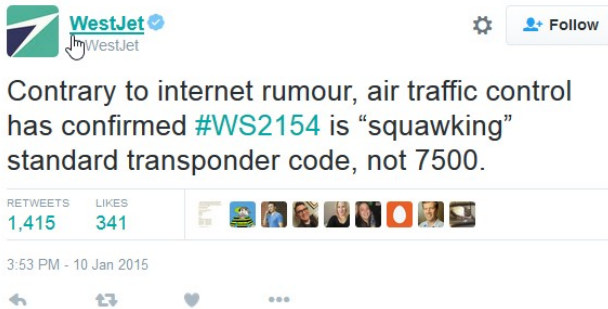


# The Twittersphere does listen to the voice of reason—sometimes

4 April 2016, by Jennifer Langston



This tweet from WestJet's official account quelled online rumors that one of its planes had been hijacked. Credit: @WestJet, Twitter

In the maelstrom of information, opinion and conjecture that is Twitter, the voice of truth and reason does occasionally prevail.

University of Washington researchers have found that tweets from "official accounts"—the [government agencies](#), [emergency responders](#), media or companies at the center of a fast-moving story—can slow the spread of rumors on Twitter and correct misinformation that's taken on a life of its own.

The researchers documented the spread of two online rumors that initially spiked on Twitter—alleged police raids in a Muslim neighborhood during a hostage situation in Sydney, Australia, and the rumored hijacking of a WestJet flight to Mexico—that were successfully quashed by denials from official accounts.

The research team from the Emerging Capacities of Mass Participation (emCOMP) Laboratory in the UW Department of Human Centered-Design & Engineering and the Information School's DataLab presented their findings in a [paper](#) at the

Association for Computing Machinery's Conference for Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing in March.

"A lot of emergency managers are afraid that the voice of the many drowns out the official sources on Twitter, and that even if they are part of the conversation, no one is going to hear them," said co-author Elodie Fichet, a UW doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication. "We disproved that and showed that official sources, at least in the cases we looked at, do have a critical impact."

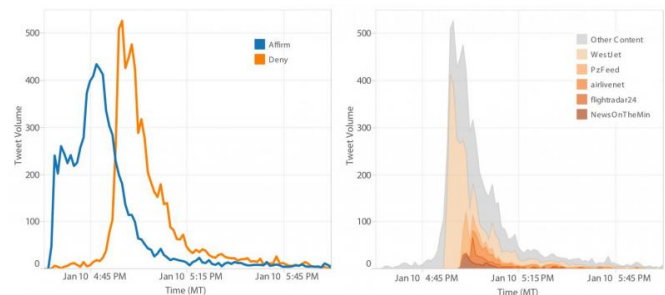


Figure 1. Propagation and Denial of WestJet Hijacking Rumor.  
Left image: Tweet Volume by Minute, Affirms vs Denials.  
Right image: Retweet Volume of Top Accounts by Minute, Denials.

The volume of tweets denying the WestJet hijacking rumor ultimately surpassed those that affirmed it (left). Many of those were retweets of a just handful of accounts (right). Credit: University of Washington

The case studies also offer lessons for organizations that may have plans in place to deal with an actual crisis, but haven't considered how to handle online rumors and communicate before they have complete information or know what is true.

"Oftentimes in a crisis, the person operating a [social media](#) account is not the person who makes operational decisions or who even decides what should be said," said senior author and emComp

lab director Kate Starbird, a UW assistant professor of human-centered design and engineering.

"But that person still needs to be empowered to take action in the moment because if you wait 20 minutes, it may be a very different kind of crisis than if you can stamp out misinformation early on," she said.

The UW researchers found that the vast majority of the tweets both affirming and denying the two rumors were retweets of a small number of Twitter accounts, demonstrating that a single account can significantly influence how information spreads. Much of the online rumoring behavior was driven by "breaking news" accounts that offer the veneer of officialdom but don't necessarily follow standard journalistic practices of confirming information.

The first rumor was one of many that spread during the "Sydney Siege" of December 2014, in which a gunman took 18 hostages at a chocolate café in Australia. A radio talk show host reported that federal police were raiding homes in the largely Muslim Lakemba neighborhood when, in fact, officers were on a previously scheduled tour of a local mosque.

Over a period of several hours, Twitter users posted 1,279 tweets related to the rumor. Of those, 38 percent affirmed the rumor, and 57 percent eventually denied it.

Nearly all of the affirmations happened in the first hour and 20 minutes, before police responded to the rumor, and the bulk of these stemmed from just five Twitter accounts that were widely retweeted.

Once the Australian Federal Police issued a single tweet—"@AFPmedia: Reports that the APF is conducting search warrants in the Sydney suburb of Lakemba are incorrect"—the tweet volume related to the rumor increased to one per second. Ninety percent were retweets of the single police account source, and all were denials. Affirmations of the rumor never resurfaced in a significant way.

The second rumor the team tracked was a possible hijacking of a WestJet flight from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Mexico in January 2015, which

generated more than 27,000 related tweets. It surfaced on Twitter after flight-tracking websites picked up what they believed was a "hijacked" code coming from the plane, which was likely caused by an instrument error on the ground.

Being Saturday afternoon, no WestJet communications employee was officially on duty. But one member of the company's social media team caught it from home about 20 minutes after the rumor the surfaced.

For the next 10 minutes, a growing crowd of users from "breaking news" accounts, aviation enthusiasts and others began tweeting about the signal code and a possible hijacking. While WestJet was close to certain that the signal was an error, company officials did not yet know for sure, because the plane was in final descent and direct communication was not allowed due to security protocol. As a WestJet employee explained in a later interview with the research team:

"The biggest question for us was: 'Do we respond now with almost confirmed information, or do we wait five minutes to get confirmed info? We chose, 'Let's get it out now,' and then five minutes later confirmed.'" The two WestJet denial tweets corresponded with a rapid drop in online chatter, and everything was back to normal within a couple of hours.

After that experience, WestJet decided to expand its inventory of precrafted tweet templates that do not require managerial approval and would be tweeted according to a specific protocol depending on how the issue is trending. This allows social media managers to respond to a fast-moving story and issue some type of official statement—even if complete information is lacking—before a situation escalates.

In today's information economy, it's important for emergency response agencies and other organizations to invest in the personnel and have an engaged social media presence before a crisis hits, Starbird said. And these two examples of online rumoring behavior demonstrate how that investment can pay off.

"Being online is really important, even if you don't want to be," Starbird said. "Avoiding social media channels because you don't want to be confronted with misinformation is a real danger for an organization. You're essentially opening up a space for information to be spreading without your voice being a part of it."

**More information:** [faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi...mera\\_Ready\\_final.pdf](https://faculty.washington.edu/kstarbi...mera_Ready_final.pdf)

Provided by University of Washington

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