clips; felt the military-like presence of law enforcement in Watertown via Instagram photos; exposed the suspect’s social media profiles; and monitored the police investigation on Twitter and U-Stream better and faster than CNN or Fox News could report. As the events unfolded in Boston, the explosion of the Information Age was mixed with a new accelerant.

On April 15, 2013, two bombs exploded near the marathon finish line along Boylston Street. Still and video footage were available from witnesses, broadcast, and security cameras. In short, there were “several Zapruders,” according to one analyst, who referenced the Kennedy assassination. Surprisingly, in these situations, there is no law enforcement standard for acquiring still images and video from the public.

Despite lacking organizational structure or forensic training, internet denizens took to sites like Reddit and 4chan to collect still and video images of the bombing sites and organize the content into “photo dump compilations.” See <http://bit.ly/106iYx> Working through forums like “FindBostonBombers,” users examined, cropped, enlarged, and notated pictorial evidence of movement in the crowd. This was a sophisticated undertaking: a public Google Document entitled “Boston Bombing Info Spreadsheet” tracked scene/evidence photos and suspect summaries with hyperlinked citations. See <http://bit.ly/106iRWq> By crowdsourcing the painstaking task of tracking people in busy photos, internet groups narrowed in on the two suspects and had compiled photographic evidence of their escape (without bookbags) by Wednesday. The FBI, meanwhile, announced its theories and photographs a day later.

By Thursday evening, YouTube videos of shootouts between the police and suspects appeared, giving a personal angle to events which were not always shown on TV. See <http://bit.ly/13D8yRy> and <http://bit.ly/13D84ek> When law enforcement tracked the second suspect into Watertown, photos from residents (ordered to remain indoors) flooded to Twitter, Tumblr,

and Instagram, giving a citizen’s perspective of what it is like to have military-style vehicles and hundreds of officers patrolling neighborhoods and entering homes. See <http://bit.ly/13DanOs> and <http://bit.ly/13DaCZY> or search for “Watertown” on Twitter; on the left column, click “top photos” or “top videos.”

While the search for the suspects continued into Friday, Bostonians posted to Twitter their firsthand accounts of the city-wide lockdown. Twitter was ablaze with trends like “#watertown” or “#bostonbombing” (“#” is a hashtag which signals that the attached word is the focal topic; as more people use a particular hashtag, you can see what topics are “trending”). Meanwhile, amateur sleuths discovered that user “@J_tsar” was one of the suspects and that he had been posting to Twitter after the attack. See <http://bit.ly/13DdHJr> Others found one of the suspect’s Amazon shopping list. See <http://amzn.to/XOZapB> Finally, users unearthed the profile of one brother on the Russian-equivalent of Facebook. See <http://bit.ly/13DdBK>

You can use the internet to monitor police scanners. During the manhunt, it was fascinating to hear Boston police operations. In the moments leading up to the capture of the second suspect, the police scanner provided riveting discussions from perimeter law enforcement about negotiators and flashbang grenades (CNN mentioned it 10 minutes later). On Twitter, a search for “#scanner” would keep you updated; for future events, listen to scanner audio via U-Stream, Broadcastify, or via iPhone apps like TuneIn, 5-0 Radio Police Scanner, Cop Radio, or Emergency Radio.

This is not to say that news from social media is superior to professional journalism. It is simply faster. You must be selective in what you believe and even more discerning about re-publishing. Early information can be deceiving and even reporters suffered some embarrassing moments. The tragedy in Boston hopefully will lead to efficient procedures for law enforcement to collect video; the public should have a way to quickly upload content directly to police or FBI. Moreover, since people were posting police scanner activity onto Twitter during the manhunt, there may be some changes going forward in what the police broadcast unencrypted. Finally, albeit less seriously, a memo must go out to YouTube videographers to stop shooting in portrait mode or, worse, narrating during their videos. If Abraham Zapruder could figure out how to focus a two-pound 8 mm camera for 26 seconds, it should be no problem fifty years later with a five ounce iPhone.

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