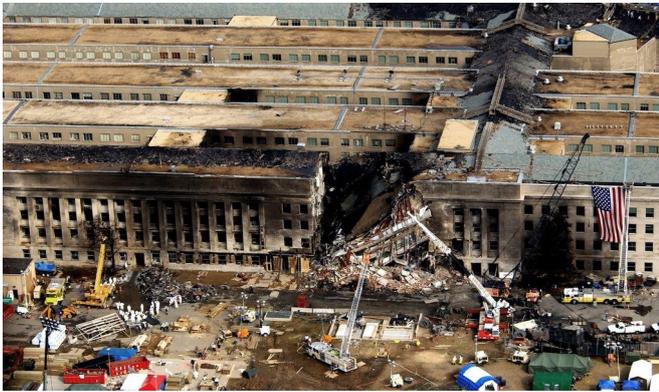


Using social media to weaken the wrath of terror attacks

14 November 2018



Terror attacks prove to be devastating, but recent counterterrorism research showed that using social media could lessen the post-attack wrath. Credit: Creative Commons - PxHere

Governments and police forces around the world need to beware of the harm caused by mass and social media following terror events. In a new report, leading counter-terrorism experts from around the world—including Michigan State University faculty—offer guidance to authorities to better manage the impacts of terror attacks by harnessing media communication.

"With social media, not only is the information immediate, but the public's access to information and conversations shape how an event is talked about," said Steven Chermak, MSU professor of criminal justice report contributor. "This can be dangerous when we can't discern fact from a panicked reaction."

The report, Minutes to Months, or M2M, assessed terror attacks in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, with expertise from MSU, Western University in Canada, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and was spearheaded by Cardiff University's

Crime and Security Research Institute, or CSRI.

By reviewing all the published research on the role of media and social media in the wake of [terror attacks](#), together with detailed case studies of specific incidents, M2M reveals insights on how media and social media coverage can increase the public harms of terrorism, and what works to mitigate such effects.

The M2M report provides recommendations to help authorities develop and execute strategies to manage the online fallout from a terrorist incident. The work was commissioned by the Five Country Ministerial Countering Extremism Working Group, which includes the governments of the UK, the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The research team found that [terrorist attacks](#) create shockwaves after the initial incident, as a wide range of voices compete through mainstream and social media. In fact, M2M found that communications after a terrorist incident often lead to a spike in hate crimes, extremism, and prompt damaging disinformation and rumors.

"People only know what they see or read, so the immediate panic social media—and then on the news—perpetuates rumors and creates fear. This is exactly what terrorists want," Chermak said. "The ongoing news in the days and weeks following attacks—and opinions and emotions through media—can continue the terror cycle."

Governments, police and others involved in public safety need to be ready to offer accurate, regular information to minimise negative fallout, the researchers said.

Terrorist violence, as the report explained, is intended to elicit intense and vivid reactions. Thus, by neglecting how to manage post-event situations is a current weak point in many governmental counter-terrorism frameworks.

The increasing volume of communication channels allows different groups to voice alternative interpretations of the same event, causing multiple narratives and accounts circulating in the post-event environment.

Martin Innes, director of the CSRI and lead author of M2M, recently issued a report that identified the systematic use of fake [social media](#) accounts spreading disinformation. The accounts, linked to Russia, amplified the public impacts of the four terrorist attacks that took place in the UK in 2017: Westminster Bridge, Manchester Arena, London Bridge and Finsbury Park.

"Over the past five years or so, both the mechanics and dynamics of terrorism and how it is reported via media sources, have altered dramatically," Innes said. "Over the same period, the logics of media and the information environment have been fundamentally transformed."

Because of these changes Innes believes that changing communication is the key to the post-attack wake of terror.

"Taking a pragmatic view, that despite the best efforts of police and security services, not all future plots will be prevented, developing an understanding of how any harms can be mitigated is an important undertaking."

Provided by Michigan State University

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