

“Rumor has it” – rumors during terrorist attacks and the role of emergency responders

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Recent years have shown us that more and more rumors, misinformation and disinformation is circulating during emergency situations. People use rumors to compensate for information and knowledge gaps to explain the event and for sense-making. But, rumors may even cause confusion, disorder and increase the anxiety of the public. WhatsApp and Facebook have drastically sped up the pace of rumor proliferation during emergencies, and especially throughout terrorist attacks. This participatory research was conducted in real-time to follow and trace the rumors that spread during the search and rescue military operation of three young youths kidnapped from a bus station in the West Bank by a terrorist organization. After the kidnapping a strict gag order was issued, causing interest in alternative sources of information and using backchannels to communicate. A total of 13 rumors circulating on WhatsApp were collected, and 69% of them were verified as true. Even rumors that were found to be false included at least one piece of information that was true. The research found that when emergency authorities share unconfirmed information, it is perceived as more credible than information spread by citizens. During the operation, official representatives did not correct or refute any rumors. Locating the source of a rumor is challenging and thus it is important to actively investigate rumors in real-time to locate the source.