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SOCIAL NETWORKING

Two Degrees of Separation from a Bomber

In Cambridge, social networks laid bare an intricate web of eerie, sometimes banal, connections to the bombings

By Erika Christakis and Nicholas A. Christakis @NACristakis | April 23, 2013

We spent a tense hour last Monday checking Facebook and Twitter to account for all 400 of our students at Harvard College, several of whom had been running in the marathon and were close to the blast site. As heads of one of Harvard’s undergraduate residential “houses,” news of last Thursday’s MIT shooting also reached us within minutes (because one of our students happened to be on the school’s campus and texted us, “gun fire at MIT; somebody shot — all I know”). Word continued to spread at warp speed as reports of shootings and sirens were shared from the real-time police feed.

The social networks through which information flows may seem like a 21st-century phenomenon, but people have always lived their lives embedded in networks, ever since we emerged from the African savannah. And we have always had an astounding ability to cooperate that exists side-by-side with a depressing ability to kill. This past week in Boston, our new online world crystallized both of these age-old features of our humanity.

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Over the course of a few hours, we watched a surreal game of Six Degrees of Separation unfold: we learned that our 18- and 20-year-old sons, independently, knew several people who’d hung out in Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s



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A woman makes a sign during a candlelight vigil for victims of the Boston Marathon bombing at Victory Park on April 20, 2013 in Watertown, Mass.

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house, gone to prom and played sports with him, and knew his teachers. Our students reported similarly eerie, yet banal, connections. A few knew him directly — the storied Cambridge Rindge and Latin School sends plenty of kids to Harvard each year — and one of our colleagues had been the younger Tsarnaev’s coach at one time, which was a particularly horrifying connection insofar as yet another one of our colleagues was the heartbroken sibling of a victim killed in the attack. Many in Cambridge discovered oddly specific but nevertheless tangential links to the suspects. And we all became aware of these perplexing bonds together, well before they appeared in the news, while sheltering in place under the governor’s order.

This is what happens when we peel back the skin of our social networks, using modern technology, to peer inside the human social organism: we can no longer hide behind the comfort of anonymity. All of a sudden, certain strangers (those ubiquitous ‘friends of friends of friends’) assume a prominence in our lives that can be either heart-warming or terrifying. Laying these connections bare can create all sorts of anxieties when we contemplate what lies just beyond the social horizon we previously could not see. And once these connections become visible, we naturally feel we have to *do* something about them: act on them, or, at the very least, worry about them.

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There are consequences to feeling so tied to random acts of violence. At one extreme, we may feel a sense of rage or betrayal by what the perpetrators have done and an intense identification with the heart-rending stories of the victims. At the other extreme, we may even feel a strange sense of sympathy for the suspects, such as we saw in the nearly unanimous descriptions of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s “chill” and gentle personality. These emotional responses to people we think we “know” may make us more or less likely to seek vengeance or justice, and more or less likely to forget the suffering of people on much more distant branches of our social tree.

As one student explained, “It makes me feel so vulnerable to think that I’m just a couple degrees from someone who could do this. It makes the bombing seem so easy, like, you know, ‘just go grab a pressure cooker!’ and anyone could do it.” Another student illustrated the collapse of social distance by saying that she heard personal details about the perpetrator “from the news or from Facebook, I can’t remember which,” as if these sources were indistinguishable.

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Yet, even as our hyper-connected world makes us feel vulnerable and uncertain, it creates positive outcomes too. Crowd-sourcing proved a potent force for justice and good will. Vast amounts of photographic evidence from the scene aided the investigation; online communication allowed collaboration with anonymous strangers to decipher and crosscheck information as it emerged. And over \$2 million in donations has been raised on behalf of victims and their families online.

The benefits of a connected life still outweigh the costs. It’s why we humans have always made networks, and why we have taken them online. When we connect with others, we place ourselves at risk of violence, misinformation, and despair. But even more, we place ourselves in a position to benefit from innovation, wisdom, and love.



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