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Tweets heard round the world: Live reporting of bin Laden raid shouldn't be surprising, experts say

BY JOSEPH MARKS 05/02/2011

The fact that the CIA firefight outside Islamabad that took Osama bin Laden's life was reported live on Twitter should not shock anyone, experts told *Nextgov* Monday.

Nor should it be surprising that news of bin Laden's death leaked on Twitter before it was picked up by cable news channels and newspaper websites.

"The government doesn't get to manage information as much as it used to," said Jim Harper, the director of Information Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank. "I was actually impressed by how well held the secret was until 10:00 or 10:15 p.m., when the Twittersphere started broadcasting it."

Several people on Twitter and elsewhere online began speculating that bin Laden had been killed soon after the White House announced at 10 p.m. that President Obama would address the nation in a live television appearance. Keith Urbahn, chief of staff to former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, has been widely credited with breaking the news on Twitter.

The 27-year-old Urbahn tweeted around 11 p.m. Sunday: "So I'm told by a reputable person they have killed Osama bin Laden. Hot damn."

Urbahn's post was quickly re-tweeted and taken by many as confirmation of the kill.

Urbahn tried to inject a note of caution in rapid follow-up tweets, noting that his scoop "could be misinformation or pure rumor." But the re-tweets didn't stop, and soon cable news stations and newspaper websites were also reporting Bin Laden had been killed, citing anonymous sources in the Obama Administration.

Urbahn didn't respond on Monday to a *Nextgov* interview request, but he told *Politico* that his source for the initial tweet had been a TV producer trying to set up an interview with Rumsfeld.

After Obama announced around 11:30 p.m. that CIA agents had killed bin Laden during an attack on a compound in Abbottabad, 35 miles from the capital city of Islamabad, it became apparent that Sohaib Athar, who describes himself as a Pakistani IT professional and coffee shop owner, had live-tweeted the entire attack.

Athar described helicopters flying overhead and speculated about possible targets, but was unaware while the firefight was going on that it was directed at bin Laden. Soon after learning that Pakistani intelligence had confirmed that the al Qaeda leader was killed in the attack, he tweeted, "Uh oh, there goes the neighborhood :-/."

Cato's Harper described the bin Laden operation as an example of effective government secrecy rather than a lapse.

Between August 2010, when CIA officers first learned bin Laden might be hiding in the Abbottabad compound, and Sunday, when the attack

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began, the secret was closely held, with no evident leaks by a national security team that likely numbered just tens of people, Harper said.

"That's in contrast to everything else the government is doing in terms of secrecy, stuff that's held for very long periods of time and allegedly in secret though tens or hundreds of thousands of people are accessing it," he said. "That's how you get WikiLeaks."

Harper speculated that Obama's decision to announce the killing late Sunday night rather than waiting until Monday morning when he could get a larger audience was another nod to the difficulty of holding secrets in the Twitter age.

"News travels so fast worldwide now that as soon as the president's ready to speak and all the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed, you've got to go," he said.

George Washington University media and public affairs professor Steven Livingston described government fears about Twitter leaks as an outgrowth or successor to the so-called CNN effect, first discussed in the 1980s, a worry that live broadcasting by television stations would inadvertently tip off rival militaries or hostage takers about a military or police raid.

Ironically, the Twitter effect may be less dangerous than the CNN effect precisely because the capacity to share information is so much more widespread, Livingston said. It's much more likely, in other words, that bin Laden or his aides would be watching CNN International than following a Pakistani coffee shop owner's 140-character updates.

"In terms of what bin Laden knew in the last moments of his life, it wasn't from a live Twitter feed," Livingston said, "but from the helicopters overhead and people knocking on his door."

Price Floyd, formerly a Defense Department deputy undersecretary for public affairs and now vice president for digital media strategy at BAE Systems, said the Twitter reports of the bin Laden operation were most notable for how unexceptional they are.

"When I hear from people about things like this, they want to find a way to ensure that it doesn't happen again," Floyd said. "But it's going to happen. It's no longer significant or unusual. It's just the norm. It's just Sunday."

The most effective thing the government can do to mitigate the amount of sensitive information that seeps into the Twittersphere, Floyd said, is to train soldiers and government officials to be scrupulous about what they put into the public domain.

One of the military's greatest successes with social media, he said, is that, despite most soldiers having access to Facebook, Twitter and other social media, there hasn't been a significant report of a U.S. military operation scuttled by online loose lips.

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