

Cyberattack Community Comment Mike Goldsby, April 24, 2013

Last week, everyone was on edge because of the terrorism at the Boston Marathon. In the middle of that event, the Associated Press Twitter account posted that two explosions occurred in the White House and that President Barack Obama was injured. This news went out to nearly 2 million followers. The Twitter account was suspended minutes later. The account had been hacked and the news report was a hoax.

The false message continued to exist with over 4,000 people passing the word to others. The Dow Jones Industrial average instantly lost more than 140 points. Some of that drop was initiated by automated trading.

A group called the Syrian Electronic Army claimed credit for the hack.

Even though it was a lie, it became a reality for just an instant, because the news media reported it. And the media made a number of errors covering the Boston bombings, because they chose to speculate rather than report what they knew.

CNN seemed to be the leader in inaccurate reporting. They reported there were five additional unexploded bombs. They reported that the police had shut down cell phone service. Turns out cell phones didn't work because of the sheer volume of calls.

The New York Post kept reporting 12 dead and posted a photo of an innocent man, labeled as a suspect.

Fox News, Associated Press and the Boston Globe all reported that dark skinned males were in custody and being deported. They also named an innocent man as a suspect, and his family got harassed. In the long run, this probably doesn't matter much to you or me. But it really matters to the guy who was falsely accused.

Clamoring to be first, right or wrong, can promote false news. A correction later does not always undo a false impression. And the media didn't seem very interested in making corrections, let alone apologizing for the error.

David Westin, former President of ABC News, said "It used to be you would go on the air and make a formal retraction." Now, he says, the sheer volume of news comes so fast the media just move on and keep reporting.

So, with print and broadcast media, let the buyer beware. Or at least let the consumer sort the news out. All my criticisms aside, I pay attention to both print and broadcast media and appreciate being informed.

Social media and the Internet are playing an increasingly important role in events like the Boston Bombing. It is bizzare to me that the two terrorists could be radicalized in part by on-line al Qaeda propaganda. Or that they could learn how to assemble bombs from a website. Photos from surveillance cameras and cell phones helped narrow down the suspects. Their photos were posted on the Internet and the Boston Police began receiving 3,000 tips an hour. This worldwide attention may be part of what caused the suspects to go on the run.

The US is likely to face situations like this again and it underscores the importance of timely, accurate communication.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community comment.