EBOLA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Lisa Gualtieri, PhD, ScM
Lisa.Gualtieri@tufts.edu
@lisagualtieri
In the beginning: Twitter and Ebola
Google Search - US

Interest over time. Web Search, ebola. United States.

Mar-Oct 2014

View full report in Google Trends
Global vs US

Interest over time. Web Search, ebola. Worldwide.

Interest over time. Web Search, ebola. United States.

View full report in Google Trends
Ebola in the US - Response

Eric Quick
@equick34
I'm so scared of this Ebola stuff OMG America WHAT IS LIFE.
9:03 PM - 30 Sep 2014
1 RETWEET 7 FAVORITES

Jordan
@jgantous
I'm actually really paranoid and scared of the Ebola outbreak and now that it's in America I think I'm moving to another continent
6:04 AM - 1 Oct 2014
1 RETWEET 8 FAVORITES

Ellen Kirst
@ellenkirste
Welcome to America, Ebola! I will now be buying a plastic bubble to live in....
7:20 AM - 1 Oct 2014
1 RETWEET 4 FAVORITES
Preliminary Coverage

CNBC Now @CNBCnow
Shares of Tekmira Pharmaceuticals surge 10% after-hours following news of first U.S. Ebola diagnosis.
cnb.cx/1Bz0e0V • $TKMR
4:44 PM - 30 Sep 2014
70 RETWEETS 12 FAVORITES

CNBC @CNBC
BREAKING: CDC confirms first Ebola case diagnosed in the United States, Reuters reports. cnb.cx/1rDPlnZ
4:39 PM - 30 Sep 2014
4,563 RETWEETS 749 FAVORITES

Eamon Javers @EamonJavers
CDC confirming first Ebola case diagnosed in the United States. Briefing for reporters at 5:30 ET
4:43 PM - 30 Sep 2014
28 RETWEETS 2 FAVORITES

Tufts CGPH Tufts Center for Global Public Health
Addressing Concerns

Lydia Polgreen @lpoigreen

Fact: Ebola is really hard to get. Requires direct contact with bodily fluids of a person showing symptoms.
5:13 PM - 30 Sep 2014
208 RETWEETS 61 FAVORITES

What are the chances of getting Ebola in the United States?
The risk that anyone will contract Ebola in the United States is extremely small, experts say.

Doctors across the country are being reminded to ask for the travel history of anybody who comes in with a fever. Patients who have been to West Africa are being screened and tested if there seems to be a chance they have been exposed. Heightened concern about the virus led to alarms being raised at three hospitals in New York City. But no Ebola cases have turned up. If someone were to bring the virus to the United States, standard procedures for infection control are likely to contain it.

It helps that Ebola does not spread nearly as easily as Hollywood movies about contagious diseases might suggest. In 2008, a patient who had contracted Marburg – a virus much like Ebola – in Uganda was treated at a hospital in the United States and could have exposed more than 200 people to the disease before anyone would have known what she had. Yet no one became sick.

Lydia Polgreen @lpoigreen

"The risk that anyone will contract Ebola in the United States is extremely small." nytimes.com/interactive/20...
5:17 PM - 30 Sep 2014
183 RETWEETS 83 FAVORITES
Stigmatization and Fear

Twitter Tweet 1:

@Cor10eH

How do we know that this isn’t a terrorist attack? People that come here from places that they knew had it or had been around it. #ebolaqanda

2:43 PM - 3 Oct 2014  Virginia, US, United States

1 RETWEET 3 FAVORITES

Twitter Tweet 2:

@realDonaldTrump

The United States must immediately institute strong travel restrictions or Ebola will be all over the United States—a plague like no other!

8:36 PM - 30 Sep 2014

908 RETWEETS 870 FAVORITES
Misconceptions

QUIZ: DO YOU HAVE EBOLA?

1. Have you touched the vomit, blood, sweat, saliva, urine, or feces of someone who might have Ebola?

NO

You do not have Ebola.

Steve Marmel
@Marmel

"OH MY GOD, DO I HAVE EBOLA?"

Here’s a very simple flowchart.

Now calm down.
10:29 AM - 3 Oct 2014

436 RETWEETS 252 FAVORITES
Spread of False Information

DON'T TRUST THE CDC!!!

The government exposed these people to the Ebola virus.

2:30 PM - 3 Oct 2014

1 RETWEET
CDC Works to Address Misconceptions

- Via #CDCchat, #ABCDrBchat, and others
Other Responses

Despite serving as a vessel for hysteria, Twitter was also a useful tool for sharing information.

Tweet: A sign at our hotel in Monrovia, #Liberia outlines the precautions people should take to protect themselves.

---

_A sign at our hotel in Monrovia, #Liberia outlines the precautions people should take to protect themselves against the deadly #Ebola virus._

---

![A sign at our hotel in Monrovia, #Liberia outlines the precautions people should take to protect themselves.](image)
How the CDC influenced the online conversation

- Join the conversation where and when it’s occurring
- Address fears and misinformation
- Use plain language
- Educate health workers and prepare the US health system
- Shift the dialog
Fundraising in the US

- Mark Zuckerberg
  - Personal Donation +
  - Enabling FB users to donate quickly & easily
What Did We Learn?

- The Ebola outbreak has unveiled a darker side of social media -- the voracious spread of misinformation. Rumored preventatives and cures rapidly gain traction online as desperate West Africans search for any method to counteract the thus-far untreatable disease. Eating raw onion, eating kola nut, or drinking coffee have all surfaced as solutions. In Nigeria, two people died from drinking salt water -- making misinformation in that country half as deadly as the disease itself. The rumored cure has hospitalized dozens more.

- The ill-informed noise on social media has made it difficult for legitimate sources, such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC) or the World Health Organization (WHO) to make their voices heard. The CDC was forced to dramatically increase its Twitter presence to combat the spread of misinformation. Twitter users have been making hashtags like #EbolaFacts or #FactsOnEbola in an attempt to compile accurate information. Sites have popped up to curate and aggregate authoritative posts from across the web.

- The key lesson from the Ebola outbreak and the role of social media in regulated industries is that rumors -- unintentional or malicious -- feed on social media, diluting the spread of accurate information and jeopardizing the credibility of organizations. Mark Twain perhaps said it best: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."