



Twitter & Migrant Lifeboat Rescue

Examination of social media and organizational response to a
stormy newspaper article

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ABSTRACT

A prominent British newspaper and its website publishes an inflammatory article stating that a lifeboat charity has been cynically abused by migrant traffickers who are using it as a 'free ferry service' to get their cargo of human beings into the United Kingdom. What reaction is generated on the Twitter social media network? What narrative, language usage and sentiment is formed? How does the charity react?

This thesis examines this case and discovers through word frequency and conversational analysis how one news story reverberated in 280 characters or less. Themes impacted by this research include Twitter as a social media network service, fake news, echo chambers and their bubbles, trust and audience perception, news media literacy, social campaigning and awareness, and crisis communication and news/stakeholder management.

The conclusion reached is that the story had the potential to adversely affect the charity's reputation and future income stream even though it was doing its duty because of its unwillingness or inability to engage with stakeholders and correct any misunderstandings. The thesis discusses why this was not a good idea and considers how the story could have developed into a broader, more damaging entity with relative ease, especially with the role social media can play for news consumers in today's society.

KEYWORDS: AUDIENCE PERCEPTION, CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS, FAKE NEWS, NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT, TWITTER.

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1 INTRODUCTION

People are on the move the world over, both through legal and illegal means: some emigrate or immigrate with visas and appropriate documentation for employment, family purposes or opportunity; others travel to different destinations for various reasons such as seeking sanctuary from an oppressive regime or society or just desiring better economic opportunities.

However, while some people seek sanctuary in UN refugee camps, undergoing the rigorous prerequisite vetting process before being allocated to a new home, in a new country; others, travel through several 'safe countries' in order to reach a particular destination, but such activities generate backlash, contempt, and emotional outrage for many people within the host countries, as witnessed in newspaper/media reports and online in many venues.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) is a much-lauded and admired British charity/non-profit organization (NPO). Formed in 1824 it is the largest provider of lifeboat rescue services around the coasts of the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, and some inland waterways through its 238 lifeboat stations and 444 lifeboats. The RNLI receives no government funding, relying on donations and legacies for its finances, while tens of thousands of volunteers assist with everything ranging from fundraising to being lifeboat crew members.

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) and charities such as the RNLI 'play a unique and vital role in society, providing critical services, enriching cultural life, offering an outlet for political expression, and contributing to quality of life' (Pressgrove & Waters, 2019).

On January 4, 2019¹ an extensive article (Figure 1) appeared in the Daily Mail online, a major British newspaper, with the headline 'Cynical abuse of our lifeboat

¹ The article appeared first online at 22:41 on January 4, 2019 and appeared in the printed edition of the newspaper the following day. The online article was updated on January 7 for unstated reasons.

heroes: They volunteer for rescue missions in all weathers, at all hours... but now migrant traffickers are exploiting the courage and goodwill of RNLI crews - by callously using them as a free ferry service'. The article's comment feature attracted a significant number of negative and abusive comments that reflected the readers' response to the article and its message.



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Cynical abuse of our lifeboat heroes: They volunteer for rescue missions in all weathers, at all hours... but now migrant traffickers are exploiting the courage and goodwill of RNLI crews - by callously using them as a free ferry service, writes SUE REID

- On January 31st 2018 a call was received at Dungeness Lifeboat Station in Kent
- Volunteer RNLI crew found eight Albanians illegally sailing towards the UK
- Some supporters of the charity have stopped donations over the migrant issue

By [SUE REID FOR THE DAILY MAIL](#)
 PUBLISHED: 22:41 BST, 4 January 2019 | UPDATED: 03:43 BST, 7 January 2019

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On a chilly winter's night, a frantic 999 call for help from a rubber dinghy in the English Channel was received at Dungeness Lifeboat Station in Kent.

It was made by a man with a heavy foreign accent as he stood at the helm of the flimsy craft, called Janhazel, which was carrying passengers on choppy seas between northern **France** and the White Cliffs of Dover.

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of Daily Mail online article (from Dailymail.co.uk)

Although this story did not seem to gain traction and coverage in other news media, it did generate some interest (and hostile commentary) in various online forums and on social media platforms. The lack of 'balancing comment' from the RNLI seemed to be a noticeable omission. Was this intentional? Did it spoil the media narrative being presented?

1.1 Objective and value of the thesis

The presence of the article prompted a consideration of the story by me in a broader context, wondering aloud whether the average reader understood the core operational aims of the RNLI (as familiar as the organization may be) and that they would not be acting as a waterborne border patrol agency, demanding to verify the immigration status of those it may be rescuing from the perils of the sea. Following the observation of comments on social media, ranging from the informed to the asinine, it inspired the idea for this research and subsequent writing of this thesis.

The objective of this thesis is to examine the social media comments made about this story, using the Twitter social media network as a data source, utilising many keywords that describe the story in neutral, negative and positive terms. This research is relevant for the communications for development field as it examines how a mass media article may influence discourse amongst supporters, (whether active or passive) of an NPO with the potential to affect its reputation and level of future support.

How an NPO reacts post-publication to a potentially inflammatory article in the media and to social media commentary can be relevant to rebutting any inaccuracies or misunderstandings as well as providing the opportunity to promote its narrative to an audience positively. Media influence is not automatically accepted as proven, with some commentators seeking to suggest that, in certain circumstances, the press may not have as much influence as some affected stakeholders may presume (Scott, 2017b). I suggest that it is not such a simple binary attribute with influence being a more subjective, variable attribute dependent on the subject, its framing, its content and, of course, the individual's

receptiveness, perceptions, prejudices and preferences (which is outside the scope of this thesis).

However, a bigger problem can be with news engagement (or disengagement), with 35% of Britons 'often or sometimes actively' avoiding the news in general, an 11% increase since 2017 (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 25), with 58% of this group doing so because it has a negative impact on their mood, and 34% saying that they cannot rely on the news being true. With this scenario, both 'positive' framed news stories can be equally ignored as well as those an organization may wish not to see being presented due to audience disengagement. Social media as a means of distributing news (and other content) cannot be ignored, and here there is a likelihood of greater engagement and trust being formed. In the UK 46% of respondents say that they trust most news from social media, compared to the national average (10%), reported the 2019 Digital News Report (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019, p. 39)

1.2 Methodology and theoretical framework

Methodologically the thesis is based around a case study-type qualitative research project, examining a scenario (the rescue activities) as relayed through the prism of a popular newspaper's article that is commented upon by media consumers. Empirical data emerges to note the linguistic word choice, tone and conversational leaning of individual commentators on social media.

This research draws upon the theoretical framework of representation (Hall, 1997, p. 15), whereby meaning and language are connected on many levels, namely reflective (does the language reflect a meaning that already exists), intentional (does the language express only what its purveyor wants to say), and constructionist (is the meaning constructed in and through language). The latter is the most dominant consideration within this research. As an example, there can be a different perception formed in the mind of a news consumer when reading a news article when the language talks about migrants versus illegal immigrants. Stereotyping is also apposite within this framework.

Framing theory (Goffman & Berger, 1986) is also relevant within this research, with it suggesting that something which is presented to an audience, e.g. a news article, can influence their choices about how to process that information. A combination of both the frame and its representation has the capacity to change the perception and understanding of a subject by the reader through its presentation of certain language in a certain manner.

1.3 Research questions

This leads to the broad research questions of:

- Was there any 'chatter' before the Daily Mail story appeared that might have in any way influenced its coverage?
- How may a specific story generate or transform social media commentary after publication?

The research will also lead to at least two rhetorical questions possibly being formed in the minds of individual readers, namely was this article a piece of fake news, or just plain misleading, and was the article based on a misunderstanding of what happened and was this accidental or intentionally interpreted this way?

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis is structured so that chapter two provides a traditional literature review, offering a plethora of information on the topics of Twitter as a social media network service, fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles, trust and audience perception, news media literacy, social campaigning and awareness, and crisis communication and news/stakeholder management. The literature review is designed to provide useful background information to assist the reader in orientating their knowledge accordingly, as well as contextualising the research and its discussion/conclusion.

The thesis's research methodology is detailed and described in chapter three, before the findings are presented in chapter four. Chapter five is a freeform discussion of the findings, ahead of the conclusion in chapter six.

Notes:

- Throughout this thesis the term NPO will be used to designate a non-profit organization and contextually this can also refer to a registered charity.
- Specific reference is made about the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), a charity registered in England and Wales (209603), Scotland (SC037736), the Republic of Ireland (20003326), the Bailiwick of Jersey (14), the Isle of Man, and the Bailiwick of Guernsey and Alderney.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review intends to provide a contextualised overview of relevant key subject elements that surround the issue under investigation by this thesis and introduce related background information as required in further support.

2.1 Twitter – a sharing service

Twitter, a U.S.-based social networking service, founded in 2006, permits the exchange of short messages known as tweets between users. Registration is required to send a tweet and maintain account functionality on the system, although any internet user may read tweets without needing a Twitter account. A tweet can be up to 280 characters in length, inclusive of any routing instructions such as highlighting a specific user account. Research suggests that most tweets are short or very short (Perez, 2018).

The service is most popular in the United States with an estimated 49.45m users (Statista, 2019a) and the United Kingdom is said to be the third-largest market with 14.1m users. The service appears to be losing some of its appeal, it is claimed (Leetaru, 2019), with 'daily tweeting users' and tweet volumes dropping, remaining users' accounts 'ageing steadily' and retweets (retransmission of original tweets) accounting for up to nearly half of all tweets.

Despite being a smaller (and different) social networking service to Facebook and its 2.32bn monthly active users (Statista, 2019b), it is a popular venue for journalists seeking news (Broersma & Graham, 2013; Engesser & Humprecht, 2015), reporting news (Lokot & Diakopoulos, 2016; Vis, 2013), as well as setting an agenda for both journalists and news consumers (Russell, Hendricks, Choi, & Stephens, 2015). Research shows that Twitter not only forms an important part of news production practice (McGregor & Molyneux, 2018), but is being capable of affecting news judgement and selection for many while being ranked equal or higher to more-established news sources. Currently many NPOs use the platform

as one of their communications channels to deliver information, create a form of community and also make calls for action (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012); although few of them use it as a two-way channel with extensive user engagement despite it being a suitable outlet (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012).

Four out of ten people in the United Kingdom use social media as a source for news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019) and 75% use an online media source (including social media) with a corresponding, but gradual, decline for print and television outlets. Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2019) note that Facebook remains the most popular outlet for news consumption (28%) with Twitter ranking second (14%). Gaining reliable demographic statistics about Twitter usage is difficult due to the lack of official, public information. Research (Sloan, 2017) suggests that ‘men are proportionally more likely to use Twitter than women relative to the male/female [proportion] of the UK population; the age distribution of Twitter users is younger than the age distribution of the UK population; and certain occupational groups are more likely to use Twitter than others – notably [...] managerial, administrative, and professional occupations.’

Active news consumers particularly like Twitter as a source of breaking and developing news (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), but equally it provides a source of news for more passive consumers (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018) who may not necessarily ‘follow’ news outlets but will see incidental ‘retweets’ by those they have chosen to follow. Engagement can also be boosted in certain circumstances too (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). If research findings (Matsa & Shearer, 2018) from the United States could be broadly applied to United Kingdom users, in lieu of unavailable relevant data, it might reveal whether a majority of social media news consumers expect ‘largely inaccurate’ news yet continue to consume it primarily on ‘convenience’ grounds. This is an area that deserves further research.

Naturally Twitter, as a social media network, is also popular for people expressing or endorsing a particular opinion (Murthy, 2018), which, inevitably, can include the transmission of fake, misleading or misinformed news and commentary, whether

made in good-faith or with a more malevolent intention. Organizations need to be aware of what is being said about them, particularly when their activities may be misinterpreted or perceived as being controversial to some, in order to protect their reputation and ensure that any public narrative is as correct-as-possible. Fake or misinformed news may still be distributed and consumed by many, but corrections and clarifications issued by the organization may equally be viewed and otherwise damaging perceptions possibly changed or minimised in the process.

2.2 Fake news, echo chambers, and filter bubbles

Social media content can have an inherent built-in filter bubble since the user selects organizational or individual user accounts to follow, which mirror their interests, social and professional contact networks. Elements of content may be additionally stumbled across through those one follows, as they redistribute content seen within their networks, as well as algorithms deployed by the social media platforms to boost engagement whether through natural content recommendation or sponsored/pay-for-promotion means (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2018).

Social networking services and the ability for users to post content can pose a threat for both news organizations and news consumers alike, as every message can potentially be fake or misleading. Fake news has been a particular issue with political news subjects, especially around election times (Al-Rawi, Groshek, & Zhang, 2019; Orellana-Rodriguez & Keane, 2018) but all types of news are equally prone to be faked or taken out of context to create a misleading impression.

Fake news, however, is a relatively new construct when referring to actual news potentially being intentionally fake (as an opposite to actual satire or humour), appearing in late 2016 and onwards with the United States' Trump presidency (McNair, 2018, p. 6). Fake news can be both an example of perceived or actual journalistic bias (McNair, 2018, p. 25) or a faked claim of a news occurrence made and transmitted by a news consumer.

The typical news consumer may be easily fooled and possessed by a short attention span due to the overload of information on offer through the internet and other media sources. People tend to accept new information with a positive belief instead of being sceptical by default (Lewandowsky, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook, 2012). Scepticism can be good for democracy and society since it encourages thinking and participation, whereas cynicism is troublesome, encouraging distrust, disengagement and the formation of more fixed views (Pinkleton, Austin, Zhou, Willoughby, & Reiser, 2012). Individuals may see a transition from scepticism to cynicism if they feel overwhelmed by their news and information choices, or if their news consumption is perceived to have no value to them (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

According to Gu, Kropotov, and Yarochkin (2017) '[t]his influences how headlines and images are created and used in fake news – they're designed to grab a user's attention[...] The headlines are designed to supposedly inform the user of some significant fact in as sensational a manner as possible. These facts also happen to conform to the mindsets of their reader, making them feel like they're part of a tribe and reinforcing/confirming their ideas and biases.'

Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, and Lazer (2019) found that engagement with fake news sources was extremely concentrated with one per cent of individuals accounting for 80% of fake news source exposures, and 0.1% accounted for nearly 80% of fake news sources shared. Furthermore Grinberg et al. (2019) recorded that individuals most likely to engage with fake news sources were conservative-leaning, older, and highly engaged with political news.

Research in the United States suggests that nearly two-thirds (64%) of Americans believe that fake news has caused 'a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events' and 23% admit to sharing a fake news story, whether knowingly or not (Mitchell, Holcomb, & Barthel, 2016). It is reasonable to suppose that similar occurrences are noted in other territories such as the United Kingdom in the absence of information to the contrary, primarily due to the cultural similarities of the two countries.

Migration-related news stories are particularly likely to polarise an audience and be prone to be interpreted *differently* by different audiences, depending on the way they are framed and presented, leading to fake news, disinformation and even conspiracy theories being consumed, believed and even redistributed (often in good-faith and belief) (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). Polarised audiences and communities (whether formal or loosely connected around a theme) can rise around news subjects, e.g. migration. Bessi et al. (2015) state that ‘polarized communities emerge around distinct types of contents and usual consumers of conspiracy news result to be more focused and self-contained on their specific contents’.

Alternative, fake or factually inaccurate news may also fall into the preceding category with users equally keen to distribute ‘news’ that matches their beliefs. Communicating (and correcting) information can be difficult due to ‘generalized public innumeracy about migration levels, effects of emotions on perceptions, and variation in the perceived credibility of different messengers’ in the mind of the public (Allen, Blinder, & McNeil, 2019).

It may be reasonably questioned whether one can always fully identify, let alone acknowledge, that having been deceived, swayed or even partially influenced by a nuanced form of fake news or a derivate thereof (Weidner, Beuk, & Bal, 2019). News consumers see fake news as a matter of degree, if they notice it at all, and often label poor journalism, propaganda, and even some kinds of advertising as fake news (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Most news consumers selectively identify news media (and outlets) that they consider as ‘consistently reliable sources’ and thus turn to for ‘verified information’, but there is no agreement about reliable and unreliable sources (Nielsen & Graves, 2017).

Social media network operators are taking steps to try and reduce the amount of fake news being transmitted over their networks (Barclay, 2018, p. 192), but a lot of these initiatives require users to flag content that is suspected of being fake. This also can lead to ‘false flagging’ or malicious reporting by users wishing to hide otherwise valid opinions and information based on their prejudices and interests. Some of this may be inspired by politicians such as U.S. President Donald J.

Trump accusing media outlets such as CNN of transmitting fake news, in other words, news that he disagrees with (Levinson, 2019, p. 35).

Nascent technologies exist (and are being developed/enhanced) to help ameliorate the problems of fake news, e.g. (Buntain & Golbeck, 2017), especially when transmitted through social media. Research suggests that journalists are often unfamiliar with their existence, even if they may be favourable to their presence and usage (Brandtzaeg, Følstad, & Chaparro Domínguez, 2018). High workloads and consequent stress levels for journalists place significant performance pressures on them to generate content in a form akin to a factory production line (Scott, 2017a). Thus, additional steps in content creation (or verification) may be overlooked, whether by intent or design.

Individually or selectively tailored and trusted news sources can create filter bubbles, self-selected environments containing information and resources, which can be naturally inspired phenomena or selective perception as we gravitate towards things that mirror our perceptions, points of view, beliefs and interests (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). Individual personalization tools, as well as social media network analysis of their behaviour and interactions, can further contribute to the creation of filter bubbles, irrespective of how 'helpful' the network is trying to be by delivering customized content that it believes the user will wish to see (Harrison, 2017).

It is a phenomenon that has been acknowledged as an issue by Twitter that needs to be fixed (Farr, 2018). It can be questioned whether the problem can truly be resolved, especially with the increasing use of algorithms by online services that seek to deliver what they believe the user would want to see, based on past activity, especially when combined with the user's own selected sources of information, social media profiles followed, interactions, etcetera (Seargeant & Tagg, 2019; Spohr, 2017).

Not everybody is convinced that the problem is so acute (Dutton, 2017), suggesting that 'panic over fake news, echo chambers and filter bubbles is exaggerated, and not supported by the evidence from users across seven

countries.’ Filter bubbles, for example, have existed when people would buy and read one newspaper that could be openly biased to one political side, as well as our existing class, profession, and location all create a real-life bubble of shared interests (Ball, 2017 Chap. 7).

Organizations should be mindful for fake or incorrect news being distributed. It is good communications practice to be in a ready reactive state. It may be sufficient to respond with an official statement stating that ‘X has happened, and we have done Y because of Z’. Particularly with social media exchanges, it may be advisable not to enter into an in-depth debate, both on resource and reputational grounds.

2.3 Trust and audience perception

An unanswerable question about trust and the news media remains, at least in the mind of many news consumers, and there has been a marked difference between trust in so-called traditional media and that delivered through social and online channels. However, the perception is changing due to increasing online delivery, instant consumption, and ease of publication. Increasingly news consumers are sharing, commenting upon, or even originating news online (Morrison, 2016) that can be picked up by other consumers and even the news media, increasing the risk that fake or misleading news is circulated.

When it is considered that ‘the news media offers a lens through which people view society and the world’ (Fletcher & Park, 2017) and the consumers will often consume media that they acknowledge they do not trust (Tsfati & Cappella, 2005). An audience’s perceptions may be skewed or influenced by consumed media messaging in any format, distributed through any platform.

Where consumers form strong connections with news brands, pay for access to journalism, and trust what they discover on social media, they have overall greater trust in their media, notes Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2019). That said, exceptions are available, such as 40% of news consumers in the United Kingdom hold relative trust in their news but only 10% hold trust for social media

postings (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019). Figure 2 shows the level of trust held by UK citizens compared to other world markets.

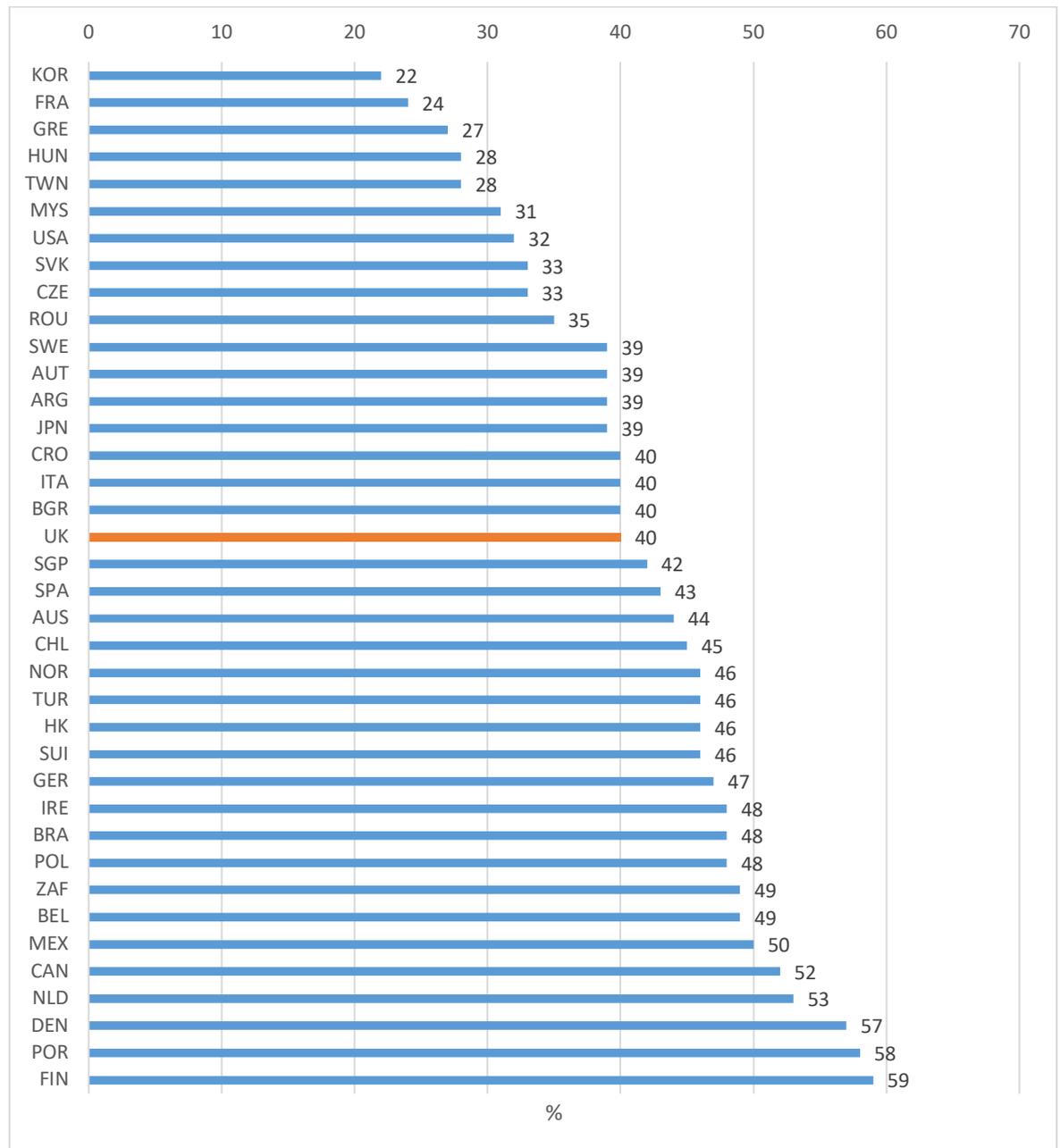


FIGURE 2. Proportion that trust most news most of the time (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019 Q6_2016_1;).

Fletcher and Park (2017) observed that consumers with low trust in the news media are more likely to prefer non-mainstream news sources, which may pose perceptual issues. Consequently, consumers are particularly likely to show increased trust to media messaging and outlets that are recommended or

rebroadcast by those in their social networks (Bergström & Jervelycke Belfrage, 2018; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). Similarly there is likely to be increased trust towards information sources in general that are frequently used, even though within this trust levels can and do vary by platform or source (Johnson & Kaye, 2015).

Even countries with a high level of trust with their news media can be 'highly sceptical of much of the information they come across in public spaces today, whether heard from politicians, published by news media, or found via social media and online search' (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Vraga and Tully (2019) state that there can be competing expectations towards news scepticism, with a possible difference existing between passive consumers (those who merely consume news online) or those who additionally create, post, rebroadcast and engage.

Perceived information overload can leave news audiences feeling 'overwhelmed about the amount of information they receive daily through multiple news outlets, including social media' (Lee, Lindsey, & Kim, 2017), with research suggesting

[w]hen participants felt highly overloaded with news information they received on social media, it was more likely they would selectively expose themselves to certain news sources, possibly sources they trust more than others, whereas lower levels of news information overload coupled with frequent access to news on social media led to less selective exposure (Lee et al., 2017).

This can further highlight the importance of trust in the media being consumed, as well as placing a greater onus on the news producer to be transparent, honest and clear with their production. To reduce the point to a common phrase: garbage in, garbage out.

2.4 News media literacy

The concept of news media literacy requires that news consumers have the knowledge and skills to be more mindful and sceptical about what they are reading (or consuming), obtained through a basic understanding of the news production cycle (Maksl, Craft, Ashley, & Miller, 2017). Extending the concepts of media literacy (Pérez Guevara, 2017) -- technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access the media, to have a critical understanding of the media and to interact with it -- can boost critical thinking skills linked to habits of news consumption that generate an informed society-at-large.

It is advantageous to be a news literate news consumer to successfully navigate social media where it can be a wild west of credible news, personal stories, clearly fake news and items in-between (Garrett, 2017). Exposure to more varied or authoritative sources can also broaden a user's taste towards news content, increasing the likelihood of positive media literacy in the process (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2017), and within this it is argued that organizations who may be affected by polarising, possibly fake or misleading news should be beholden to try and correct the record through public statements and engagement.

Vraga and Tully (2019) note that news consumers who are more news literate and value news literacy attributes are more sceptical of information quality on social media with their research, suggesting that news literacy plays an important role in shaping perceptions of information shared online. Vraga and Tully (2019) also noted that those with higher news literacy levels may be reluctant to engage with news and politics on social media because they do not view it as a reliable option, which in turn means they don't supply (or correct) news that is seen by those with a lesser degree of news literacy who could, arguably, benefit from this practice.

Education (as a function of media literacy) seems to play a role in ameliorating fake or misleading news (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017) and it is reasonable to contend that this would *or should* extend to a stakeholder proactively correcting misleading information being circulated.

2.5 Social campaigning and awareness

Social media networks offer an effective limitless platform for the distribution and amplification of social campaigning, cause marketing, advocacy and promotion, both for the organization and its supporters (Pasquier & Wood, 2018). This is a natural extension to the benefits an own-operated web platform can provide (Saxton & Guo, 2012). Through these outlets, political discourse can be shaped at all levels (Medina, Sánchez Cobarro, & Martínez, 2017) irrespective of the actor's role. While political issues may remain in the background at all times, most campaigns will at least attempt to inform, raise awareness, shape public understanding, change consumer and citizen behaviour; network and connect concerned publics, or visibly mobilize consumers or citizens to put pressure on decision-makers (Segeberg, 2017).

Online campaigning may be important and powerful, but it so far does not universally replace offline activities (Krebber, Biederstaedt, & Zerfaß, 2016, pp. 106, 110-111; McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014). There is a large risk that many tweets (or other social media interactions) are not 'engaged with the substance of the campaign' (Housley et al., 2018) that in turn may lead to defocussing by the campaigner and the intended audience.

Guo and Saxton (2014) observed that Twitter is a particularly powerful educational tool (through advocacy and campaigning) but falls short for mobilisation and grassroots lobbying, although that is not intended to say that it has no potential effect. Using Twitter as just *one* of many communications channels may increase the possibility that messaging will reach an intended audience, while repeated exposure to diverse messaging will serve to reinforce its presence and that of the underlying NPO brand and call-to-action *de jour*. Direct communication to vocal supporters and advocates is possible, primarily through public messaging, and can form an essential part of public advocacy and stakeholder management (Kim, Chun, Kwak, & Nam, 2014). It is imperative, however, that any inbound messaging is responded to where appropriate to continue the conversation and to *inter alia* acknowledge the correspondent (Guo & Saxton, 2014).

For an NPO, social media can be a powerful solicitation tool for both physical and financial support. A low entry cost barrier and a low cost per message transfer (the service can be free, but there may be personnel and other administrative costs to factor in) allow messages to be designed to be shareable amongst supporters and their networks (Soboleva, Burton, Daellenbach, & Basil, 2017). Social media may provide a 'fruitful online community' for organizations, whereby the brand and supporter-base may even engage in an (asymmetric) two-way conversation, with Twitter being noted in some research (Phethean, Tiropanis, & Harris, 2015) as being a social media venue whereby there is an observable element of unsolicited messages from people talking about a particular NPO.

Those responsible for social media handling need to be alert and listen to relevant social media chatter about their organization, being ready to alert management and plans should exist to handle conversations or topics that are less-desirable or critical (Crawford, 2009). This should appear obvious, especially when Twitter 'can provide better guarantees to NPOs in meeting the expectations of their stakeholders with regards to keeping them continuously informed and enhancing relationship building with them' (Gálvez-Rodríguez, Caba-Perez, & Lopez-Godoy, 2016).

Social media activity is consumed extensively through the use of mobile devices; thus an active presence on such platforms can be a necessity, especially when you compare how visibility and support may otherwise be reached through more offline channels (Bjork, Palaggi, & McKee, 2016). This online presence can be a bipartite quality since it may require a great degree of deployed resources to ensure visibility, both in attracting an initial audience and continuing to be presented within their social media feeds as social media network operators try to present what they believe the consumer will see (or what they are being paid to promote).

Larger NPOs may find social media to be just an extension of their traditional marketing and advocacy activities, providing an additional platform to service existing supporters, as well as to attract potential new supporters. Frequency of updates and a creative, engaging approach is one key for engagement and

success, just as it would be for commercial ventures (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Social media also provides a means for external stakeholders and the media-at-large to be kept informed about the organization, although maintaining an own presence, such as a website or blog, where full and total control can be managed, remains a very significant outlet and its value should not be under-estimated (Go & You, 2016).

Research by Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. (2016) underlined that Twitter could be a very strategic tool for both smaller NPOs and those with a larger online community. Similarly, NPOs with the highest degree of donor dependence 'strive most in the use of contents of Twitter as a one-way communication mechanism' it is claimed (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2016).

2.6 Crisis communication and news/stakeholder management

Social media networks can play an important role within the sphere of crisis communications and organizations should be aware of the positive and negative attributes offered. Crisis communications-related activities need not be solely concerned with perceived 'capital-C' crises, as much organizational crisis communications planning and handling tactics may be deployed when negative, damaging, incorrect or fake news is circulating.

A *crisis* can be a 'major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name' (Fearn-Banks, 2016, p. 1). Roshan, Warren, and Carr (2016) note that crises may be clustered into three areas: victim, e.g. natural disaster, rumour or hacking; accidental, e.g. a claim of inappropriate behaviour or a faulty product; and preventable, e.g. human-error accident or organizational-misdeed.

Managing the news agenda – or at least seeking to stay on top of it – can be viewed as necessary, even if individual social media users are not directly engaged through a response. Twitter is 'analysed as a source of real-time news and information, which can have a significant impact on organizations and their strategies' (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt, & James, 2015). Social media

engagement to correct misinformation, reputational damage and address other issues need to be promptly undertaken. Organizations should already have a social media plan, and crisis communications handling should be part of it, so such escalation should be manageable and commonplace (Fearn-Banks, 2016, pp. 91-93). That said, social media is not 'a homogenous phenomenon with a single coherent role in crisis management' (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016) but its utility should not be overlooked, with flexibility in handling and approach being necessary.

In many situations, it may be sufficient to be aware of a potential crisis, if a story or event develops further than desired, perhaps fuelled by incorrect, uncorrected information. In many organizations, those charged with handling publicity may also be responsible for handling crises. To be forewarned is to be forearmed, to quote a well-known English idiom. Sometimes a 'crisis' may appear on the horizon or, at the very least, a minor brouhaha involving some vocal social media users, especially if they are perceivably influencers of any form since they can be pivotal players within a situation and require suitable handling and treatment (Zhu, Anagondahalli, & Zhang, 2017).

As with all crisis or disaster management planning, a framework should exist that is flexible in part but equally capable of handling whatever it needs to encounter. This framework can be used to 'facilitate the creation of disaster social media tools [and] the formulation of disaster social media implementation processes' with '[d]isaster social media users in the framework [including] communities, government, individuals, organisations, and media outlets' (Houston et al., 2015). The framework may not have all of the answers – although some prepared scenarios could be considered, and sample responses prepared – but it will aid and guide during what would otherwise be a potentially hectic, fast-moving situation.

Gruber et al. (2015) gives an example of 'practical tips for crisis management and leadership on social media' that could easily form the nexus of a crisis management framework, being suitable for NPOs of any size:

- Be present, listen, and engage everywhere stakeholders are talking about your organization.
- Develop strategic social media plans before a crisis hits.
- Develop a local and national or international social media presence.
- Develop transparent social media communications before, during, and after a crisis.
- Use the power of 140-character tweets²—amplify codes, photos, and retweets.
- Know key social media voices/influencers amongst your stakeholders.

Caution needs to be taken, however, when communicating particularly to potentially affected or engaged correspondents since ‘engaging indiscriminately with emotional social media users can potentially create crises’ (Ott & Theunissen, 2015), adding metaphorical petrol to a bonfire (existing crisis event) even unintentionally. In many cases, it may be desirable, whether due to the volume of incoming messages or its perceived content, to acknowledge the message and direct the user to a prepared statement that can contain the NPOs position, latest news and other critical information.

It can be a very fine balancing act, particularly on social media, since ‘[a] dialogical approach is only effective if the users are affected by the crisis. If they are not, attempting to engage as many stakeholders as possible is likely to fuel anger’ it is argued (Ott & Theunissen, 2015), noting that even ‘statements are not always well-received online and are often perceived as “talking down”.’ It can be a useful backstop and form of basic acknowledgement in some situations, and Ott and Theunissen (2015) counsel that ‘official statements show that the organization takes the situation seriously, interpersonal ways of communication are more appropriate’ and that [social media activity need] ‘to be authentic [and] communication should match the setting and the organization’s usual style.’

² Since publication Twitter has increased the maximum character count of tweets for most languages.

In any case, no matter what approach is taken, research suggests that many NPOs do not use the 'full potential value' of social media for crisis communications.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A simple model was developed to gather data from Twitter for subsequent analysis within this thesis in order to examine audience reaction to a news article following a reported series of actions by the RNLI. Audience reaction, in turn, is capable of influencing other more passive consumers of the same online discussion.

The research methodology subsequently comprises of the data gathering and the data coding process, as detailed in the following sub-chapters.

3.1 Data gathering

Consideration was given to pertinently selective keywords, which were used to conduct a Twitter search that would deliver a broad range of opinion and commentary about reported migrant sea rescues involving the RNLI. The keywords were selected to reflect those that may appear in general conversation by Twitter commentators with differing opinions to the subject of migrant rescue by the RNLI.

A timeline of December 10, 2018 to January 11, 2019 was selected to encompass the possible peak period of Twitter comment activity following news emerging that the RNLI was involved with migrant rescue, as well as allowing for any preliminary and subsequent activity. Twitter data was captured using the Google Chrome browser and QSR International's NCapture plugin³, directly interfacing with Twitter to download keyword-selected tweets.

The following search terms were used:

- RNLI "Pick Up"
- RNLI Border
- RNLI Illegals
- RNLI Immigrants
- RNLI Migrants

³ <http://help-ncapture.qsrinternational.com/desktop/welcome/welcome.htm>

- RNLI Refugees
- RNLI Taxi

All tweets originated by the (official RNLI Twitter account) @RNLI over the same period were also captured to discover what engagement they may have made on the subject under observation.

3.2 Coding of Tweets

To aid qualitative analysis, NVivo 12 for Mac⁴ was used as a core tool, providing the ability to qualify data from several individual datasets into a unified, deduplicated entity.

Tweets contained within the dataset were individually coded at a node-level to gain a sense of their tone, sentiment or purpose. More than one (category) code can be assigned to an individual tweet, while coding was refined as the dataset was analysed. Retweets (including originator duplications) were coded in accordance with the original tweet on the grounds of consistency. Retweets were considered as valid material as they emphasised or amplified the conversation and would accurately reflect how a passive reader would encounter such discussions.

In total ten codes were used to broadly define each tweet, being:

Comment-Politician

A message from an identified politician.

Concern

Expression of concern, either for the RNLI or migrants.

Media Coverage

A tweet focussing a link or reference to a mainstream media outlet.

⁴ <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/nvivo-products/nvivo-12-mac>

Not Relevant

A category for tweets that were irrelevant to the study but had been captured by, for example, the (incorrect) use of a keyword.

RNLI Criticism

Messaging explicitly critical of the RNLI.

RNLI Positive

Messaging explicitly positive towards the RNLI.

Tone-Negative

Messaging featuring a negative (or overtly abusive) tone.

Tone-Neutral

Messaging featuring a neutral, or objective tone without explicit emotion.

Tone-Positive

Messaging featuring a positive tone.

Unfounded Claim

Messaging featuring a claim that is apparently unfounded or lacks substantiation.

Tweets from the @RNLI user account were not coded but manually observed for engagement.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research data, as described and defined in chapter three, has been examined and is presented in the following sub-chapters based around their different modes of analysis.

4.1 Word frequency and usage

Analysis of word frequency within the dataset can indicate trends, repeated claims or elements of concern, particularly since the 280-character limit imposed by Twitter required that tweets be reasonably concise (which included any mentions and hashtags).

Using NVivo produced a word frequency list that combined stemmed words, e.g. talking would appear with talk or talked, with the top-20 terms shown in Table 1. The table does not include Twitter artefacts such as identities nor non-descriptive words such as 'either' or 'torn'.

Interestingly despite this, the more neutral term migrant is most prominent, while the vexed descriptive modifier illegal, as in illegal migrant, is significantly less prominent. This phenomenon will be outlined in a future section regarding the overwhelmingly negative and neutral sentiment displayed within the dataset.

A sense of vexation or dissatisfaction appears to be expressed within the messaging for the RNLi and its crews, judging by the choice of words such as crews, exploiting, and goodwill, along with a more general frustration, leading to the use of the arguably polemic words of ferry and service (used as part of connotatively pejorative phrases). The use of more humanitarian-orientated words such as save, lives, and rescue are markedly less used within the Twitter conversations.

TABLE 1. Word frequency analysis

WORD	COUNT	WEIGHTED PERCENTAGE	COMBINED WORDS
Migrant	362	5.45%	Migrant, Migrants
Traffickers	287	4.32%	Traffickers, Trafficking
Crews	285	4.29%	Crews
Exploiting	285	4.29%	Exploiting
Goodwill	284	4.27%	Goodwill
War	284	4.27%	War
Albania	283	4.26%	Albania
Economic	283	4.26%	Economic
Illegal	87	1.31%	Illegal, Illegally, Illegals
Ferry	70	1.05%	Ferry, Ferries
Service	70	1.05%	Service, Services
Sea	59	0.89%	Sea, Seas
Lives	57	0.86%	Lives
Save	57	0.86%	Save
Free	54	0.81%	Free
Immigrants	23	0.35%	Immigrants, Immigration
Border	21	0.32%	Border
Rescue	20	0.30%	Rescue, Rescued, Rescues
Supported	20	0.30%	Support, Supported, Supporter
Boats	18	0.27%	Boat, Boats

Nvivo also produces a generic, unfiltered word cloud of the dataset that allows, as seen in Figure 3, the reader to visualise the prominent presence of words as they appear written in a larger font size, enabling at-a-glance visual representation about the key words and sentiments present within the analysed data. Naturally, some words are capable of double meanings, and other words may be more linking or establishing words in their own right.

TABLE 2. Node coding frequency

NODE	COUNT
Comment-Politician	1
Concern	63
Media coverage	7
Not Relevant	3
RNLI Criticism	20
RNLI Positive	5
Tone-Negative	95
Tone-Neutral	120
Tone-Positive	19
Unfounded claim	6

Closer examination of conversations linked by node type follows below. There is scope for duplication when a conversation has multiple coding, although only a selection of tweets is highlighted and referenced to give context.

It should be noted that some correspondents may have sought to improve the visibility of their messaging by repeated retweets. Such activities are counted within this study to reflect the visible actuality afforded to Twitter users. It is acknowledged that the analysis may appear brief, but this brevity is intentional to avoid de facto repetition of related or similar messaging.

4.2.1 Comment-Politician

Only one politician, Charlie Elphicke, member of parliament for Dover and Deal (a coastal constituency), was recorded as posting (repeatedly, sometimes every few minutes) a tweet⁵ that arguably and obliquely referred to the migrant sea crossing, by noting his 'delight' at the Home Secretary having visited Dover to see how 'everyone on the frontline, like the RNLI, Border Force and emergency services, work tirelessly along our coast to protect the border and keep people safe.'

⁵ <https://twitter.com/CharlieElphicke/status/1080498721589264384>

Another politician was tagged into a tweet by another user, although there is no evidence to suggest this yielded engagement by the politician.

4.2.2 Concern

Concern raised within tweets was interesting, with correspondents hoping that the RNLI focussed on sea safety matters rather than engaging with border security⁶, along with the ‘goodwill’ of the volunteer crews being ‘exploited’ by such rescue operations⁷.

One tweet asked a perhaps rhetorical, sarcastic question, tagging in the Home Secretary, to ask what had happened to the ‘illegals’ that have been rescued by the RNLI and other NGOs⁸, showing an element of concern but also possibly a modicum of politicising at the same time.

Providing ongoing financial support to the RNLI was questioned if its role was to be expanded to become a ‘ferry service for illegal immigrants’⁹, to which another correspondent countered that the RNLI mission was to rescue all in trouble at sea. Concern was raised that charitable donations should not be used to fund activities that the government should be undertaking¹⁰, and fears stated that charitable giving to the RNLI might suffer if it continues to offer a ‘ferry service for illegal migrants’¹¹.

4.2.3 Media Coverage

Very few tweets referred to media coverage of the RNLI undertaking rescue of migrants at sea. The most visible was a January 4 Daily Mail article¹² that could be described as being inflammatory and far from neutral in tone. A search at the time suggested that other media outlets considered this to be a ‘non-story’.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/tiddlyompom/status/1080565022881918989>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/Blond43B/status/1082079656000585728>

⁸ https://twitter.com/Steve_Reid/status/1080183696618147840

⁹ <https://twitter.com/ianrweeks/status/1081560007055949824>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/Brie0748/status/1081647163061415936>

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/KathyStMarks/status/1082262810439151616>

¹² <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6559079/Migrant-traffickers-exploiting-courage-goodwill-RNLI-crews.html>

4.2.4 RNLI Criticism

Criticism was made about the RNLI's activities in rescuing migrants and claims were made by some that they would no longer donate or support the organization, much of which was couched in sorrow-like terms and regret.

A reference was also made to a previous press article¹³ where lifeboatmen were reportedly sacked over inappropriate 'pornographic mugs', seemingly to show that the RNLI is acting in a politically correct or unnecessary manner. One correspondent¹⁴ accepted that their decision to not 'put money in the [collection] boat box' as harsh but justified it due to 'anyone that assists illegals entry into Britain does it without my money,' while another¹⁵ called upon RNLI leadership to 'grow a pair and direct their crews TO NOT respond to calls from illegal immigrants to be picked up'.

Some criticism was based around the 'genuineness' of migrant sea rescues, as if sea rescue was somehow only allocated to a particular group, with a correspondent¹⁶ claiming that the RNLI was not formed to 'rescue illegal immigrants who waste their valuable time that should be used to rescue genuine sea goers' and that the RNLI 'don't have the manpower nor resources [to engage in such rescues].'

Reputational damage was the concern of another correspondent¹⁷, claiming that '@RNLI may have permanently tainted its donation pull by becoming associated with illegal trafficking. Perhaps it will issue a statement confirming it will not be landing clandestine migrants?' Since the RNLI appears not to have actively engaged any correspondents, even with a templated statement, one may question its policy of non-engagement on even a superficial level, indicating to supporters that it may not care, irrespective of the merit of claims being made. Other criticism

¹³ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/12/lifeboatmen-sacked-pornographic-mugs-accuse-rnli-conducting/>

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/TraceF1/status/1081708833993576452>

¹⁵ Tweet ID 1081562826718760960 (later deleted)

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/TRUEBRIT13/status/1080538149435117570>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/EricYesyev/status/1081013286013992961>

described the rescue acts as a form of betrayal¹⁸, suggesting it will lead to an increase of atrocities being conducted by existing migrants in the UK.

4.2.5 RNLI Positive

Explicit positive support towards the RNLI and its migrant rescue activities was slight, even if other comments were generally supportive or reassuring towards the RNLI as an institution. Some of the positive comments questioned¹⁹ whether the NPO should still fund the migrant rescues, intimating that it is a government responsibility, and another stated²⁰ that the RNLI volunteers are doing what they 'signed up for'.

Positive messaging and support became mixed in the mind of at least one correspondent, seeking to 'show the Government up for what it is' while adding 'RNLI have real boats, rescue real people whether they are lost at sea or fleeing from terror. They don't have water cannon on board to fire at children.'²¹

4.2.6 Tone-Negative

Overall the general tone displayed in the Twitter conversation concerning the RNLI's migrant rescue activities, as differentiated to explicit, specific reference to the RNLI, was noticeably negative, despite different search terms being used. However, some references are equally applicable to the RNLI as an organization, as well as for the underlying actions being performed.

An objective of reaching the UK (or other desirable countries) seemed to be the primary focus of the migrants, a common theme claimed, with 'being picked up by Border Patrol, RNLI or RN is all the same to migrants in boats. It's been happening off Libya and Morocco for years. The objective is to land in Uk (sic), Italy or Spain.'²² Migrant travel and subsequent rescue were viewed as a 'cynical abuse'

¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/Spellitout007/status/1080808463024955393>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/Brie0748/status/1081647163061415936>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/VicarofDribbley/status/1080603519328153632>

²¹ <https://twitter.com/BrexitRage/status/1080544144769069056>

²² <https://twitter.com/merkjp22/status/1081147585832910848>

of 'lifeboat heroes'²³. Rescuing the migrants was often described as a waste of time and a diversion of critical resources.

The conversation became heated and invective took over at times to form tenuous links to the subject under discussion, such as 'Ask the women in Frankfurt who are being molested at swimming baths by immigrants & the families who lost love ones in the arena bombing to a piece of vermin who was given refuge in this country BUILD 3 walls across the Chanel (sic).'²⁴ There were even unfounded allegations that the RNLI had been forbidden²⁵ from disclosing how many rescues it had undertaken, presumably by government decree.

4.2.7 Tone-Neutral

Neutral tone messaging can be open to interpretation, though it has been identified as being potentially critical but supportive.

Examples include *respectfully* questioning²⁶ that as long as the RNLI does not receive government funding whether charitable donations should be used to pick up migrants, i.e. suggesting it is the government's responsibility, and suggesting that volunteer crews are endangered because migrant boats ignore 'internationally recognised laws and protocols for crossing shipping lanes'²⁷.

4.2.8 Tone-Positive

Positive-tone messaging was less prominent, focusing on how 'everyone on the frontline' like the RNLI, Border Force and emergency services are working to 'protect the border and keep people safe'²⁸, and how actions are fulfilling a 'duty of care' to those at sea²⁹.

²³ <https://twitter.com/merkjp22/status/1081504300545777664> (Tweet no longer available)

²⁴ <https://twitter.com/buchan1972/status/1080070456110182401>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/AskmoreNorman/status/1081612121748721664>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/Brie0748/status/1081647163061415936>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/StevieJ2019/status/1080372953731264513>

²⁸ <https://twitter.com/CharlieElphicke/status/1080498721589264384>

²⁹ <https://twitter.com/steveb757/status/1082618595560046592>

4.2.9 Unfounded claim

A tiny number of messaging made unfounded, unrelated claims in connection with the migrant rescue conversation. Although these will be examined as part of the dataset, they will neither be examined or analysed on the grounds of relevancy within this thesis.

4.3 RNLI Engagement

Manual examination of the @RNLI user timeline was undertaken to see if they had directly, publicly engaged with any correspondents concerning migrant rescues. During the period with 371 originated tweets, only two tweets could be identified, both made on January 2, 2019, as responding to comments concerning migrant rescues. As will be discussed in chapter five, this appears to be a specific policy rather than an omission.

5 DISCUSSION

Evaluating what can be a salient indicator of how and what people are saying online -- the frequency and context of key individual words -- may open a pathway into the mind of many, at least those who were sufficiently engaged about the subject during its period of observation. However, this approach can never be stated as being conclusive, because Twitter is not the only communications channel available, many people tend not to express stronger political opinions online (especially with a real name being visible), or even participants may have used related but uncaptured words to make a statement, e.g. 'it is terrible what's happening presently in the English Channel with those poor travellers' without tagging the RNLI.

Over the past few years, there has been a shift in the language used by the media-at-large when it concerns migrants (Ruz, 2015), with many adopting the term 'migrant' as a more neutral word in contrast to 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'. Modifier words like 'illegal' have been dropped in favour of 'undocumented' or 'irregular' in many cases (Migration Observatory, 2016). Such language changes may be seen elsewhere, and permeate the media of other countries too, e.g. Finland (Migrationsinstitutet, Centret för Svenskfinland, 2016) and Sweden (Språk, 2016). However, this highlights a disparity for the changing language deployed by the authorities and the media that may be a marked contrast with the language deployed by everyday citizens, especially on controversial or heated subjects.

Analysis of tweets in chapter four showed that the term migrant was used prominently, irrespective of its broader context and deployment, suggesting that it may be entering the public consciousness in any case. The converse may be said of the controversial descriptive modifier of *illegal*, being relatively underused and deprecated in usage.

Broad support for the RNLI as an organization did appear, even from those who were otherwise critical to the activities that the RNLI may be involved in. This may be partially explained as a lack of information about the broader picture, ignorance about the rules concerning rendering aid at sea, and possibly an assumption that competent authorities, rather than volunteer efforts should make such 'official' rescues. There was a relatively high proportion of words that were critical of the migrants and migration, irrespective of a broader framing concept, noting the involvement of illegal actions, e.g. traffickers, trafficking, illegal, and economical. There was a more muted presence, or total absence, of words that may invoke concern or compassion for their plight.

The conversational analysis was informative about the broader discussions or comments being made, even with its stated limitations and ways that some participants may 'game the system' through excessive retweeting. If one views the tweets as a *passive observer*, it becomes clear that one may see certain message types and sentiments appear to be reinforced by their regular, if not more prominent, presence.

The overall tone of Twitter messaging was felt to be neutral, even allowing for the presence of positive and negative terms. This neutrality was perhaps overly representative for the RNLI as an organization, rather than for the migrants *en masse*, who attracted a higher degree of negativity within the communications.

There is no evidence to suggest that any significant 'chatter' emerged prior to the publication of the article by the Daily Mail, but the original source for the revelation is not known. It is noted that the mainstream media did not consider, on the whole, the story to be something worthy of carrying for reasons best known to themselves, despite one national newspaper making the original revelations. This may be because it did not fit a particular editorial agenda, or that the media's editors had recognised the actual role of the RNLI in the rescues or other reasons. In any case, its omission from other media outlets can only have benefitted the RNLI, possibly saving it from possibly more negative headlines and/or adverse reader reaction irrespective of the actual news coverage.

It should be noted that there was no significant chatter on Twitter about such migrant rescues (based on the keyword analysis) prior to the article's appearance. One may draw inferences from this, along with the subsequent lack of follow-up by other media post-publication of the January 4/5 article.

As criticism was made about the RNLI as an organization, it could have been beneficial for some form of engagement being made, even if it was merely referencing a given public statement. The opportunity for engagement on this subject was neglected, despite the RNLI being otherwise fairly communicative within its Twitter social media channel over the period of investigation. Maintaining communications with stakeholders, even on unpalatable or negative news coverage, is arguably essential for all NPOs, and it provides a means for proactive negation or rebuttal as required.

There were online interactions on other subjects by the RNLI during the period under investigation, yet these were not 'sufficient proof of dialogue because most organizations do not apply genuine and authentic replies when they interact with their social media followers' (Taylor, Kent, & Xiong, 2019), and that '[o]rganizations often ignore uncomfortable questions and criticisms from followers in social media and use social media as a marketing tool' (Taylor, Kent, & Xiong, 2019). Taylor and Kent (2014) attribute this organizational behaviour as an 'unwillingness or inability to enact dialogue'.

Some of those commenters who had threatened to withhold future charitable giving may have been persuaded to continue supporting the organization had their concerns been at least acknowledged; and their grievances addressed, perhaps with balancing, informative information being provided. While an extensive one-to-one engaged dialogue would have been superfluous, an initial reach-out to the commenter on Twitter with a 'please see our statement at (web address)'-type of message could have sufficed.

This could have allowed the same message, despite it possibly feeling impersonal and redundant at times in different timelines, to possibly dilute the negative and

neutral commentary – or at least provided some balance even for casual readers who follow the RNLI.

That claims, regardless of any merit or factuality, were left to be unchecked was, I contend, an issue of concern for the RNLI that could only have contributed towards an element of reputational damage, at least in the short-term. Some of those who portrayed negative or neutral feelings towards the RNLI, including those who may have indicated a cessation of donations, could have been expressing temporary discontent and perhaps resumed charitable giving later on. There is no way to ascertain this, but it is highly plausible that many donations will have been lost.

Examination of the RNLI's social media presence on Twitter during the period of investigation shows that they had resources available to post and respond to individual messaging strands, but they effectively (in 369 of 371 situations) chose to ignore the subject of migrant rescue and their role within it. The two responses were perfunctory at best and were in response to more 'soft-ball' type messaging. The RNLI lost, it is argued, a great chance to undertake advocacy activities, correct misunderstandings and incorrect information, and perhaps use the situation to highlight its mission to rescue all at sea. It could easily have avoided the perception of taking sides in a politically sensitive situation by highlighting its independent role. It chose to do neither of these.

It has not been examined, but if worthy of background thought, as to whether this story could have developed with more wide-reaching adverse effects for the RNLI if the 'Twitter storm' had engulfed it, or if the story had latterly featured in other media.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to discover the language and sentiment used on a social media network following the publication of a potentially contentious story in a mass-circulation newspaper and website concerning a British NPO rescuing migrants who had been 'illegally sailing towards the UK' (see Figure 1 on page 2).

Despite the story failing to gain traction and coverage in other media outlets, it retained the potential to adversely affect the perception of the NPO in the minds of man, due to the story's representation and framing, which could translate in turn to reduced or terminated financial and moral support for its activities. Should there have been broader media interest and coverage in this story it would have been possible to conduct additional research to compare and contrast representation and framing elements, as well as increased social media commentary and reaction. This is one understandable limitation of the research, yet it need not invalidate any findings or conclusions.

To guide the reader and contextualise the underlying research a literature review considered Twitter as a social media network service; fake news, echo chambers and their bubbles as responses; trust and audience perception as the result of interaction between news media literacy, social campaigning and awareness; and in addition the effects of such factors as crisis communication and news/stakeholder management.

Analysis was made of Twitter in a period preceding and following publication of the article, utilising several keywords that described the story's core claim in neutral, negative and positive terms. Tweets that matched the selected keywords were coded into ten distinct categories for analysis. Tweets from the RNLI during the same period were also examined, but not coded, to discover their engagement with the topic under investigation.

It is fair to say that responses to the article were primarily neutral or negative, being indicative of the manner in which the story was framed. This tends to mirror

the type of comments left by other users on the article as viewed on the internet (but not considered by this thesis, for it is beyond its current scope).

It was discovered that there was widespread use of the neutral term migrant throughout the captured Twitter messages, even when the tone may have otherwise been negative or conservatively neutral. This can be a reflection towards the underlying change of language deployed within the media-at-large over recent years, though it may not reflect the sentiment of the populations where such media outlets may be based.

There was a noticeable level of frustration and concern for the RNLI as an organization and its lifeboat crews even when the correspondents were against the use of RNLI resources for migrant rescue, with feelings being that official authorities should have done more to either aid the rescue or prevent such access to British territorial waters. General support seemed to be retained for the RNLI, even if its mission was disapproved of, although some correspondents did indicate that they would either cease financial support or are considering it as a course of action should the RNLI continue to rescue migrants.

Some correspondents were very eager to make their voice appear to be heard, utilising extensively the 'retweet' function -- this group including one British member of parliament. There appeared to be very few actual conversations within the analysed tweets; instead it was primarily a one-way series of exclamations, comments and claims.

What was most noticeable, and possibly alarming, was the lack of engagement by the RNLI, particularly to comments that were arguably misleading or misinformed. The organization could, and I argue should, have at least sought to engage, even if it was to merely point to a statement that may correct any incorrect information and place its version of the narrative into the public domain. This can be viewed as being more critical when people are turning away from news in general and/or placing trust in news (and by extension reports of news) from social media as discussed earlier.

Without a doubt, there will be many Twitter users, including many who did not directly comment, who will have seen the article and/or the discussions around the topic, who will now have a less favourable view of the organization because of its apparent actions. It is fortunate that the story did not develop further within the media world, nor receive even more significant and prolonged exposure.

This thesis provided a compelling case for analysis, showing how the discussion around one news article can polarise debate, and offered insight into the linguistic and semantic devices deployed within. It also provided an example describing how an organization both missed an opportunity and failed to engage with stakeholders within a situation that had the capacity to develop into a potential 'crisis' that may have had wider reputational and financial implications, irrespective of it doing nothing wrong or untoward.

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