

# Boston: just another day in the news revolution?

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/04/19/boston-just-another-day-in-the-news-revolution/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/04/19/boston-just-another-day-in-the-news-revolution/)

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TV is Twitter is Reddit is...

What does the Boston bombing tell us about how news is changing? This post was written while it was happening, so it's a first draft and I welcome further thoughts and feedback.

It was an exceptional story but I think it shows us some key trends:

1. Twitter is now central
2. Different platforms have different editorial values – even within the same news organisation
3. 'Crowd-sourcing' is incredibly active, but still ill-directed
4. Social media is 'maturing'
5. The public now has access to more and, arguably, better

sources than ever before

6. There's more 'noise'

Please read on.



Paul Bradshaw's original news diamond

Seven years ago when Twitter was just another start up, media academic Paul Bradshaw created [a model for the 21st century newsroom](#) which showed how 'news' is now produced in a multi-platform, multi-source process. I adapted the idea behind the model as a scenario for my book [SuperMedia](#) which described the arrival of networked journalism. We've all tried to update those models in response to developing news practice, and the Boston Marathon bombing story shows how far we've had to move.

This morning I woke up to news that Boston police were involved in a shooting in the district of Watertown just days after the marathon bombing. I won't give [the detailed event or news narrative](#) but tapping into the coverage makes clear how different platforms now have varied concepts of what news is. I think this is a good thing if it means we get choice. Though it must confuse the audience at times and it must also be a constant problem for journalists.

Old instincts die hard. Most news journalists want to be 'first' as well as right. I tweeted this morning:

"Intersting [sic] that [@BBCr4today](#) is ignoring Boston breaking news. Provides real choice I guess but shows its not really a news programme."

## Different Kinds of News

A couple of loyal BBC journalists retorted variously that Radio 5 was reporting the news in more detail and that Today had mentioned it (before moving on to other stories such as a feature on a very old tree). Other listeners replied to me on Twitter that they would rather Today waited and got it all 'right'. I would agree. When I said 'not really

a news programme' I should have said, a 'different kind of news programme'.

The BBC is in an unusual position in that it has more platforms than any other journalistic organisation that I know. It also has a deliberate policy of verification rather than just speculation/narration. So despite an excellent newsroom social media operation it is always going to feel slightly 'behind' on stories like this. Some people – perhaps a majority – might prefer that:



One of the questions the BBC face is how far they go – for example on a live blog on their website – to try to 'curate' the information breaking in other sources such as Twitter or other media organisations. Interestingly, they were nearly an hour behind the Telegraph in setting up a live blog. That's just a technicality, but perhaps symptomatic of different editorial policies?

### **Making Decisions**

Of course, it's not just the BBC. All journalists have to make decisions according to their editorial policies and resources. Channel 4 News' Faisal Islam who is in the US was retweeting various local journalists who were tweeting lines from the scene. He included the odd caveat, but in effect he was being that programme's reporter + social media outlet.

So we saw this morning how this works.

Twitter runs ahead. Sometimes with [false leads](#) or dead ends as well as good ones. Twitter also has different standards. The two suspects in photos released by the police were both named.

But if you followed local journalists like @GarretQuinn @efleischer and @sethmnookin you got immediate updates from the scene that were as reliable as any immediate reporting can be. Plus there were outlets such as the [big local paper](#), the Globe and, of course, twitter updates from the authorities including the Boston Police Commissioner. It's difficult now to believe that some people actually mocked Greater Manchester Police when they first went on Twitter a few years ago.

This might well be the moment when open forums such as [Reddit](#) and 4 Chan claim a journalistic role. Not everyone would approve of them naming suspects ([including people who were certainly not involved](#)) but the crowd-sourcing on those sites around the imagery has been fascinating. Though as [Charles Arthur points out](#) – incorrect. They recovered some ethical credit when they [came out with a full apology](#).

They also linked to sites that helped people send in evidence to the police. Whether all this amateur investigative journalism helped or hindered the police we don't know yet. I suspect the FBI had plenty of their own material to work with and [enough intelligence analysis](#) in-house.

But I do think that there is now evidence that [social media is maturing](#) and that contributors realise that expertise and reliability will get more sustained attention as opposed to mindless speculation. If you look at those sites it's interesting how self-critically, self-correcting they can be.

### Social Media Disintermediated

And even social media has been disintermediated. By that I mean short-circuited or by-passed. In America, at least, the public can log onto [websites](#) that scan the radio communications of fire, police and other emergency services so you can hear them talking to each other live about the operation. Of course, what they say is not verified – [a police officer may also get things wrong](#) – but it is a direct source.



No-one and no news is perfect

So in the face of some [social media triumphalism](#) how did traditional media fare?

Rolling TV (and radio) news scoops up the information from official and social media sources and in its desire to fill the gaps between real incident and information speculates, often inane. But the [one big glaring rolling news mainstream media mistake at CNN](#) appeared to be a traditional editorial balls-up where misinterpreted tips from (unreliable) traditional sources were over-reported, on air.

At least one newspaper, the New York Daily Post screwed up big time by implying an innocent person was a suspect – ironically, by using an image taken from Reddit.

But there has been some outstanding reporting by mainstream media both of the actual events and of the surrounding social media noise.

Other parts of 'legacy' traditional media have been revitalised by social media developments. Some stalwarts of the US networks such as [Pete Williams at NBC](#) were well-briefed by their contacts and erred on the side of caution while staying very close to the front edge of breaking news. [He wasn't infallible](#) but he was generally sound.

Everyone says that Twitter is the new news agency feed – but old fashioned news agencies like Associated Press are now in the public eye thanks to Twitter itself. Before only journalists had access to AP or Reuters, now those news suppliers communicate direct with the public and can hit home with stunning revelations like this one this morning when AP seem to have got the critical fact first on identification of the suspects:



The whole point of Breaking News is that it is by its very nature confused, provisional, uncertain, contradictory, and developing. The wonderful New York Times, like the rest of the media, told us that the suspects had robbed a 7-Eleven convenience store. Later, it turned out not to be true:

*Note: The Massachusetts State Police are backing off an earlier assertion that the two suspects had robbed a 7-Eleven in Cambridge. "The most accurate statement is that we're investigating whether they were involved in an armed robbery in a 7-Eleven," said Dave Procopio, a spokesman for the state police. "Initially we came out and confirmed it for you, now I want to go back and double check it," he said. "I want to qualify that further to say we're double-checking."*

Real life is messy. It always was. It's just that in the past, you the public didn't see it until it became Normal News. Now you can, almost, see for yourselves.

### Known Unknowns

This means that journalists (and that includes those people on Reddit) have to develop a new language of what we know and don't know that makes Donald Rumsfeld's [famous ontological aphorism](#) look positively simplistic. They have to explain to a public who have access (potentially) to everything why their version of events is partial. There's

no shame in being open in a transparent world.

A good example of this was the Sky News presenter saying to her correspondent that many people were asking Sky on their social media what the suspects names were – he explained that they have not been confirmed officially so they won't repeat them on air.

But the best example of excellent mainstream media news reporting has to go to an unexpected (for me) source – local Boston TV news. ABC affiliate WCVB led by brilliant reporter @SeanKellyTV had the best picture, the detail and the local touch plus they handled all the verification and proportionality issues with care without losing the drama. A great advert for local TV and thanks to the Internet, I can follow them from London.



### More Journalism, Not Less, But Better

I think that this all shows that we need more good journalism not less. The folks contributing on Reddit aren't trying to replace CNN. But both need to pay attention to each other and improve what they do. We have the right to communicate but we also have responsibilities to do it well.

From the journalists' point of view it means that newsroom systems have to be re-calibrated. This means in a practical way they have to be able to respond to multiple sources and speeds of information. In an ethical sense, they have to set parameters for what they will report – even conditionally. It may be that the same news organisation will do this differently on its different platforms. A live blog will be able to cite more sources than a news bulletin, for example.

### Noise Or Falsehood?

At the moment a lot of newsrooms are still struggling with this. As [this piece indicates](#), there are sometimes some grey areas where journalists with a more social media background might have different values to the mainstream media organisation they work for. Reuter's Matthew Keys was accused of simply re-tweeting everything he saw on twitter or TV without checking. His response was that those who follow him realise that his information is less reliable:



I can understand that his attitude might make Reuters nervous as this is not generally their company policy as I understand it.

Yet, this will always be subjective. Let me give you an example from over a decade ago. I was programme editing and putting the final touches to the headlines when my political editor rang up just a few minutes before we went on air. She had a scoop. 'Have you got that confirmed from another source?' I asked. She responded magisterially: "If I believe that this one source is reliable then that is good enough for you" she said.

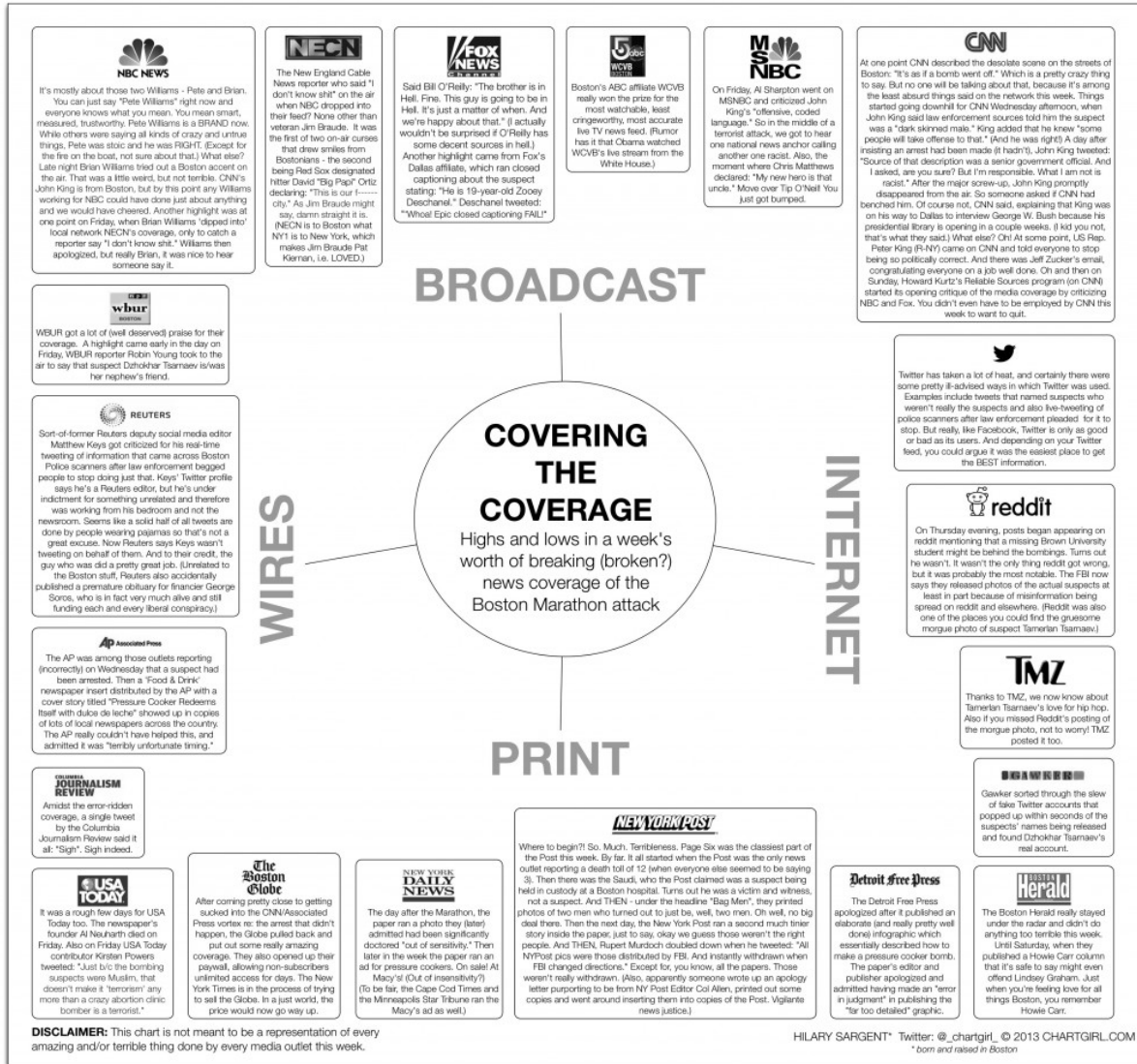
### Start Making Sense

In a sense this is nothing new. Journalists have always been what Philip Trippenbach – in [this post from 2008](#) –

calls 'sense-makers'. But [as I have discussed elsewhere](#) at some length, it is different. News on any platform is now, in effect, continuous and networked. So the journalist is not just a packager, or discoverer, or reporter. They are also a connector or curator. [Skills](#) and values as well as process will have to adapt. This goes even for platforms like the Today Programme that might chose not to 'roll' with the news, as well as those like this [Guardian live blog](#) which makes a virtue of doing just that.

Update 2:

This was all beautifully visualised by 'chartgirl':



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