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### **Do social media transform journalism?**

A case study of the Tarik Z Twitter storm

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# Do social media transform journalism?

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## Abstract

*The scholarly literature about the potential of social media to open up the news production process to civic journalism has emerged in the context of the widespread proliferation of social media on the one hand, and the restricting conditions of professional journalism on the other. While some maintain that social media facilitate the rise of civic journalism, others assert that civic journalism is a marginal phenomenon and that professional journalists dominate news production on social media. In this article, we aim to contribute to this literature about how social media might transform journalism. We focus on the curious case of Tarik Z, a young man who disturbed the Dutch evening news by breaking into the news studios and demanding airtime to “address the nation”. We will analyze the huge Twitterstorm this crisis caused with a range of social media analytics and content analyses. Based on these analyses, we will demonstrate how in instances where professional journalists take the lead in the news production process on social media the kind of news they produce online can be guided by alternative journalistic values.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

On January 29 2015, minutes before the start of the Dutch evening news at 20:00, an apparently armed man broke into the news studios in the city of Hilversum and took a guard hostage. This “Tarik Z” claimed that he was a member of a wider team who had placed radioactive explosives throughout the country, and demanded airtime to tell the nation “matters that questioned our current society”. The guard took the man to an empty studio, telling him that he would get his airtime there. Meanwhile, the building was evacuated and the police arrived. At the beginning of the crisis, the channel displayed a screen reading “because of circumstances, no broadcast is available at this time.” When the channel came back, it immediately showed footage of the man wandering around in the studio, talking to the guard and being taken by the police. His gun turned out to be fake and he appeared to have acted on his own. Police called the situation safe at around 22:00.

One minute after the news was supposed to start, at 20:01, a first message joking about the disturbance was sent on Twitter, culminating by the end of the evening in over 75,000 tweets. These tweets form the subject of this article as they demonstrate and underpin a number of expectations of journalism in the social media era, particularly with regard to the involvement of “ordinary citizens” (i.e., people who are not professional journalists in their daily lives) in the news production and dissemination process. Our case study of the tweets demonstrates, first, how professional journalists, rather than ordinary citizens, take the lead in the production and dissemination of news they consider relevant and have access to. At the same time, our case study also shows how news on social media can be guided by alternative news ethics, even if that news is produced by professional journalists.

Our case study is particularly relevant in the context of current literature about the potential of social media to make journalism (more specifically, news production and dissemination as important facets of journalism) a more “democratic” product, made *for* and also *by* or *with* ordinary citizens. Technically, social media platforms enable ordinary citizens the possibility to act as “citizen journalists”, that is, to create, collect and disseminate news rather than being passive news consumers (Campbell, 2015), and thus overcome elite bias and other restrictions in traditional professional journalism (Peterson, 2007; Vliegenthart & Van Zoonen, 2011). There is, however, still much disagreement about the extent to which and how citizen journalism on social media occurs, and whether professional journalists also dominate news on social media.

Through our case study of the Tarik Z Twitterstorm, we will further examine the news production processes that underpin the discussion on the internet's potential to democratize journalism. By using social media analytics, we assess who the main producers and disseminators of the news about the Tarik Z crisis were. Furthermore, the construction of particular meanings of events or issues usually remains hidden to the outsiders of habitual news production. In this case, however, such meaning-making took place in public and in real time. Tracing the tweets through time thus enables a detailed reconstruction of how the story began, evolved and eventually settled down in a dominant interpretative frame. We demonstrate which tweeters created the main narrative, and how the content of tweets can be held to resemble an alternative to narratives and news ethics associated with professional journalism.

In the following two sections, we delineate the tenets of the literature on the organizational and cultural restraints in professional journalism, and how civic journalism may challenge those restraints via social media platforms. After outlining our method in the subsequent section, we discuss the results of our assessments of the origins of information and appearance of key sources, and the narrative and values that emerged from the tweets.

## 2 RESTRICTIONS IN PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Famously, in the 1970s, Gaye Tuchman (1973; 1978) described the daily production of print and television news as a process of "routinizing the unexpected". On the basis of an extensive ethnography of US news rooms, she firstly demonstrated that the requirement to publish daily news was made possible by anchoring news organizations and their journalists to specific locations where events could be expected to occur regularly. Hence, court rooms, police stations, government departments and a range of other institutions are the main places where news comes from; not because their news is more interesting or relevant, but because it is easier for a news organization to find and process. Secondly, Tuchman showed how the work routines in the news organizations produced a classification of newsworthy events according to their timing and duration. While journalists themselves would distinguish hard and soft news on the basis of their content, Tuchman argued convincingly that the distinction was based on the question as to how long an event would last, and how acutely it needed to be reported. Thus, a fire is hard news because it has a short time span, and is only relevant as news if it is reported immediately. Soft news concerns stories that have no immediate urgency to publish and can wait to fill holes of a slow news day. In sum, Tuchman's work showed how organizational solutions to the challenges of space and time by and large defined what could become news, and what would be left out.

## Do social media transform journalism?

Media@LSE Working Paper #47

As a result of these organizational routines, news comes mainly from the same kinds of official, institutional sources who not only get to say that something is going on, but also provide the primary definition of how it is to be understood. If and how media reproduce or resist these primary definitions are questions subject to ongoing research. Empirical evidence shows cases of news media somewhat passively following the primary definition of, for instance, law enforcement officials about crime (Welch, Fenwick & Roberts, 1997) as well as cases in which journalists contest the primary definition of police and legal sources (Schulenberg & Chenier 2014). Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) suggest that such contestations become especially likely when primary definers differ among themselves about the meaning of specific issues or events, and when alternative, credible sources are easily available.

In addition to the organizational routines and source availability, the professional values of journalism are a third factor that influences how news is selected and constructed. For journalists themselves, especially Western journalists, accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity and accountability are among the most widely shared values that keep political and commercial pressure at bay (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). However, critical scholars have demonstrated that some of these values may produce an additional bias in what can become news, and how it is presented. For instance, the focus on accuracy and the connected distinction between fact and opinion have been shown to work against information that is based on experience or feelings. Tuchman showed, already in 1978, that as a result journalists missed completely how the women's movement was mobilizing on the basis of shared experience rather than on the basis of facts about inequality. Similarly, many journalists do not consider the experience and feelings of oppression among marginalized groups like Muslims or black people as authoritative knowledge about Islamophobia or racism, especially in the absence of supporting facts and figures (Durham, 1998; Peterson, 2007). The value of impartiality leads to comparable omissions because of the need to first identify which the legitimate parties in a conflict are. For example, news reports about banning the burqa or niqab tend to ignore the voice of young Muslim women wearing such attire (Saharso & Lettinga, 2008).

The combined result of organizational routines, source requirements and professional values is that news is often "olds". It concerns new events but as the reports about these events are molded in familiar, predictable and easily applicable formats, they appear as a repetition of things that one has witnessed before. Conflicts and crises, evil and deviance, danger and threat, disaster and turmoil are all staple ingredients of the news, alleviated by an as predictable upbeat story about heroism and luck, funny animals and silly scenes. While each individual news report is presented as an "inverted pyramid", the overall story is told in a

linear way that begins with a disruption of an equilibrium, which is followed by attempts at finding a solution, and ends with a new equilibrium which makes the event then disappear from the news (Hartley, 2013). Evidently, some stories never seem to come to an end, while others emerge and disappear within a day. What kind of meanings or frames these stories carry is similarly the outcome of organizational routines, source requirements and professional values. Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen (2011) discuss in detail how frames arise from social and routinized processes in journalism in which there is little space for the individual agency of journalists, but much more for the interests of powerful institutional actors who may struggle for meaning among themselves. Kaplan (2008) speaks of “framing contests” in this respect. Whether or not social media may challenge such structural restrictions and the standardized forms of news production and output in journalism will be discussed in the next section.

### 3 SOCIAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

The scholarly discussion on the impact of social media on professional journalism has various currents. Hermida (2012) distinguishes between three focal points. First, the widespread use of social media has changed how news is *gathered*. Many journalists see social media users as sources that can provide eyewitness stories, pictures and videos, particularly in remote places or unexpected situations (such as natural disasters) where they are not present. Also, such information can be shared instantly and continuously through social media, which increases the speed of the news gathering process. Second, social media have impact on how news is *reported*. News stations and journalists generally have their own social media account to publish their stories. Stories are generally unfolded through quick and short updates, rather than as a finalized product at set times (as is usual in traditional reporting), which makes news reporting more fragmented. Third, social media also affect how journalists *promote* their news. For instance, journalists can use social media and other interactive features to build a community of “followers”, or they may send messages with a news link back to the website of themselves or their news station (see for an extensive review: Hermida, 2012).

A broader question is whether social media mobilize ordinary citizens into taking over some of the tasks of professional journalists, particularly as regards the production and dissemination of news. One part of the scholarly discussions about this issue explores the normative and conceptual boundaries of what journalism means and whether citizens are able to “do” it. This work tends to be critical in nature about the potential role of citizens in online journalism. Approaching journalism more or less as a distinct profession, it maintains, for instance, that ordinary citizens are generally not able to produce accurate and objective



reports, or that emotional and voluntary sharing and retweeting on social media undervalues the work and education of professional journalists (Campbell, 2015).

Alternative positions do not necessarily reject the idea that professional journalism has particular quality norms or assume that citizens, in their activities on social networks, aim to replicate the work of professional journalists or uphold their values, but are rather interested in exploring the meaning and structure of ordinary people's sharing activities online with potentially journalistic features and the interaction of civic journalism with professional journalism (e.g., Boyd, Golder & Lotan, 2010). One of the prominent issues that has been investigated in this framework is whether the internet, particularly social media platforms, can democratize the process of news production and dissemination by freeing it from the restraints and routines mentioned in the previous section, regarding news definition and selection, source dependency and journalistic values, and opening it up for the input of ordinary citizens. Particularly civic (micro-)blogs, such as Twitter and Weibo, are attributed the potential to facilitate the contestation of primary news definitions by official sources through the provision of alternative sources, and in doing so produce a wider variety of stories and perspectives in the news (Allan, 2009).

However, there is still disagreement about the extent to which and how such citizen journalism occurs, and what the journalistic value of citizens' input is. For instance, Lindner, Connell and Meyer (2015) indicate that professional journalists increasingly engage with civic journalism, and that much civic news does not differ significantly from traditional news in terms of elite bias (cf. Meraz, 2009; Rebillard & Toubol, 2010). Murthy (2011) suggests that citizen journalists do produce and consume their own news in the Twittersphere, but, eventually, news coverage of professional media outlets may have a more lasting impact on public opinion. In contrast, studies have also indicated that citizens have a strong impact on which news their networks consume via the links to news stories they share via social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook (Hermida, 2012). Bruno (2011, p. 9) speaks of a "Twitter effect" on news coverage, promoting, among other things, journalism that is "more oriented to the 'process' of news-making and more open to a diversity of sources than traditional mainstream coverage could produce today." In a similar vein, Deuze (2008, p. 12) contends that "contemporary journalism will have to come to terms with their audiences as co-authors or co-producers of the news. Instead of having some kind of control over the flow of (meaningful, selected, fact-checked) information in the public sphere, journalists today are just some of the many voices in public communication, including (...) citizens themselves through weblogs, podcasts, and using all kinds of other online publishing tools."

## Do social media transform journalism?

Media@LSE Working Paper #47

Our case study of the Tarik Z Twitterstorm is part of these ongoing discussions about how social media may transform journalism. We focus on Twitter as this medium has formed the locus of attention in the literature and for its high relevance for journalism,<sup>4</sup> and on the production and dissemination of news as primary facets of journalism. Our study comprises a number of innovative assessments, based particularly on the affordances of social media analytics. The large data samples that can be collected through social media scrapers yield an alternative and bigger picture of the presence and practice of journalism online, complementing the insights of extant research that is based on content analyses and surveys.

The presence of professional and civic journalism on Twitter depends, among other things, on the topic about which the news is and the “access” to news (Hermida, 2012). Therefore, and also considering the fact that professional journalists generally use Twitter intensively to disseminate their news (Hermida, 2012), professionals can be expected to form the main sources of the Twitter news about the Tarik Z crisis, which after all took place in the center of Dutch professional journalism. We will demonstrate how they functioned as the authoritative sources through an assessment of retweets and @mentions and via network analysis. Based on a longitudinal quantitative content analysis, we will also assess how they produced the main narrative and frames of the crisis. In addition, we will demonstrate how news on social media can be guided by alternative news values, even if that news is produced by professional journalists. We will assess those values through a qualitative content analysis of the tweets about the crisis of the most active and retweeted accounts.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://medium.com/@Haje/who-are-twitter-s-verified-users-af976fc1b032#.s2lhx4veh> (accessed February 7, 2016).

## 4 METHODS

### 4.1 Data Collection

Our analyses are based on the tweets that were sent on the evening of the Tarik Z crisis. The tweets were scraped by the software program Coosto. We collected tweets that were sent between 20:00 of the day of the crisis until midnight, and combined terms related to the location of the news broadcast and the news broadcast itself – such as “media park” (the Dutch national media center where the crisis took place and “NOS” (the name of the news channel that was targeted by Tarik Z)<sup>5</sup> – and a number of terms related to the crisis, such as (the Dutch words for) “hostage”, “weapon” and “radioactive”.<sup>6</sup> This strategy enabled us to separate relevant tweets from non-relevant ones; it is unlikely that people that mentioned a word from both sides of the query were not tweeting about the crisis. At the same time, this approach may have also yielded a number of false negatives: tweets that should have been collected for analysis, but are not. Because it is impossible to be sure how many tweets were actually sent that evening, we assume that the 75,000 tweets we found form an extremely large sample rather than that they necessarily are all tweets.

### 4.2 Sources

We analyzed the main sources of the Twitterstorm in three steps. First, we identified tweeters with the most retweets and @mentions as authoritative sources (either producers or disseminators) of information. Second, by looking at the network of tweeters, a picture of the centrality of specific accounts and sub-clusters can be established. We created the network layout with the Force Atlas algorithm of the network analysis and visualization software package Gephi (Jacomy, Venturini, Heymann & Bastian, 2014), with node sizes based on degree centrality (i.e. the number of incoming and outgoing relations), which is a basic measure for node centrality (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Using the modularity algorithm of Gephi (Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte & Lefebvre, 2008), we established which nodes and groups are more strongly connected to each other than to the rest of the network, and thus which accounts performed a central productive or distributive function in the network as a whole. Third, based on a longitudinal quantitative content analysis of the emergence and

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<sup>5</sup> The following search query with these terms was used: “media park” OR gebouw OR hilversum OR mediapark OR pand OR studio OR “acht uur” OR “nos journaal” OR achtuur OR journaal OR nos OR npo.

<sup>6</sup> The following search query with these terms was used: afgelopen OR afloop OR beelden OR journalist OR journalisten OR persalarm OR personeel OR portier OR regie OR regiekamer OR schakeltechnicus OR brief OR briefje OR eisen OR hackers OR hackerscollectief OR radioactief OR explosieven OR cyberaanval OR live OR televisie OR zendtijd OR “binnen gedrongen” OR agenten OR arrestatie OR binnendrong OR gijzeling OR indringer OR gek OR man OR verward OR pijnacker OR tarik OR terrorist OR nepwapen OR pistool OR wapen OR nepvuurwapen OR gewapend OR gewapende OR bewapend OR bewapende OR “wie is de mol” OR widm OR wieisdemol.

evolution of the most retweeted messages, we assessed which tweeters produced the dominant narrative and frames, and how these frames developed during the crisis (assuming that a narrative needs distribution through retweets in order to become known and accepted).

## 4.3 Ethics

We assessed whether standard ethical codes of journalism were present in the Twitterstorm through a qualitative content analysis. We focused on the accounts that had the strongest presence in the Twitter coverage, considering the times they were retweeted or @mentioned, and explored which news values could be identified in the texts, rather than searching deductively for the presence of a fixed set of codes. However, as is common in explorative approaches (Bowen, 2006), we relied on some “sensitizing concepts” that provided a “general sense of reference” and indicated “directions along which to look” (Blumer 1969, p. 148; in Patton, 2015, p. 545). The concepts that guided our analysis pertain to the traditional journalistic values of accuracy, independence, impartiality, humanity and accountability (see previous sections). We analyzed the tweets systematically, both individually and comparatively, through which we gained an insight into which tweets reflect which ethics and if and how those ethics differed among the sources. We demonstrate the manifestation of the most prominent of the ethics with concrete examples. Our discussion focuses, given our interest in the question as to whether Twitter changes journalism, on the occurrence of possible alternatives to the aforementioned values that are associated with professional journalism.

## 5 GENERAL PATTERNS

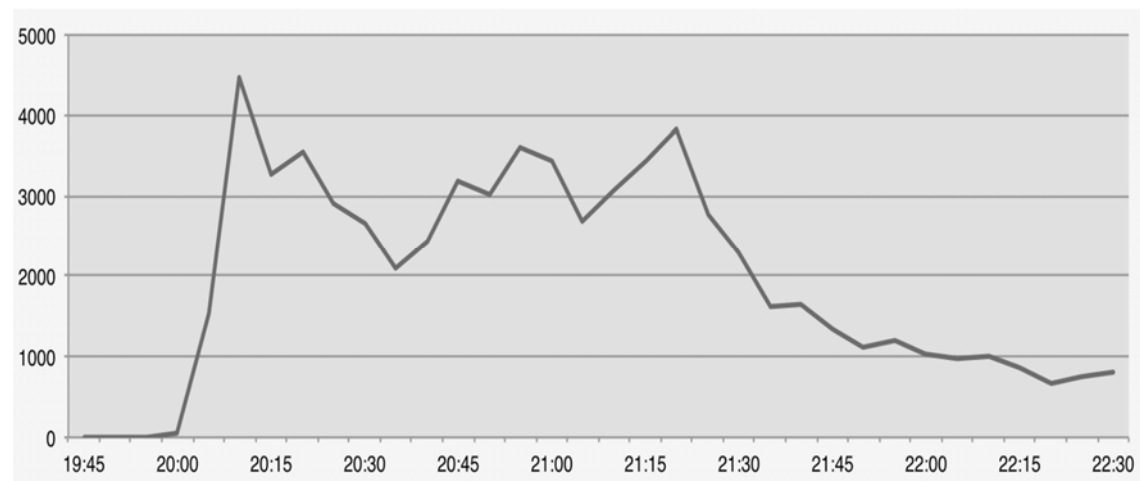
Before we discuss our results on the sources and ethics of the tweets, we begin with an overview of the overall patterns in the tweets. The first tweet about the crisis was sent at 20:01 by an unknown woman who joked about the disruption of the news and the possible involvement of the presenter of a reality show following the news: “Lol. No news because of circumstances. Is Rick sabotaging things behind the screens? #npo1 #Nosjournaal #widm.”<sup>7</sup> Quickly, however, it becomes clear that something serious is the matter. In total, between 20:00 and midnight of January 29<sup>th</sup> of 2015, about 35,000 different authors sent 75,000 tweets (including retweets). Most people, some sixty percent, sent one tweet. One-third of the authors sent two to five messages and five percent sent six to ten tweets. Less than two percent of the people sent more than ten tweets. There is a second dimension to the overall pattern, which is that 69 percent of the tweets contained the code “RT”, which signifies a retweet. Most tweets were thus redistributing rather than producing original content.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/tamarageense/status/560875382992150529>. All tweets cited are translated from Dutch to English.

Figure 1 shows how these patterns evolved in time. The tweets started right after the television programming was disrupted and increased at a rapid pace: almost 20,000 tweets were posted in 30 minutes. This is roughly the same amount of tweets as the total average number of Dutch tweets sent between 20:00 and 20:30. The biggest peak is found ten minutes after the beginning of the crisis, when many people came to know about the crisis and tweeted or retweeted this knowledge within their network. Other media organizations also started reporting on the crisis. A radio broadcast of the station where the crisis took place reported about it at 20:23, and an extra news broadcast of the competing news channel RTL did so at 20:27, but the facts and opinions they conveyed did not translate into a second peak of tweets, probably because there were still many questions that remained unanswered. Traffic picked up only at 20:38, seemingly to an important extent due to the disclosure of Tarik Z's demands letter at that time. Footage of Tarik Z wandering around in the studio and his capture by the police, shown shortly after nine o'clock, impelled another wave of tweets, culminating in a third peak at about 21:22, which disappeared slowly in the late hours of the day.

**Figure 1:** Number of Tweets (per 5 minutes)



## 6 SOURCES

### 6.1 Retweets and @mentions

Table 1 shows the thirty tweeters with the most retweets and @mentions, hence the most dominant sources in that respect. The table indicates, first, that the dominant position of these tweeters is not simply a reflection of the number of tweets they sent. The most active tweeter, Rudy Bouma, a journalist who works for NOS (the news organization that was attacked), sent

## Do social media transform journalism?

Media@LSE Working Paper #47

only 35 tweets. Secondly, there is also much variety in the number of followers (ranging from 121 to 796,438) these active tweeters have. Lastly, professional media, particularly news organizations and individual journalists, received by far the most @mentions and retweets, while some ordinary citizens can be found at the lower end of the list.

**Table 1:** The dominant sources of news as regards the most retweets and @mentions combined

	Role	#Follow-ers	#Tweets	#Posts	#Retweets sent	#Retweeted @mentions received
NOS	News station (the one that was attacked)	336,157	17	16	1	10,899
NUnl	News website	796,438	8	8	0	4,493
RTLNieuwsnl	News station	153,942	20	19	1	1,870
FrankNanninga	Individual professional journalist (freelance)	559	14	12	2	1,374
Telegraaf	National newspaper	263,404	22	14	8	1,200
Afrikaleeuw	Individual professional journalist (RTL News)	4,374	17	5	12	1,184
scvdw	Individual professional journalist (NOS)	646	1	1	0	1,126
fokkesukke	Satire	46,648	11	5	6	1,112
WielsDeMol	TV Show that was cancelled due to events	94,812	1	1	0	928
volkskrant	National newspaper	269,703	5	5	0	892
JandeHoop	Individual professional journalist (RTL4)	114,291	6	5	1	872
artrooijakkers	Presenter of TV show that was cancelled due to events	37,204	5	2	3	840
DominiqueHeyde	Individual professional journalist (NOS)	52,567	2	1	1	761
IbHaarsma	Individual professional journalist (SBS)	926	4	4	0	619
GooiNieuws	Regional newspaper	7,135	13	7	6	586
MarkKampers	Individual professional journalist (newspaper Telegraaf)	934	6	5	1	570
Koning_NL	Satire	278,354	2	2	0	494
NPORadio1	Radio news channel (NPO)	16,541	11	7	4	482
JeanPaulRison	Individual professional journalist (for an online sports channel)	1,472	3	1	2	461
Nielsbrw	Individual	664	9	3	6	456
johnvandertol	Individual professional journalist (NOS)	4,974	15	15	0	455

frenkdeboer	Not available	55,889	1	1	0	440
PimSedeeRTL	Individual professional journalist (RTL)	5,385	10	6	4	381
gersonveenstra	Individual professional journalist (RTL)	5,993	13	8	5	378
Bart_Dirks	Individual professional journalist (local news)	5,699	2	1	1	366
Cynthessizer	Individual	787	7	6	1	355
rudybouma	Individual professional journalist (for the TV news channel NOS)	8,993	35	24	11	344
drmurgatroyd	Individual	121	6	1	5	335
JanDriessen	Individual	7,729	2	1	1	320
BartMos	Individual professional journalist (De Telegraaf)	6,153	13	6	7	313

## 6.2 Retweets and @mentions

The leading role of professional journalists is also evident in the Twitter network, which is visualized in Figure 2. This visualization presents Twitter accounts as a node, the size of which is based on the number of relations with other accounts. These relations emerge when an account @mentions or retweets a tweet from another account.<sup>8</sup>

Several groups can be distinguished in the network. The largest group (in red, 26 percent of the nodes) is clustered around the news site Nu.nl (“nunl”) and the news station RTL (“rtlnieuwsnl”). The turquoise group (12 percent of the nodes) is formed around a newspaper, De Telegraaf. Other groups are primarily centered around the individual accounts of professional journalists, but also around a television show that was cancelled due to the crisis (*Wie is de mol?*) and the account of a popular cartoonist (*Fokke en Sukke*). Overall, the network data further illustrate how professional news providers were the key players on Twitter during the Tarik Z crisis. Further, while the patterns show that Twitter is not one big homogeneous network, the different groups are all connected with the account of the news

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<sup>8</sup> The figure shows the main network of 632 accounts (1.6 percent of the total) and 890 relations between accounts (1.2 percent of the total). As our goal is to visualize the main network of news makers and reveal the underlying network structures, we omitted isolated nodes from the figure. These accounts do not play an active role in the network (more specifically, they are connected to other accounts through only one retweet or @mention) or are not connected to the main network. We also omitted the account of NOS. As NOS was mentioned in most tweets as the subject, its inclusion in the visualization would obscure the visibility of the core network structures. However, although we present a visualization without NOS, we have of course analyzed the role of NOS in the network and will take the findings of that analysis into account in the interpretation of the network below.





**Figure 3:** Defining what is going on

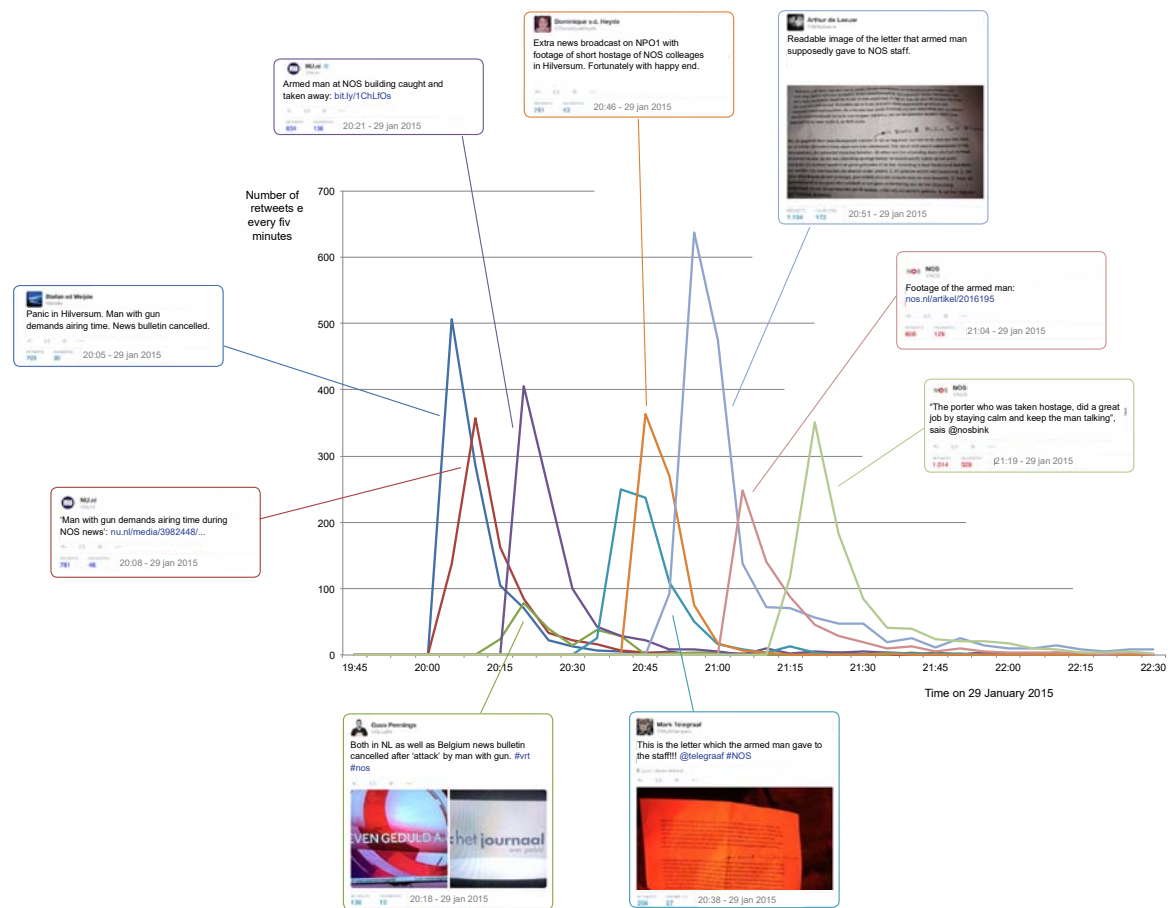


Figure 3 does not only show how the primary definitions of the situation changed over time, but also how quickly information went stale. The lifespan of these tweets is fairly short and uniform. All curves are skewed slightly to the right: after a quick initial rise, the number of retweets fades out at a slower pace. The posts reach their peak in terms of retweets within only ten minutes.

## 7 ETHICS

The results regarding the narrative show a fairly standard news pattern, which is yielded, as we showed earlier, by standard news makers. Our final question is whether Twitter news producers keep a different ethics than traditional professional journalism that does not take place on social media. We investigated this question through a qualitative content analysis of

the 179 tweets of the ten most active, retweeted or @mentioned accounts (see table 1), which were owned by professional journalists or news stations. Some of these tweets mentioned small and apparently factual updates, thus sustaining a value of “factuality”. Other tweets explicated sources and cited sources between quotation marks. These conducts were particularly visible in tweets that were sent by organizational accounts, such as the accounts of newspaper De Telegraaf and news station RTL. There were differences with traditional professional journalism, however, in regard to norms pertaining to accuracy, personal voice and responsibility.

## 7.1 Accuracy

The accuracy of crucial tweets was compromised because of technical issues, marginally in the form of typos and bad grammar, but most importantly through a hardly legible picture of the letter with threats and demands which Tarik Z carried with him.<sup>9</sup> The speed of distribution overrules accuracy here. Moreover, rumors went public without checking. The suggestion that both of Tarik Z’s parents had recently died, for instance, was used to depict Tarik Z’s state of mind and as an explanation of his behavior.<sup>10</sup> Further, the source of rumors was often unclearly defined. In some instances, it was described as “the social media”,<sup>11</sup> suggesting that these create their own temporary truths. All of these issues, seemingly induced by the instantaneousness of Twitter reporting, come at the expense of the accuracy of news.

## 7.2 Personal Voice

Next to the hashtags, @mentions and telegram style of phrasing, all typical for Twitter communication, the terminology which the professional journalists used contained slang, spoken language and playful references. This gave the Twitterstorm a sense of informality that would have been absent in standard reporting of such a crisis. One tweet, for instance, referred to Tarik Z as a “news silly” (“journaal gekkie”),<sup>12</sup> while another tweet employed a variant of the Dutch word for “good” (“goeie”) that is not used in formal Dutch writing.<sup>13</sup> Such informality, however, is not merely a linguistic property of the tweets. As informality is often associated with the personal in social etiquette – as something that occurs between people who

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<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/FrankNanninga/status/560886669134417920>. A rewritten and fully legible version of the letter was disseminated later in the evening.

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/gersonveenstra/status/560909355990536192>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/FrankNanninga/status/560898173015584768>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/rudybouma/status/560902907055599616>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/NOS/status/560916209429139456>

know each other well – it also personalizes the tweets. The widespread use of humor may be regarded as another factor that rendered tweets informal and personal. For instance, several tweets joked that Tarik Z's clothing – black suit, narrow tie, white shirt – resembles the outfit of the gangster squad in the movie *Reservoir Dogs*. While claiming that, according to the police, Tarik Z's accomplices "are still fugitive", the tweet shows a photo-shopped picture of a scene from the movie which displays Tarik Z together with the movie's cast (see Figure 4).<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 4:** Tarik Z photo-shopped with the *Reservoir Dogs* actors\*



\*Tarik Z appears as the second person in a black tie from the right.

Personal voice was also present through anecdotes. For example, one journalist tweeted that "the heroic security guard of the #NOS is the same man that accompanied me in the lift for goods :-)." <sup>15</sup> This tweet is also an example of the many messages that contained personal judgement (here: "heroic security guard") or expressed emotions (in this case joy; see ":-)") through words, emoticons, capital letters, or exclamation marks.

### 7.3 Responsibility

Probably the most contentious issue about the Twitterstorm concerned the social responsibility of journalism. For instance, the demands letter that Tarik Z carried with him was disseminated without constraint by one of the professional journalists. The

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<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/rudybouma/status/560921629254254592>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/rudybouma/status/560920148161617920>

newsworthiness of the letter is self-evident; however, as it relates to violence (the hostage situation itself) and the threat of much more violence (e.g., radioactive explosives), a police source would normally not share this kind of direct evidence with journalists, at least not before completing an investigation. For similar reasons, the news channel where the crisis happened prohibited their reporters soon after the crisis began to share any further information through Twitter or otherwise. The reporters ignored that request, however, and continued tweeting.

The way the hostage taker, Tarik Z, was treated also differed from what standard journalism ethics recommend. Most notably, Dutch journalistic norms prescribe that the privacy and safety of suspects should be warranted and thus that references to them should mention only the first letter of their family name. Several individual reporters, however, found the full family name of Tarik Z through social media and shared it immediately. One of the reporters even asked explicitly if someone knew the suspect.<sup>16</sup> Another reporter showed a picture of what Tarik Z, assertedly when he was about six or seven years old, wrote in a “friends book”, a small booklet in which children share with their friends what their favorite things are, such as their favorite color and food.<sup>17</sup>

## 8 DISCUSSION

Our research has demonstrated that the Twitter news about the Tarik Z crisis was produced primarily by professional journalists, and that the news was narrated in the linear way that is rather custom in professional journalism. In addition, the primary sources often followed standard procedures regarding factuality and sourcing. The main differences we found between the Twitter coverage of the crisis and general norms of journalism concern the accuracy, personal voice and social responsibility of reporting. Hence, we may conclude that Twitter does open up the news production process, but for alternative news values that produce a personal and temporary truth, rather than for ordinary people or unusual news narration.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/BartMos/status/560890052839223296>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/FrankNanninga/status/560926415865257984>. It should be noted that Dutch TV news channels and newspapers also showed footage and pictures in which Tarik Z was recognizable. Later, however, the news channel where the crisis took place said that they will stop doing this and follow the existing privacy and safety protocols again. See <http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/nos-zendt-beelden-tarik-z-niet-meer-uit~a3849420/> (accessed February 14, 2016)

Although our results do not fulfil any high hopes that the internet comprehensively “liberates” the production of news, the general picture is ambiguous rather than distinctly negative or encouraging. After all, many ordinary citizens (about 35,000) participated in the Twitter coverage of the crisis and arguably many more consumed the tweets and retweets of others. However, ordinary citizens did not play a central role as gatekeepers and generally sent only one to five messages, often retweets, jokes or playful exclamations of wonderment and surprise. In these respects, Twitter was mainly used for limited and personal purposes by ordinary citizens, seemingly producing a lot of “affective news”, a combination of fact, opinion and emotion (Papacharissi, 2015). Even though the facts in such content can be considered as newsworthy, the presence of non-factual content raises the fundamental (and old) question if Twitter coverage should be called “news” in the first place.

Based on our findings, however, we cannot assert that ordinary people’s Twitter participation is limited and affective per se, or that professional journalists always take the lead. In the case of the Tarik Z Twitterstorm, the prominent position of professional journalists can be explained by the fact that this crisis developed right in the heart of professional journalism. Further, people’s limited participation in this case might, in part, also be explained by a lack of access to first-hand information about what happened on the ground in Hilversum. Some of the scoops, such as the picture of Tarik Z’s demands letter, were primarily accessible to insiders; people that are part of the Media Park network of professionals or people that were even present in the building. Retweeting tweets, in this context, might often have been the only thing ordinary citizens could do. Certainly citizens can play a bigger role in the coverage of events that are literally visible to the general public; things that happen in the streets, for instance. Access to first-hand information, however, cannot fully explain why the Twitterstorm about Tarik Z was sourced and narrated primarily by professional journalists. After all, there were also tweets that did not contain content that originated from the studio, such as funny cartoons or the picture of what Tarik Z as a child wrote in a “friends book”.

Another factor that may be at play here is the fact that professional journalists generally have much more followers than ordinary citizens have. The average number of followers of the most dominant sources, shown in table 1, is about 80,000, much higher than the number of followers, estimated at 150 or less, of the average Netherlander.<sup>18</sup> Thus, what professional journalists or organizations tweet has a much larger immediate public. Earlier studies found that this network size does indeed promote the overall distribution of original tweets via retweets (Suh, Hong, Pirolli & Chi, 2010). However, table 1 also shows that the most influential accounts do not necessarily have many followers. Most notably, Frank Nanninga, a freelance

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<sup>18</sup> E.g., <http://www.besocialized.nl/blog/social-media-cijfers/> (accessed February 18, 2016).

professional journalist, had merely about 600 followers. His nonetheless ubiquitous presence in the Twitter coverage may be explained on the basis of his status as a professional journalist, which can be considered as yet another possible factor that influences who can become a primary news producer on Twitter. Perhaps ordinary citizens are more prone to retweet professionals than to share the tweets of fellow citizens, which they may see as less credible or as probably “old news” rather than as material to “flaunt” with within their network.

To conclude, as regards the unorthodox news values, we showed that the main sources (all professional journalists) tweeted rather informal messages that were open to personal experience and fun. The main news producers also relied on less strict quality norms in regard to the sources and contents of their messages, and they were less careful to violate privacy and safety norms. Those properties are arguably induced, to some extent, by the Twitter culture of instant communication and immediacy: the need to tweet as soon as possible may take priority over accuracy and responsibility standards. Also, these standards may be compromised by the sheer collectivity of the Twittersphere (lessening a sense of individual responsibility) and an awareness that unreliable or socially irresponsible material is already circulating on the web (causing a perception that, for that reason, the material is already news or cannot be held back). Lastly, the informal character of the tweets can be seen as an expression of changes in journalism generally, which is criticized for its increased attention to personality and entertainment (Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2009). Although the output that results from all such processes may be less clear and trustworthy than what may be traditionally expected from professional journalism, it also forms a larger and more diverse pool of ideas about what is going on and is thus bound to be less conformist or more critical than news that relies uniformly on mainstream official sources.

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