

Microblogging during the European Floods 2013: What Twitter May Contribute in German Emergencies

Christian Reuter, Institute for Information Systems, University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany

Julian Schröter, Institute for Information Systems, University of Siegen, Siegen, Germany

ABSTRACT

Social media is becoming more and more important in crisis management. However its analysis by emergency services still bears unaddressed challenges and the majority of studies focus on the use of social media in the USA. In this paper German tweets of the European Flood 2013 are therefore captured and analyzed using descriptive statistics, qualitative data coding, and computational algorithms. The authors' work illustrates that this event provided sufficient German traffic and geo-locations as well as enough original data (not derivative). However, up-to-date Named Entity Recognizer (NER) with German classifier could not recognize German rivers and highways satisfactorily. Furthermore the authors' analysis revealed pragmatic (linguistic) barriers resulting from irony, wordplay, and ambiguity, as well as in retweet-behavior. To ease the analysis of data they suggest a retweet ratio, which is illustrated to be higher with important tweets and may help selecting tweets for mining. The authors argue that existing software has to be adapted and improved for German language characteristics, also to detect markedness, seriousness and truth.

Keywords: *Clustering, Computer-Mediated Communication, Crisis Informatics, Data Mining, Disaster Management, Emergency, Entity Extraction, Information Retrieval, Microblogging, Rapidminer, Social Media, Text Mining, Twitter, Web-Based Services*

1. INTRODUCTION

The usage of social media enables access to real-time data provided by citizens, the news, organizations and companies. Using Twitter communication during disasters is a major challenge because access to tweets is real-time and short-lived. This requires fast decisions on which information to select. This hidden implicit knowledge could add significant value to manage disasters. Many studies during the last decade covered the analysis of social media in disaster management mainly in the USA (starting with Murphy and Jennex (2006) on PeopleFinder and ShelterFinder following Katrina and Palen and Liu (2007), who were anticipating a future of ICT-supported public participation), but only a few case studies about countries such as Germany exist (Reuter

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et al., 2012). However, Twitter in Germany is used in a different way from that in the US, e.g. usage frequencies. In Germany 56% of internet-users are active on Facebook, whereas just 6% are active on Twitter (BITKOM, 2013). The question arises whether, in general, German tweets contain relevant information as compared to US disaster management studies (e.g. Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird, & Palen, 2010). Furthermore the applicability of existing mining methods to non-English tweets and the selection of appropriate technology is a challenge.

The availability of sources of data, a taxonomy and ontology for guiding search, retrieval and storage have been identified as some key points for organizations to focus on when considering social media (Jennex, 2010). Suggestions for dynamic quality assessment of citizen generated content (Ludwig et al., 2015), implemented as tailorable quality assessment services (Reuter, Ludwig, Ritzkatis, et al., 2015) can only be successful, if these requirements are fulfilled.

In order to address these points, our study (1) aims to first examine whether German emergency tweets contain *additional* and *relevant* information, useful for forecasting, prevention or crisis intervention. This objective is evaluated with retrospective Tweet analysis of the European Flood 2013 data in Germany. Following the structure suggested by Vieweg et al. (2010) this study also investigates (2) if existing computational data mining systems can be applied to German crisis Tweets. Furthermore, we examine (3) which methods (computational versus manual-supervised) are valuable and practical in producing trustworthiness and secure information (see Figure 1).

2. RELATED WORK

There has been much research about the use of social media in emergencies. For more than one decade, social media has been used by the public in crisis situations (Reuter et al., 2012): after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, wikis created by citizens were used to collect information on missing people (Palen & Liu, 2007). During the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami (Liu et al., 2008) as well as the 2007 Southern California wildfires (Shklovski et al., 2008) photo repository sites were used by citizen to exchange information.

Many other published research papers focus on the use of Twitter during disasters, mainly in the USA since 2008 (Reuter, 2014): The use of *Twitter* has been analyzed scientifically in the context of various crises such as the 2008 hurricanes Gustav and Ike leading the observation of differences between the use of Twitter in crisis and the general use (Hughes & Palen, 2009), the 2008 Tennessee River technological failure, outlining the phenomena of broadcasting (Sutton, 2010), the 2009 Red River Floods, highlighting broadcasting by people on the ground as well as activities of directing, relaying, synthesizing, and redistributing (Vieweg et al., 2010).

A study of Public Information Officers of the Los Angeles Fire Department in 2009 highlights the importance of the information evangelist within organizations (Latonero & Shklovski, 2011). Other studies on the 2009 Oklahoma Fires highlight the role of retweeting (Starbird & Palen, 2010); the 2009 attack on four police officers in Lakewood, Washington shows the ability of Twitter to organize and disseminate crisis-related information (Heverin & Zach, 2010), the 2010 San Bruno Californian gas explosion and fire disaster illustrates that sentiment analysis with emotions performed 27% better than Bayesian Networks alone (Nagy & Stamberger, 2012).

The analysis of 2011 Super Outbreak compared real “emergent groups” (as defined by Stallings & Quarantelli, 1985) and virtual “digital volunteers” (coined by Starbird & Palen, 2011) and distinguished groups of twitterers, such as helpers, reporters, retweeters, and repeaters (Reuter et al., 2013). A journey about the availability of social media during the 2011 San Diego/Southwest Blackout illustrates that “contrary to expectations, the cell phone system did not have the expected availability, and as a result, users had a difficult time using social media to

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