

## RESPONSIBLE DATA REFLECTION STORIES 5

A collection of real-life examples of the risks that are faced when using data in advocacy work, along with mitigation strategies to overcome these challenges.

# Verification of social media

## Fact-checking and clarity is crucial when communicating on social media: the case of UNHCR on Twitter.

### CONTEXT

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is mandated to lead and co-ordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems worldwide. They are very active on Twitter at the handle **@Refugees**,<sup>1</sup> as of December 2015, they have 1.88 million followers, and they have tweeted over 27,000 times. Communicating to the public about what they're doing is important for a number of reasons; for political reasons, as well as garnering public support through donation campaigns.

### Story outline

In February 2014, UNHCR representative in Jordan, Andrew Harper tweeted this photo, showing a 4-year-old, Marwan (not his real name), who was "temporarily separated from his family."

It was a heartwarming photo, showing the need and results of UNHCR workers coming to help the boy. It got picked up by relatively mainstream media too—



1 <https://twitter.com/refugees>



“**Refugee named Marwan, 4, found wandering the desert alone**”,<sup>2</sup> said the New York Daily News, and **Bustle used it as an example**<sup>3</sup> of how children have especially been suffering from the Syrian conflict.

The original photo from Andrew Harper’s account got retweeted over 1,300 times, gaining more coverage after CNN anchor Hala Gorani retweeted it, and so the chinese whispers began—in Gorani’s interpretation, Marwan was “crossing the desert alone”, and this tweet (now deleted) was retweeted almost 10,000 times, according to the **Columbia Journalism Review**.<sup>4</sup>

But following fact-checking on the photo and tweet by the Guardian, it came to light that the situation described was more complex than it first appeared. According to a UNHCR press officer who was at the border -

*“Let me say first, the child was temporarily separated. He was a tiny bit behind his family. His family were ahead and he was just straggling behind. That’s the story. He didn’t enter as an unaccompanied minor ... he was literally 20 steps behind,”* **-The Guardian, Tues 18 Feb 2014**<sup>5</sup>

2 [www.nydailynews.com/news/world/refugee-marwan-4-found-desert-fleeing-war-syria-article-1.1617606](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/refugee-marwan-4-found-desert-fleeing-war-syria-article-1.1617606)

3 [www.bustle.com/articles/15809-syrian-boy-found-alone-in-desert-by-un-after-becoming-separated-from-fleeing-parents-photo](http://www.bustle.com/articles/15809-syrian-boy-found-alone-in-desert-by-un-after-becoming-separated-from-fleeing-parents-photo)

4 [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/syria\\_not\\_orphan\\_boy\\_pic.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/syria_not_orphan_boy_pic.php)

5 [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet)

**Andrew Harper** @And\_Harper · 18 Feb 2014  
Thanks to Jared 4 this shot showing **Marwan** at the back of this group of @refugees. He is separated - he is not alone.



And two days after that original tweet, Andrew Harper clarified; Marwan was at the back of a larger group of refugees, not, as many understood, crossing the desert 'alone'.

## Using 140 characters to describe a complex situation

In the time between Harper's first and second tweet, thousands of people saw that photo, and interpreted the message to mean that 'temporarily alone' meant more than just a few feet behind his family. It was picked up in **Time magazine**,<sup>6</sup> where, ironically, the photo was described as "an image cut[ting] through the fog to illustrate a simple truth in a way no amount of words or numbers ever could."

Using social media to garner support for humanitarian activities is understandable; but this example held the risk of misrepresenting what was, it seems, a simple case of **a boy standing 30 feet behind his family**.<sup>7</sup> Though having scepticism about the 'validity' of anything we see on social media is healthy, this case brings up a number of responsible data issues:



<sup>6</sup> [time.com/8359/syria-refugees-toddler/](http://time.com/8359/syria-refugees-toddler/)  
<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/jimsciutto/status/435743490417233920?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/jimsciutto/status/435743490417233920?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

**CONSENT**

Were Marwan's family aware of what was being tweeted? Though his name was changed, the photo remains online in many different places. Without solid technical literacy—or first-hand experience of Twitter, and its global reach—it may well be hard to imagine just how far this photo would reach—from the thousands of retweets on Twitter, to the republication of the tweet in major media outlets.

**IMPLICATIONS**

“Briefly separated”, with a photo of a little boy on his own in the desert, was evidently understood by many to signify a more serious separation than what the reality seems to be—that the boy was walking within sight of his family. The more serious question (and **a debate ensued on Twitter**<sup>8</sup> along these lines) was whether this misrepresentation was intentional, potentially aimed at using the situation to draw attention to the undoubtedly crucial role of UNHCR staff, or if it was unintentional, written quickly and with the obvious limit of just 140 characters.

**VIEWS OF INDIVIDUALS VS ORGANISATIONS**

The original tweet was sent out from an individual's account, not from the official UNHCR one. Despite this, discussions online seem to assume that whatever was said was an “official” UN perspective. Would a disclaimer in Harper's bio have affected this? It seems unlikely, but would it have made a difference to the way the story was reported? Or is anything tweeted by senior members of staff considered to be an official representation of the organisation's views?

**REPRESENTATION**

Although in this case, Marwan himself was not in as serious a situation as many understood him to be, it is true that there are many other children who are in that tragic situation. Despite the lack of veracity of this specific photo, **Sara Gates writing in the Huffington Post**<sup>9</sup> still describes it as “epitomising the Syrian refugee crisis”, and **others found the silver lining in the situation**<sup>10</sup> as “throwing a spotlight on the number of child refugees”. Is it ever okay to use one example to be ‘representative’ of a broader situation as a whole?

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8 [https://twitter.com/jimsciutto/status/435743490417233920?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/jimsciutto/status/435743490417233920?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

9 [www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/18/syrian-boy-desert-marwan-separated-family\\_n\\_4808576.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/18/syrian-boy-desert-marwan-separated-family_n_4808576.html)

10 [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet)



## Mitigation strategy

A part-retraction was issued by Andrew Harper, the person who tweeted the original photo, thanking his colleague Jared Kohler for a photo which put Marwan's positioning in context with the rest of the group. CNN anchor Hala Gorani, whose retweet gathered more attention than the original, also tweeted a slight clarification:

But again—'briefly separated' can be interpreted in a wide range of ways. She deleted the original tweet, but it's also worth noting that this clarification got only 45 retweets in comparison to the original which received up to 10,000 retweets before it got deleted.

**Updates were also posted on the TIME piece,**<sup>11</sup> though many others did not adjust their original post. Mainstream media picked up upon the misunderstanding too, with the Guardian saying **it first triggered sympathy, then a backlash,**<sup>12</sup> and **the Independent in the UK covering the explanation**<sup>13</sup> that Harper subsequently tweeted.

## Lessons learned

As **Sara Morrison writing in the Columbia Journalism Review writes,**<sup>14</sup>

*"The news is supposed to give its consumers information, not create fabricated narratives... Lie in one photograph (even a lie by omission, as in Marwan's case) and cast doubt on all of them."*

11 [time.com/8359/syria-refugees-toddler/](http://time.com/8359/syria-refugees-toddler/)

12 [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/18/image-syrian-boy-desert-un-refugees-tweet)

13 [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-image-of-four-year-old-boy-marwan-crossing-into-jordan-captures-plight-of-refugees-9136290.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-image-of-four-year-old-boy-marwan-crossing-into-jordan-captures-plight-of-refugees-9136290.html)

14 [www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/syria\\_not\\_orphan\\_boy\\_pic.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/syria_not_orphan_boy_pic.php)

For media reporting on these tweets, fact-checking them before quoting seems to be the main lesson learned from this situation. Though Harper **seems to stand by his comments**,<sup>15</sup> this case acts as an example of what can happen if potentially ambiguous situations are covered without total transparency.

Clarity, despite the inherent lack of space in Twitter, seems crucial. Corrections from media agencies upon realising that the story might not have been covered correctly, appear also to be one of the more responsible ways of dealing with faulty coverage.

### READ MORE

'**The photo that cried wolf**', by Sara Morrison in the Columbia Journalism Review<sup>16</sup>



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[https://twitter.com/And\\_Harper/status/435652401048350720](https://twitter.com/And_Harper/status/435652401048350720)

[http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/syria\\_not\\_orphan\\_boy\\_pic.php](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/syria_not_orphan_boy_pic.php)