

Social media: When tweets lie



Faked photo of flooded subway

The news was almost unthinkable, said *The Christian Science Monitor* in an editorial. The New York Stock Exchange, the world's financial hub, had apparently succumbed to last week's super-storm. "The trading floor is flooded under more than 3ft of water," Twitter user "comfortablysmug" informed his 6,000 followers. The only problem? "It wasn't true." "Comfortablysmug" was exposed as a serial liar—but not before the lie that the stock market was inundated had been re-tweeted over 650 times, and reported on CNN and in *The Washington Post*. That wasn't the only social-media fabrication as Sandy hit, said Cord Jefferson in *Gawker.com*. Rumors flew about a burning hospital in Coney Island, and doctored photos circulated of divers in a flooded subway tunnel, and of the Statue of Liberty being submerged by waves. What if firemen or police had risked their lives on the basis of Twitter's "hive of lies"?

In our new social-media ecosystem, said Alexis Madrigal in *The Atlantic.com*, disinformation of this kind is inevitable. When a professional journalist gets a story wrong, or simply makes things up, his or her career can be destroyed. On Twitter and Facebook, everyone's a publisher, and it's

both easy and rewarding to start rumors, pass on lies, or post jaw-dropping fake photos. You get lots of attention that way. Who cares if it's not true—especially if you're posting anonymously? Twitter's "savvy self-correction" sets the record straight soon enough, said John Herrman in *BuzzFeed.com*. Soon after the stock-exchange tweet went viral, the NYSE itself tweeted a picture of its untouched trading floor, and "comfortablysmug" was unmasked as Republican political consultant Shashank Tripathi—who had to resign from his job as a result. Yes, Twitter spreads rumors, but it is also a "fact-processing machine on a grand scale."

Social media can do more than debunk rumors, said David Carr in *The New York Times*. After I lost power during Sandy, the "little campfire of Twitter posts on my smartphone" kept me company, allowing me to keep close track of the storm, and of my friends in several states, in real time. Twitter became a font of "relentlessly and remarkably local" information about power outages and flooding in our towns, boroughs, and neighborhoods. Twitter has its flaws, but "there is no more important news than that."

FEMA: Big government in action

Hurricane Sandy has given Americans a powerful lesson in the benefits of big government, said Drake Bennett in *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

When the super-storm smashed into the Eastern Seaboard, the Federal Emergency Management Agency rushed into action. Within 76 hours, it had deployed over 2,270 disaster-relief personnel to several states, carried out 700 rescues, provided shelter to almost 11,000 people, and delivered more than 660,000 gallons of water and 1.5 million meals. Republicans, however, would prefer to stop FEMA from carrying out this lifesaving work, said Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*. House Republicans have proposed slashing the agency's funding by up to 40 percent, and have repeatedly insisted that "disaster relief should be turned back to the states and the private sector." That same philosophy led to FEMA's infamously inept—and deadly—response to Hurricane Katrina during the Bush years. When disaster strikes, we need competent government.

Even in responding to disasters, "bigger government isn't always better," said Michael Tanner in *The Wall Street Journal*. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that FEMA is plagued with "the same bureaucratic waste and inefficiency that beset

other government programs." After Hurricane Katrina, FEMA spent \$878 million on prefabricated homes, then left thousands of them to rot in storage lots because its own regulations barred them from being used on Louisiana's floodplains. FEMA's management may be better today, but a 2010 audit detailed 40 pages of waste, fraud, and cost overruns. "The presence of a hurricane is no argument against reforming incontinent federal spending," said Kevin Williamson in *National Review.com*. A far bigger storm is looming on the horizon—"a Category 5 fiscal hurricane" threatening to drown our already debt-soaked nation.

Ultimately, disaster relief *saves* the government money, said Matthew Yglesias in *State.com*. Storm-ravaged states can only get back in business if they quickly repair roads and power lines. "But that requires financing by an entity capable of rapidly financing expensive projects—i.e., the federal government." Without help from the feds, it might take years for New Jersey and New York to rebuild what they've lost—resulting in lost businesses and jobs, falling tax receipts, and a drag on the national economy. Cutting federal disaster aid to reduce deficits "is the height of penny-wise, pound-foolish thinking."

Wit & Wisdom

"In America, anyone can become president. It's one of the risks we take."
Adlai Stevenson, quoted in Politico.com

"Under pressure, people admit to murder, setting fire to the village church, or robbing a bank, but never to being bores."
Eisa Maxwell, quoted in Columnist and hostess The Wall Street Journal

"The people who successfully delude themselves seem happier than the people who can't."
Woody Allen, quoted in The Boston Globe

"The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple."
Oscar Wilde, quoted in the Columbus, Ohio, Dispatch

"No one is so eager to gain new experience as he who doesn't know how to make use of the old ones."
Novelist Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach, quoted in the Associated Press

"To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe."
Columnist Marilyn vos Savant, quoted in the Toronto Globe and Mail

"A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits."
Richard Nixon, quoted in the Montreal Gazette

Poll watch

■ 67% of Americans approve of how President Obama is handling Hurricane Sandy recovery efforts. 16% disapprove.
NBC News/The Wall Street Journal

■ 51% of Americans now believe that climate change causes more-frequent natural disasters, while 23% say it doesn't. 32% say Hurricane Sandy was connected to climate change, while 34% say it wasn't.
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