

# Communicating in a Haze: the Challenges of Hybrid Media and Hybrid Threats in Crisis Communication

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# Crisis phases – the CERC model

(Reynolds & Seeger, 2005)

- Precrisis (risk messages; warning; preparation)
- **Initial Event (uncertainty reduction; self-efficacy; reassurance)**
- Maintenance (ongoing uncertainty reduction; self-efficacy; reassurance)
- Resolution (updates regarding resolution; discussion about cause; discussions about new risks)
- Evaluation (discussion of adequacy of response; consensus about lessons; new understanding of risks)

# Best practice: Timeliness

- Core tenet of effective crisis communications (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012; Coombs, 2007, 2015, etc)
- High demand for information in the uncertainty of the immediate aftermath
- Directly affected: adjusting (i.e. situational) and instructing (i.e. self-efficacy) information quickly
- Wider citizenry: situational information and sense-making
- Measured in minutes – golden window
- Prevents information voids

# Best practice: Message Control

- Absence of a quick response > other voices intervene
- Loss of credibility and authority is difficult to recover from (Lin et al., 2016)
- Other sources may promote inaccurate information, rumour, speculation, undermine the official narrative etc (Coombs, 2007); damaging the aims of crisis response (Veil et al., 2011)
- Therefore, important to 'steal thunder' (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012)
- Ongoing dialogue also vital, including acknowledgements of uncertainty/ambiguities to remain credible (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011)

# Challenge #1: Hybrid Media System

- However, social media produces an ‘avalanche’ of information that requires monitoring and response (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2013)
- Hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017)
- Potential for pro-social hybridity in crises, e.g. media crowd-sourcing, promotion of approved self-efficacy measures, etc
- Potential for ‘dysfunctional hybridity’ in crises: doctored ‘eyewitness’ media and testimony, social media accounts purporting to be genuine mainstream news accounts, bot-nets/troll farms, earnest citizens who amplify speculation, conspiracy theories, rumour, etc (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018)
- Much of the above (and the nature of their consequences) only possible in a *hybrid* media system

# Challenge #2: Hybrid Threats

- European Commission: “the mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and unconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare. [...] Massive disinformation campaigns, using social media to control the political narrative or to radicalise, recruit and direct proxy actors can be vehicles for hybrid threats” (2016, p. 2)
- Disinformation – raw materials for misinformation and distrust of official response among citizenry
- Misinformation often regarded as ‘self-correcting’ (e.g. Andrews et al., 2016; Fowler, 2017; Johnson, 2018, etc)
- In a CBRN crisis? Unlikely to be effective quickly enough (Arif et al., 2017; Jong & Dückers, 2016; Vosoughi et al., 2018)

# In combination

- Actors (human and non-human) producing dis/mis-information in combination with vulnerable media infrastructure combine to produce opportunity and motive to those who wish to disrupt an effective crisis response
  - Some evidence already of this (CREST, 2017)
- The incident phase already crucial – now an intensification in the importance of this phase

# Case Study: Birling Gap

## 27 August 2017

- An “**unknown haze**” hits East Sussex beaches between Eastbourne and Seaford at approx. 4:45pm-5pm.
- 150 people treated at hospital for stinging eyes, sore throats and vomiting.

## 28 August 2017:

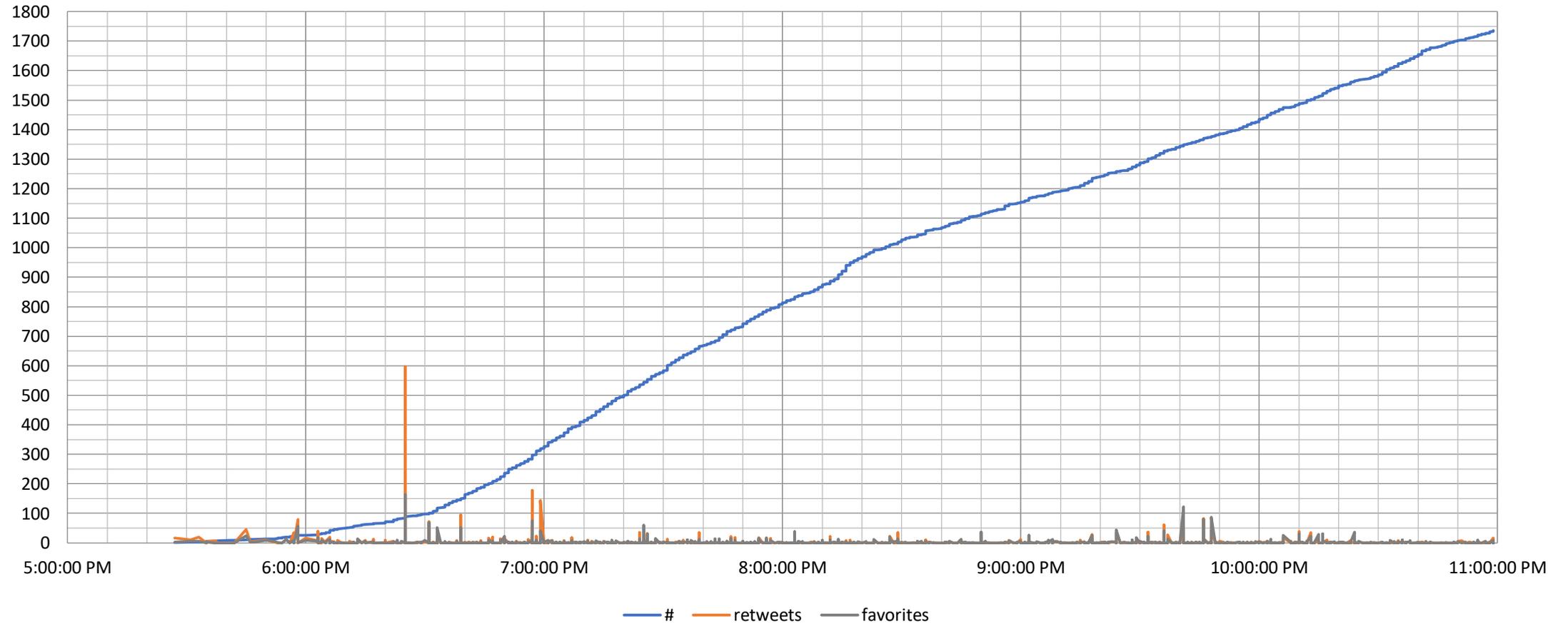
- Agencies begin to attempt to establish the cause of the gas, initially reported in news media and social media accounts as chlorine (based partially on eyewitness accounts).
- Fire and Rescue Service say in response that it is ‘extremely unlikely’ that it was chlorine.

## 8 December 2017:

- Government launches a review of protocol in the emergency response to such incidents, examining whether responders should be required to take air samples.
- Dawn Whittaker, chief fire officer for East Sussex Fire and Rescue says “In the current climate, **these sorts of things could be deliberate and potentially harmful**, so we just need to sharpen up”.



# Findings: Timeliness



# Findings: Message Control

Host	Frequency	Percent
bbc.co.uk	299	29.6%
news.sky.com	90	8.9%
theguardian.com	89	8.8%
reuters.com	47	4.6%
telegraph.co.uk	44	4.4%
thesun.co.uk	30	3.0%
castwb.com	25	2.5%
independent.co.uk	20	2.0%
kentonline.co.uk	18	1.8%
metro.co.uk	17	1.7%
rt.com	15	1.5%
reddit.com	15	1.5%
dailymail.co.uk	13	1.3%
eastbourneherald.co.uk	13	1.3%
express.co.uk	12	1.2%
mirror.co.uk	12	1.2%
huffingtonpost.co.uk	12	1.2%
apple.news	11	1.1%
standard.co.uk	11	1.1%
dailystar.co.uk	9	0.9%
other domains (105)	209	20.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1011</b>	

# Findings: Message Control

<i>Content Categories</i>		<b>N</b>	<b>% of all tweets</b>
<i>Information</i>	Advice	97	<b>5.6%</b>
	Requests for Information and questions	92	<b>5.3%</b>
	Situational Information	1221	<b>70.3%</b>
<i>Discussion</i>	Criticism of media or public response	12	<b>0.7%</b>
	Criticism of response	15	<b>0.9%</b>
	Criticism of rumour	6	<b>0.3%</b>
	Querying official account	11	<b>0.6%</b>
	Rumours, jokes, memes, meta-commentary	151	<b>8.7%</b>
	Speculation about cause of event (incl. intentionality)	96	<b>5.5%</b>
<i>Personal and Affective</i>	Expressing emotions (e.g. disbelief, fear, etc)	45	<b>2.6%</b>
	Expressing sympathy, support and thanks	40	<b>2.3%</b>
	Discussion about (potential) impact on other places	7	<b>0.4%</b>
	Personal narrative (e.g. eyewitness accounts and images, symptoms)	157	<b>9.0%</b>

# Implications

- Message control relatively high even on social media
- However:
  - inherent advantages not always taken
  - loss of control need not be widespread to be problematic (e.g. general loss of trust in authority sources, secondary impacts on hospital response, etc)
- Ever-increasing intensification of incident phase
- Proliferation in number of stakeholders/voices
- Motive and opportunity for belligerent actors