

Locus of Responsibility

When asked to view and explain their tweet actions, almost all of our participants provided some explanations that could be viewed as rationalizations for why they were not fully responsible for having shared rumoring tweets. Though we tried to reduce the stigma of this action (e.g. by sharing truthfully that one of our own researchers had shared the rumor as well), it is perhaps not surprising that having been put, to some extent, “on the spot,” these interviewees attempted to deflect some blame. However, these rationalizations also shed light on users’ perceptions for how online rumoring takes place and what roles they play in this rumoring.

From the interviews, we identified six distinct—though in places overlapping—perspectives on the “locus of responsibility” for sharing and correcting rumors.

Self: Taking Responsibility for Sharing/Correcting Rumors

Some participants expressed a sense of personal responsibility for posting the rumors—blaming themselves (at least to some extent) for not having verified adequately and noting concern about how their posts may have affected others.

Comment [1]: How many?

PP4: “This one was me and I was wrong. I had neglected to notice [how this information was not related to Les Halles]. My [colleague] came back online and said ‘Hey, we already tweeted that earlier today. It’s [not Les Halles]. I’ve verified that.’ I’m like ‘Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry.’”

As PP4’s quote shows, when a person draws the locus of responsibility inward, it can be uncomfortable. They may feel ashamed for what they view as an error—and a public one. They may also feel responsible for causing others to hear and share the rumor. At least two interviewees expressed significant distress about their rumoring activity.

Comment [2]: Check this number

WP1: “I was left with a sense of anxiety after the whole thing was over, and I feared I had needlessly alarmed or frightened people, and I worry about that event. I feel uneasy about it. I am not sure it is possible to avoid this kind of feeling, but it left me with a feeling of unease.”

WP1 describes his anxiety as being rooted in a sense of responsibility to those who may have been misinformed by his tweet. Here he positions the relevant “downstream” individuals as people who may have had a loved one on the flight, but this sense of responsibility was also seen to apply to other Twitter users who simply read and passed along his tweet—those had been drawn into the rumor, and perhaps their own later sense of discomfort, by his tweets.

For a few interviewees, this reflection and anxiety had a productive function—identifying and taking responsibility for their role in the rumor seemed to help reshape their idealized behaviors (what they would or should do in a similar situation in the future), perhaps leading to a permanent change in the user’s crisis verification and posting strategies.

Upstream User: “But I Heard it From <username>”

In many cases, participants were seen to place the locus of responsibility on the source of the information, whether a trusted news source or a friend. For example, PP3 had lived in Paris and had worked with one of the mainstream news outlets there. In explaining why she shared rumoring-affirming tweets about Les Halles, she explained that both were both retweets of major

news sources whom she thought she could trust. PP5 also noted the role of mainstream news outlets in propagating the rumor:

"[I tweeted] because of this person citing this. ... I probably should have been vague, but the fact of the matter is that when you see Liberation reporting it, I'm like 'OK'. It seemed much more real."

PP5's statement suggests that **his/her** trust in the information source (a media account) played a role in her choosing to share a rumor-affirming tweet. Interviewees who invoked this perspective deflecting responsibility to the source typically pointed the finger at trusted media outlets (in Les Halles). However, upstream sources can also include trusted friends or accounts that a user is following.

Downstream Users: "They Should Have Verified My Tweet"

A small set of interviewees placed the locus of responsibility on downstream users—their followers and others who might be reading and re-posting their tweets. In their interview responses, they excused their rumor-sharing behavior by suggesting that their audience should not be accepting their tweets as fact, but should be verifying this information themselves. PP9, the only interviewee from the Affirm-Only user group, described his rationale like this:

"If I retweeted a tweet that wasn't to anyone directly and then found out later on it was false, well then I found out later on that it was false. See, one of the problems I think in society is everyone just blames everything that's there on one of those that search out and seeks."

Crisis Events: "That's Just the Nature of These Events"

In rationalizing why they had shared a rumoring tweet, **several interviewees** suggested that rumoring is just a natural part of crisis events (as we described in the Background section of this paper). Many described their motivations for participation as trying to help other people by getting information out quickly. They noted the uncertainty and ambiguity in the information space and how it is difficult to discern good information from bad, truth from rumor. Some suggested that, in real-time tweeting of uncertain information, they sometimes encounter a trade-off: Is it worse to pass along this rumor (in the case that it turns out to be untrue), or to not pass along this rumor (in the case that it turns out to be true)? **[cite]**. Often, it seems, the default answer is tweet now and worry about it later. PP1 illustrates:

"To be honest with you, if thought it was an emergency I would still be bashing tweets out. ... If I thought that it was false then I would stop. But until I knew for sure, I would probably keep doing it until I realized it was not the thing to be doing."

This quote both suggests a rationale for posting rumoring tweets and demonstrates that corrective actions (by others) can help people clue in to rumors and perhaps adjust their own behavior. The latter relates to the final category of locus of responsibility described below: the crowd.

Twitter: "That's Just the Nature of Social Media"

Related to the nature of the crisis, especially along the axes of speed and uncertainty, is another locus of responsibility: the nature of Twitter. There was a common perception across almost all of the interviewees that the real-time nature of Twitter was both a huge advantage for

Comment [3]: Deleted: Another common element of participants' rationale was a perceived difference in responsibility for original information vs. derivative information (cite Chatter on the Red). Interviewees often thought the upstream source was to blame for derivative information they shared (like retweets and tweets with links to articles). On the other hand, interviewees felt users should take responsibility for original content such as their own observations or interpretations. PP6 explained it like this:

"I would not say it had any major impact ... but I was not personally contributing original insight into it. I was not on the scene or making little hot ticks on who the attackers might be or anything like that."

Comment [4]: How many?

Comment [5]: cite this... materials paper I think

Comment [6]: Is it okay to repeat a quote very rarely? This one is being used in the shift section.

Comment [7]: Only if we really, really need it. I'd suggest cutting it here and leaving it below. Let's leave a note here and I'll figure out how to do that.

it as a place to seek information during disaster and a major contributor to the spread of false rumors.

PP6: "I think you need to be aware of the imprecise nature of information and how it travels on social media."

For some, like PP6 above, this awareness was a cautionary point, something that one should take into account as they participate. But for others, this perspective could lead to more of an acceptance that these are just the limitations of Twitter, that you can't expect to it be what it's not. PP8 touches on this:

PP8: "I think most people, like me, they trust TV more than Twitter because when you're on Twitter you know that people post things that they have not checked before. That's why being a journalist is a job, because you checked your sources first, and this is not the case for Twitter. But when you know this it is fine."

For some interviewees, this attitude included a hint of resignation and an abdication of responsibility. However, for the journalists in our set, this came with a new set of competing responsibilities. All were quite reflective about the challenges of balancing journalistic expectations with the pressures of keeping up with and staying relevant within real-time news.

WP3: "The speed of these events is the most challenging aspect..to get it out and get it right. Or not get it out at all if it is not right. Or to get it out and correct it if you are wrong."

PP4: "So I just believe that information is traveling so much faster than it used to and we as journalists used to be the gatekeepers of the information, and you would not believe something until you saw it in the paper, but now people are starting to believe whatever they see on social media ... I think it's more worth it to say 'we're hearing this and we're going to try to find out if it's true or not', as opposed to pretending it doesn't exist and nobody online can see it when we know for a fact that they can."

In our interview, PP4 described at length how she and her colleagues are developing new journalistic practices to adapt to the nature of real-time news, seeking new middle ground between journalistic integrity and relevance.

The Crowd: "The Crowd Will Fix It"

The final category of locus of responsibility is not one of blame, but one of (perhaps misplaced) hope. Several participants provided explanations placing the locus of responsibility for rumoring and rumor-correction on "the crowd". Some expressed an implicit trust in the crowd, using it to help verify information, for example through triangulation (see PP6 below) or by waiting to see if a story "has legs" (see PP4 below):

PP6: "If there is something that I am really going to drive home or focus on ... I go with multiple independent verifications, if possible. So there is source A reporting that Y, and source B was completely independent also reporting that Y ... you can triangulate and see that maybe this is happening."

PP4: "We were pretty sure nothing had happened there at this point because it had just been too long without any more information from anybody..."

Comment [8]: How many used the crowd for verification? Active or passive?

Considering rumor corrections specifically, several interviewees expressed a more explicit trust in the crowd—that the crowd could be relied upon to identify and correct rumors. This is the idea of the “self-correcting crowd” manifesting in the crowd itself. This quote for PP7 sums up this point of view:

PP7 “I think [rumoring is] part of twitter and something we have to understand ... that’s going to happen. It’s like a free information sharing tool. Everyone has freedom of speech (hopefully) and hopefully if someone is spreading false information, that information is quickly debunked through other people responding and giving their own insight to something.”

This trust in the crowd encompasses several of the locus of responsibility categories listed above: Upstream Users, Downstream Followers, the Nature of Crisis, the Nature of Twitter. If interpreted broadly, almost every interviewee could be seen as placing at least some of the responsibility for rumoring (and the hope for it being correcting) with “the crowd”.