#SocialStrong: The Effect of Social Media on the Boston Marathon Bombing

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Abstract

During the 2013 Boston Marathon, two explosions occurred devastating the city and entire country. The days leading up to Dzhokhar Tsarnev’s arrest were a blur of posts by various social media outlets. A small portion of information was verified by authorities. However, a large amount of material was false, then published by accredited news outlets. In contrast, the Boston Police Department effectively used social media to communicate with various publics. In a time of ever-advancing technology, tactics like social media shape a response to crisis. The following case study seeks to examine the effect of social media on the Boston Marathon Bombings.
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## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of the Boston Marathon</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Patriot’s Day Race</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Crisis &amp; Media Coverage</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequence of Events</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Police Department’s Response</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Social Media During the Bombing</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Social Media</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for the Future</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
#SocialStrong: The Effect of Social Media on the Boston Marathon Bombings

Overview

The devastating Boston Marathon bombings which occurred in April 2013 have forever changed the way social media is viewed. The actions taken in the search for and apprehension of the Tsarnev brothers gave the public and professionals within communications an in-depth look at the current state of media presence and influences. Many companies decided to halt all social media updates out of respect for the events that occurred. However, news sources continued to search for the latest updates of information. In many cases, the most bountiful resource for news was posted on various social media outlets.

The use of social media outlets during the incident resulted in both positive and negative outcomes affecting the media, authorities and the general public. Traditional media outlets made extensive use of Twitter and other social media to report the story. In one instance, The New York Post ran a front page photo of two teenagers adjacent to the headline “Bag Men,” thereby implying they had a connection to the backpack bombs; the image was take from a crowdsourcing site. Websites such as Reddit used crowdsourcing where members collectively sifted through images of the bombing scene. These well-meaning people incorrectly accused innocent bystanders whose lives are forever effected. In some cases, Twitter reported misinformation either accidentally or maliciously; then, the information spread on a global platform. For example, some untrue stories were circulated such as conspiracy theories.

Yet in other instances, social media was used very effectively. The Boston Police Department’s use of Twitter was arguably one of the most poignant actions amidst all of the noise. The Department used social media both cautiously and powerfully to get information out to the public and the media. During a time when cell phone reception was blocked due to the concern of detonating subsequent bombs, Commissioner Ed Davis decided social media was the best route to take in terms of communication tactics. Their approach was a carefully calibrated ‘command-and-control’ use of social media with a selective sharing of timely and factual information to counter media rumors, in turn, reassuring the public while simultaneously protecting the location of investigating officers in a fast-moving and unpredictable environment.

Cheryl Fiandaca, Bureau Chief of public information assumed the role of running the Department’s Twitter feed which served as an official source for such journalists, authorities and the public alike. Once the final capture of Dzhokhar Tsarnev was made, the announcement was not made via press conference but rather on Twitter. The success of the Boston Police Department’s Twitter feed has pushed many other police and fire departments to create their own handle. This incident has also started a new conversation centered around the effect of social media during crisis.

1 See exhibit 1 for the New York Post front page story.
History of the Boston Marathon

The Boston Athletic Association has organized the Boston Marathon since it began in 1897. The Boston Marathon is the world’s oldest annual marathon and ranks as one of the world’s most prestigious road racing events. Typically, the event attracts over 500,000 people per year, making it New England’s most widely viewed sporting event. The race started with 18 participants in 1897. The event now attracts approximately 20,000 registered participants every year with about 26,839 people registered in 2013. The marathon is considered an American classic and a staple for American athletics. The B.A.A. promotes a healthy lifestyle through the support of various charities, youth and year-round running programs. The B.A.A. has expanded its presence in the local community through various charity involvements and races. The organization is very much a part of the community’s pulse.

Mission

“Established in 1887, the Boston Athletic Association is a non-profit organization with a mission of managing athletic events and promoting a healthy lifestyle through sports, especially running.”

The Patriot’s Day Race

During 1897-1968, the Boston Marathon was held on Patriot’s Day, April 19. This day is a holiday commemorating the start of the Revolutionary War and was recognized only in Massachusetts and Maine. The only exception allowed was when the 19th fell on Sunday. For those years, the race was held the following day (Monday the 20th). But, in 1969, the holiday was officially moved to the third Monday in April. Since 1969 the race has been held on a Monday.

Patriot’s Day commemorates the anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord. These victories were the first battles of the Revolutionary War. The day is meant to be a time when Americans celebrate a supreme dedication to freedom while remembering the many battles America had to endure before becoming free.

Past Crisis & Media Coverage

Due to the scale of this event, about 1,000 media members from more than 100 outlets receive media credentials. The Boston Marathon has not encountered many crisis throughout history. Generally, the press surrounding the race has been very positive and upbeat. Many times any news is related to new partnerships or coverage on runners and their achievements. The most

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2 See exhibit 2 for full list of charities B.A.A. is linked to.
recent issue before the bombing was a scandal involving Rosie Ruiz in the 1980 marathon. Ruiz had been crowned the victor of the 1980 race but it was later discovered she did not actually finish the entire course. At the time, social media did not exist. However, the reaction of the media was as strong as it is today. Newspaper columnists, television and radio talk show hosts, along with others took part in publicizing the situation with Ruiz. This scandal did shake the B.A.A. but eventually blew over and the news coverage returned to normal. The only other recorded deaths at the Boston Marathon previous to the bombing was in 1996 when a 62 year old man died of a heart attack during the one hundredth anniversary event, then again in 2002 when a 28 year old woman died of hyponatremia. None of these events were as dramatic as what happened at the finish line on Monday, April 15. The tragic event killed three individuals and injured over 200 people making it the biggest crisis in the Marathon’s history.

Sequence of Events

The following is a chronological account of developments in the Boston Marathon bombing case and subsequent investigation, as spelled out in court documents and other official statements, including a federal complaint. The names below reflect authorities’ official explanation as to what they believe occurred. The tweets were taken from the Boston Police Department’s Twitter account.

Monday, April 15

Morning: The Boston Marathon begins at Hopkinton Mass. with runners and wheelchair competitors. Almost 23,000 people participate in the race with an abundance of cheering spectators along the 26.2 mile course.

2:38 p.m.: Cameras show two men, later identified by authorities as Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnev, turning onto Boylston Street heading east near the location of the finish line carrying a knapsack.

2:45 p.m.: His brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnev begins walking toward the finish line also carrying a knapsack with a phone in his left hand. He drops the knapsack to the ground at his feet. He remains there for about four minutes, seeming to take a picture with his phone.

2:49 p.m.: Dzhokhar Tsarnev lifts the phone to his head and speaks for about 18 seconds. He finishes the call and the first explosion goes off within seconds. He looks to the east, the starts moving west - away from the finish line without the knapsack he had been carrying. Ten seconds later, the second explosion occurred right where Dzhokhar Tsarnev had left the knapsack.

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3 See exhibit 3 for full article about Rosie Ruiz.
Wednesday, April 17

Afternoon: Dias Kadyrbayev (a friend of Dzhokhar Tsarnev since the two enrolled together at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth in fall 2011) drives to Tsarnev’s dormitory room and texts his friend to come down and meet him. Kadyrbayev noticed that Dzhokhar Tsarnev has cut his hair short. The two talk, then Tsarnev goes back to his room.  

Evening: Azamat Tazhayakov (Kadyrbayev’s roommate at a New Bedford apartment) stays with Dzhokhar Tsarnev at the apartment until about midnight.

Thursday, April 18,

Afternoon: Azamat Tazhayakov attends a class at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, after which Dzhokhar Tsarnev drives him home to his New Bedford apartment.

5 p.m. ET: The FBI releases pictures of two male suspects being sought in connection with the Boston Marathon bombings.
11 p.m.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology police officer Sean Collier, 26, is shot dead on the school’s Cambridge, Massachusetts campus (the killing is later linked to the Tsarnevs).\(^4\)

**Friday, April 19**

Early Hours: Police say the two suspects hijack a car at gunpoint in Cambridge, Massachusetts, taking the driver as a hostage. One suspect tells the driver they are the Boston Marathon bombers. Then the suspects talk openly about heading to New York. Eventually, the driver is able to escape his captors by running into a gas station convenience store. From the information gathered from the hostage, authorities track down the suspects. Then, a chase ensures during which the suspects toss explosives and exchange gunfire with the police. Tamerlan Tsarnev dies after the gunfight, while Dzhokhar eludes the authorities.\(^31\)

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\(^4\) See exhibit 4 for full story about Sean Collier.
Daytime: Boston and surrounding communities are put on lockdown. Schools are closed, public transit is shutdown and people are ordered off the street. Governor Deval Patrick asked that all residents ‘shelter in place’ and that they not open the door for anyone with the exception of a properly identified law enforcement officer.
6 p.m. to 9 p.m.: After the lockdown is lifted, a resident goes outside to check his boat parked in the backyard. He notices blood inside. This tip leads to a large-scale law enforcement effort that ends with the capture of Dzhokhar Tsarnev.  

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Boston Police Department’s Response

The Boston Police Department’s use of social media was a fairly new concept. Unlike other large-scale city police departments, Boston has invested in its police department's social media presence for a number of years. The Department’s Twitter account was created in 2009 and was the first to publish public safety information during the St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Shortly after they opened their Twitter account, the Department expanded to Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest and a video-streaming site, UStream. These sites are all handled by the Bureau of Public Information and provide information to local and national media outlets while handling the majority of media relations functions as part of the Office of the Police Commissioner. The department’s Twitter account originally had 54,000 followers. This number grew to over 330,000 people following the account after the events. In total, the account reached approximately 49 million people within five days.

Use of Social Media During the Bombing

The Boston Police team in place during the Boston bombing and the manhunt which occurred in the following days consisted of: Bureau Chief, Cheryl Fiandaca, and three officers responsible for the content on BPD’s multiple social media outlets. Fiandaca was a former television news reporter with 16 years of experience working in New York City and Boston. Her ultimate goal was to transform the department into a news organization in addition to carrying out their usual activities. Additionally, Fiandaca stated the Department cross-trains staff to perform public relations activities such as: writing news releases or how to post Facebook and Twitter messages.

“We staffed 24 hours,” Fiandaca told the Huffington Post. “Someone was always here. We tried to put out as much information as we possibly could without jeopardizing the investigation.”

Cheryl Fiandaca, Bureau Chief

During the crisis the Boston Police had blocked cell phone reception due to speculation that phones might have detonated the bombs. The Department’s blog was a popular source of information (30,000 views monthly), but it crashed due to heavy user traffic. The Department’s official Twitter account published updates about the incident quickly after the first blast. Fiandaca tweeted from the Boston Police handle @BostonPolice 10 times during approximately a 90 minute time span.
“It was difficult to communicate. When I finally got a call and spoke to the commissioner, he said, ‘We need to push this out and let people know what’s happening,’” Fiandaca recalled.

“That’s what I did, I started tweeting from my phone at that mall.”

Cheryl Fiandaca, Bureau Chief

The Department understood Twitter was the quickest and most reliable way to communicate with: Boston residents, marathon runners, friends and family members, the news media, BPD employees and other law enforcement agencies. The team was briefed by commanders three to five times per day. The Department posted 148 tweets during the five-day manhunt which concluded with the capture of Dzhokhar Tsarnev.

However early on Friday, April 19, the Boston Police changed their approach. Instead of posting updates alone, they tried to counteract false information which was spreading rapidly throughout various social networks. There was a vast amount of misinformation which was being published in newspapers and broadcasted on networks. This prompted rumors to become perceived reality and led to false accusations. A missing student from Brown University had been incorrectly identified as a suspect and confusion spread over a number of people who were held as suspects. These misunderstandings had far reaching effects for law enforcement and the individuals whom were eventually proven innocent. Additionally, multiple news sources including AP and CNN had erroneously reported a suspect was in custody.

Fiandaca said she had to address the issue of misinformation and the multitude of information which was being spread rapidly throughout various social media outlets. It all came to a boiling point when she received a phone call from an official stating a local radio station was reporting locations of officers involved in the manhunt. While the department has the ability to release information in real time, they have a responsibility to ensure safety first.

“These guys know not to do that. They don’t give away where officers are,” said Fiandaca, in reference to local media. “But there were hundreds of reporters from all over the country here. We wanted to let other media folks who aren’t as familiar know what’s commonplace in Boston.”

Cheryl Fiandaca, Bureau Chief

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5 See exhibit 5 for full story from CNN.
After releasing several tweets asking people to stop compromising officer safety and broadcasting live video of officers, the department observed the tone and speed of coverage change instantly.

**Influence of Social Media**

While the Boston Police and the FBI were working hard to locate the two suspects who were responsible for the bombing. It became a trend for mainstream media including established and professional forces to follow the lead of the plethora of information being released on various social media outlets. A recent report from the Pew Research Center, a quarter of Americans received information about the explosions and the manhunt for the bombers on a social networking site like Facebook and Twitter. This trend promoted a new wave of crowdsourcing therefore bypassing more traditional methods.

**Reddit**

Soon after the bombing at the Boston Marathon, a ‘hive community’ - Reddit - set into motion a collaborative effort to identify who was potentially responsible for the devastation. Essentially, Reddit serves as a community board which posts any and all new pieces of information. While the intention may have been noble, innocent bystanders were labeled as suspicious or worse simply because they were near the scene during the time of the explosion.

*“Activity on Reddit fueled online witch hunts and dangerous speculation which spiraled into very negative consequences for innocent parties. The Reddit staff and the millions of people on Reddit around the world deeply regret that this happened.”*

Erik Martin, Reddit’s General Manager

In many cases, it was from this massive cloud of information that news outlets chose to report. One instance in particular involved CNN reporting on arrests which were never made and suspects which were deemed innocent. The *New York Post* also published a front page photo of two dark-skinned males implying they were the suspects. Reddit’s work was being cited by major publications. Each time the group targeted a now-wronged bystander, they had the potential of ruining a life. Hence, ground rules were set forth requiring photos which had been thoroughly examined and vindicated were to be to be clearly marked in old threads. However, the site had proven its worth. One user uploaded a photo taken during the destruction; it contained a shot of Dzhokhar Tsarnev. Various other photos were questioned by the *New York Times* but some have since then been verified as authentic.

**Twitter**

On Friday morning among the multitudes of broadcasts from Watertown, Massachusetts, a Twitter account claiming to be the suspect’s brother started posting threats to the police. After
earning a great deal of retweets, it was picked up by a police scanner which added authenticity to the user. Once the scanner decided to broadcast the threats, journalists started to tweet about them as well which essentially created a credibility-building feedback loop.\(^55\) Terrorism experts said social media helped those in Boston and played a role in determining next steps after the explosions.

> “Authorities have recognized that one of the first places people go in events like this is to social media, to see what the crowd is saying about what to do next. And today authorities went to Twitter and directed them to traditional media environments where authorities can present a clear calm picture of what to do next.”

Bill Braniff, Executive Director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism\(^56\)

Initially, law enforcement asked for the public’s aid via Twitter and other social media outlets. However, it became clear the frenzy of information was harming the integrity of the investigation and jeopardizing officer safety as well as leading to numerous false accusations.\(^57\) Yet, Cheryl Fiandaca’s use of Twitter remained separate from the rest due to the credibility of the content being posted. Twitter said the Department’s tweets acted as “a lifeline of communication for the entire city, and served as a defense against miscommunication” during the uncertain days after the April 15 bombings.\(^58\) However, this was not the only time the Department’s use of social media was applauded. After the capture of Dzhokhar Tsarnev, the social media news site *Mashable* ran the headline, “Boston Police Schooled Us All on Social Media”.\(^59\) The Huffington Post also ran with, “How Cop Team Led City From Terror To Joy.”\(^60\) The Department’s Twitter account was able to memorialize the horror of the bombs and the elation of the final capture in real time.\(^61\)

> "If I'm here in Washington, D.C., and I'm on Twitter and can demonstrate my empathy, it helps create this idea of resolve or community solidarity with people who are there on the ground in a way that uni-dimensional media doesn't do," said Braniff. "Online, I can express outrage or sympathy. I get a greater sense of unity—the we is a much bigger we"

Bill Braniff, Executive Director of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism\(^62\)

**Facebook**

Many people who were concerned about family and friends in the Boston area turned to Facebook as a source of news.\(^63\) As the word spread about the blasts on Monday afternoon, social media was contoured by runners, authorities and the general public. "I have been following my friend's Facebook [account] who is near the scene and she is updating everyone before it even gets to the news," said Sara Bozorg, Doctor at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.\(^64\) "Sites like Facebook offer a convenient way to retrieve news especially since many users are constantly on them,” says Michael Dimock, Director of Pew’s public opinion and polling project. They “are on Facebook, and the information is just flowing at them.”\(^65\) Some found different platforms were
suitable for different purposes. Facebook can improve the overall image of a crisis if used correctly. In the end, Facebook was best for care and support.66

Implications for the Future

The biggest source of information in this crisis came from the public via social media outlets. Social media can be effective in a crisis by using it to gain awareness of the situation. Listening to the conversation and noticing what is being said, then appropriately responding was crucial for the Police Department during the event. By providing real-time updates, the Boston Police Department was able to control the tone of the conversation. Additionally, this case demonstrated perhaps the best illustration of a crowdsourcing investigation in recent history.67

The public quickly and adamantly responded to the FBI’s request for information. Ultimately, it all ended with a tweet.68 A citizen’s tip led to the capture of the surviving suspect. Meanwhile, major networks turned to Twitter and other social media platforms for breaking news coverage. Many Boston residents offered aid and shelter to those impacted by the bombings via social media. As news broke about the devastating bombings, many were desperate to connect with family and friends who were running the race or in the area. Yet, with cellphone service cut off, people turned to social media to connect and check-in.69 Lastly, the Boston Police Department and Cheryl Fiandaca’s smart use of Twitter set a new precedent for other authorities to follow during emergencies. As the city of Boston and all of America continues to recover from the devastation, developments in technology such as social media continue to shape and define our responses to crisis.70
References


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Footnotes


Images


Appendix

Exhibit 1:
Exhibit 2:
It is unfortunate that one of the most memorable events in running lore--for both runners and non-runners alike--is not a hard-fought victory in a race, or a true act of sportsmanship, but is rather Rosie Ruiz's "victory" in the 1980 Boston Marathon. In these days of on-course video cameras, elite starts, chips, and checkpoints, it is amazing to think that anyone could have perpetrated, even for a short time, such an obvious hoax, but in the relatively unsophisticated world of road racing in the early '80s, although there were those who were suspicious from the start, it actually took a few days before the truth won out.

The real winner, Jacqueline Gareau of Canada, crossed the line in 2:34:28, but was essentially ignored by the media that flocked to interview Ruiz, who had crossed the line earlier. Apparently, Ruiz had dropped out of the race, hopped on the subway, got off about a mile from the finish line, and ran in from there. The effect was to rob Gareau of her moment of triumph,
although she was later honored in a special ceremony a couple of weeks after the race. Second-place finisher Patti Lyons, whose 2:35:08 finish set a new American record, was also pretty much completely ignored.

While technology in the running world has changed a great deal, the reaction of the popular media has not. As they still do with any scandal that erupts in today’s world, newspaper columnists, TV and radio talk show hosts, and other humorists had a field day making jokes about Rosie’s Ruse:

**Now Rosie Ruiz can be just like Bill Rodgers, and sell her own line of running gear. Rosie Ruiz shoes--so comfortable that when the marathon is over your feet feel like they've only gone a mile or two.**
--David Kindred, Washington Post

**Did you hear about the Rosie Ruiz doll? Wind it up and it takes the subway. . . .**
--David Kindred, Washington Post

**One disgruntled runner told Rosie Ruiz that she didn't look tired enough to have run 26 miles--so she hit him with her roller skate!**
--Mark Russell, WRC radio

**Rosie Ruiz was disqualified from the Boston Marathon today. Officials became suspicious when she crossed the finish line of the 26.2 mile event wearing open-toed sandals and smoking a cigarette.**
--ABC TV "Friday" show

**Rosie Ruiz is taking this too seriously. Instead of crying on national TV, she could have written a book, Shortcuts to Fame. It would start on Chapter 20.**
--David Kindred, Washington Post

(The preceding was excerpted from the July, 1980 *Running Times*)
Officer killed in MIT standoff ID'd as Sean Collier, 26
Stephanie Haven, Special for USA TODAY 12:19 p.m. EDT April 19, 2013

He was responding to a disturbance on campus.

MIT police officer Sean Collier, 26, of Somerville, Mass., died Thursday night after two men fired gunshots at Collier, who responded to a disturbance on the campus.

MIT police chief John DiFava said Collier was "a dedicated officer who was extremely well liked by his colleagues and the MIT community," according to a press release from the Middlesex District Attorney office.

Massachusetts General Hospital pronounced Collier dead upon arrival Thursday after 10:30 p.m. when he was found between Vassar and Main streets, 10 minutes after the first reports of gunshots on the MIT campus.

Collier worked in the Somerville Police Department information technology department before he joined the MIT police in January 2012, Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone said.

"He was an outstanding employee for us," Curtatone said. "I have no doubt he was also an incredible officer for MIT."

Collier was among the top candidates to be appointed to the Somerville Police Department, before he began at MIT, Curtatone said. Even after he...
switched employment, he helped maintain the Somerville Police Department website, which he had helped build.

Members of the MIT Outing Club, an outdoor adventure group Collier participated in, created an online page to post memories of the deceased police officer.

"It seems you were a model MIT CI officer, who truly understood his role on campus and was a real friend to the students," an alum of this club wrote. "Thank you for your service."

Collier graduated with honors from Salem State University in 2009 where he majored in criminal justice. A post on the college's Facebook page read that they "are deeply saddened" about his death.

Somerville police are helping regional authorities with the ongoing manhunt, but Somerville residents are in no immediate danger, Curtatone said.

"It's been surreal," Curtatone said.

\textit{In an earlier version of this story, the MIT officer's first name, Sean, and the Somerville mayor's first name, Joseph, were incorrect.}
Exhibit 5:

Police: Body found in river may be missing Brown University student

By Pauline Kim and Laura Smith-Spark, CNN
updated 10:37 PM EDT, Wed April 24, 2013

(CNN) -- The body of a young man found in the Providence River on Tuesday may be that of Sunil Tripathi, a student at Brown University who disappeared March 16, police told CNN.

A Brown rowing coach reported a body in the river near India Point Park, Lindsay Lague, a spokeswoman for the Providence Police Department, said Wednesday.

Lague said authorities may be able to identify the body as soon as Thursday morning.

When asked if it might be Tripathi, Detective Mark Sacco said it was "likely" but was cautious to say they won't know who it is until the medical examiner makes a determination.

The body is a man between the ages of 18 and 30, he said.

The Tripathi family's search for the 22-year-old philosophy major has been detailed on a Facebook page, "Help us find Sunil Tripathi."

They temporarily took down the page after they were inundated by ugly comments when Sunil Tripathi was falsely accused on social media of being one of the Boston Marathon bombers.

After the FBI released images of Suspect 1 and Suspect 2, people took to sites such as Reddit, a real-time message board, and Twitter speculating that Tripathi looked like one of the suspects.
Reddit's general manager apologized to the Tripathi family for the misinformation.

Tripathi was last seen in the early hours of March 16, recorded on a security video walking south on Brook Street in Providence, not far from his home. His last recorded computer activity was shortly before that sighting. "He was seen on the 15th, Friday, hanging out with his friends, talking to family members, all normal activities, nothing out of the ordinary that anyone detected," his brother Ravi told CNN affiliate WPRI on April 10. Since then a desperate search has been on for Tripathi, known to family and friends as "Sunny."

Tripathi, who had been struggling with depression, was last seen wearing blue jeans, a black Eastern Mountain Sports ski jacket, glasses and a black Philadelphia Eagles wool hat. He was said to be 6 feet tall, 130 pounds, with short, dark hair.

By March 17, nobody had seen him for 24 hours, and a friend became concerned and called the police. At that point, the family was notified and came up from Philadelphia as soon as they could, Ravi said.

"We are a very tight-knit family, and it's very out of the ordinary that he would be not in contact for even 24 hours," Ravi told WPRI. "He spoke with his aunt, he spoke with his grandmother Friday night, he texted with my mum, all normal activities, and then his cell phone was left in his apartment along with his wallet and ID, which is totally atypical for him."

The FBI and other agencies launched a search of Providence, Rhode Island, and nearby cities after he was reported missing, but no trace was found.

Over the past month, Ravi has appeared on local and national networks appealing for help to find his sibling, the youngest of three.

At the time he went missing, Sunil Tripathi was on approved leave from the Ivy League school, meaning that he had requested and was granted time off but remained a student there.

Sunil had taken the time off to figure out exactly what he wanted to do, Ravi told WPRI.
He described his brother as a quiet person who enjoyed the little things in life. His preferred food was vegetarian and he was a talented saxophonist, the family said.

"Our concerns are first and foremost with Sunil and his family," Margaret Klawunn, vice president for student life and campus services at Brown University, said last month. "We are hopeful that by encouraging the Brown community to help spread the word that Sunil will be located."

Sunil had been living in Providence since 2008 but grew up in Radnor, Pennsylvania.

The family, including Sunil's sister, Sangeeta, tried to find him by re-creating the sequence of events early on March 16, in the hope of finding a clue to where he might have gone. They also got the word out by posting fliers, canvassing the area, working with law enforcement and sought to harness the power of social media.

A tweet a week ago on the family's Twitter page, Finding Sunny, said: "Sunny day. We're out in Providence postering away -- learning the nooks and crannies of every block of this town.... "

A moving video was posted on YouTube on April 8, simply titled "For Sunny," in which family and friends appeal for him to come home, telling him how much they love him and want to see him.

The family "want to know that he's safe," Ravi told WPRI just six days before the Boston bombing. "All we really want to know is that he's around and that he's okay.

"And we would like him to know that we love him deeply and we miss him a lot."