

## Jakarta Bombing teaches us the importance of crisis communication in a digital age

by Avianto Amri, Risk Frontiers

---

Risk Frontiers' PhD Student, Avianto Amri, is from Jakarta and last week he was there doing fieldwork when the terror struck. In what follows Avianto recounts his experiences and shares some of his thoughts on the event.

---

Several days have passed, but the memory of last Thursday's terrorist attack in Jakarta remains fresh in my mind. The bombing site is close to the office of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre). This office is where I regularly work during my fieldwork. The Starbucks coffee shop that was bombed is where I like to buy my morning coffee before coming to work, or where I casually meet up with people, particularly UN staff, since many work just across the street. The fast food establishment next to the coffee shop is where I often buy food before heading home.



**Figure 1:** Location of the bombing site close to important buildings, including the Presidential Palace, Vice President's office, many Government buildings, and UN offices. It is also a popular spot for tourists.

Fortunately, on the day of the attack, I was far away from the crime scene in a meeting at the National Disaster Management office. Around 10.30 AM, my friend from the AHA Centre informed his Director, who was in a meeting with me, that explosions were coming from the Sarinah shopping mall, less than 200 metres from their office. The Director then immediately instructed the staff to activate the emergency protocol and to gather more info. A few minutes later, we learned that the explosions were from bombs and a shoot out with police was taking place. Our meeting was cut short and the lockdown procedure activated.

### Conflicting reports

Soon after I'm being bombarded with information on my phone: images of the bombing, videos, and reports through instant messaging apps and social media -- Whatsapp, Facebook, and Twitter. Updates come through every minute or so, including graphic photos of the bomb blasts and the suspected dead people.

At one point I receive a picture of a person I know, a Dutch UN official, lying down on a pavement with blood coming from his shirt and face. In the message, it was reported he had died from the bomb blasts and that his wife has confirmed it.

There were also messages regarding explosions in four other locations scattered around Jakarta. Suggestions to avoid shops or restaurants with American brands are prominent, with speculations that the perpetrators number 6 to 40 people, and they are fleeing to other parts of Jakarta. These reports are picked up by the mainstream media and immediately released to the public.

Most of these messages are false – pure speculation. My UN colleague is still alive, though he was critically injured and is in intensive care. No other explosions occur and the total number of terrorists is reported to be five people.

This sort of reporting is clearly not helpful. It sparks panic and fear amongst the public, consistent with the terrorist agenda.

So much conflicting information is both irritating and frustrating: it only creates confusion and helps to fuel the panic. For this reason, I limit the information that I share to my family, friends, and colleagues, notifying them only that my family and I are safe and our locations are far from the scene.

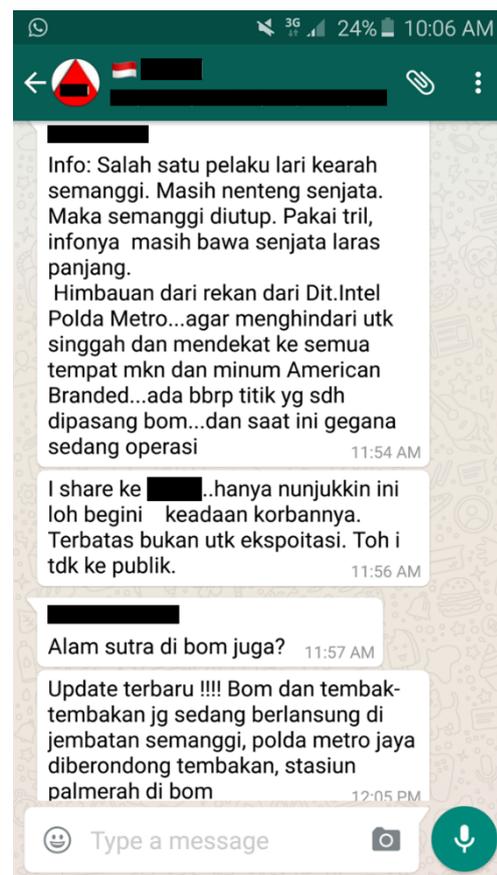


Figure 3. Updates from a Whatsapp Group, informing that many locations have been rigged with bombs, on-going shoot out at a police headquarter, and terrorists were fleeing to western part of Jakarta. All of this information was false.



briefing note  
**307**  
Jan. 2016

Misleading information and unconfirmed reports only worsen the situation. Many people were broadcasting messages to their network while advising them not to share pictures of the victims, as it will hurt the feelings of the victim's family! Or that it has the potential to panic investors and the tourism sector. The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission has already penalised three of the main TV media networks and one radio agency because of inaccurate reporting.

### **#WeAreNotAfraid**

In the first few hours, updates were coming in with the hashtag #prayforjkt, mirroring what happened after recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Turkey.

Soon after though there is a sudden change in the tone of the messages. The hashtag had been changed to #KamiTidakTakut, or #WeAreNotAfraid in English. The messaging to stand up against terror went viral. There were even jokes and funny posts mocking the terror attack as 'less threatening than the daily life in Jakarta.'

This was further reinforced when the news broke that the armed groups had been neutralized by the Police. A statement from Joko Widodo, the President of Indonesia, further enforced this.

*“... Our country, nation, and the people must not be afraid, we will not be defeated by act of terror like this ...”*

The Indonesian Police brought down the armed groups in less than 5 hours. At this point there were 7 deaths: 5 terrorists and 2 civilian, with one of the civilians confirmed as a Canadian citizen. Compared to recent terrorist attacks, the situation was handled quickly with minimum fatalities and injuries. Many were quick to praise the quick response and bravery of the police.

Terrorism and radicalism are significant threats in Indonesia. One of the main learnings that we can take from this event is the need to improve how we communicate risks, especially during times of crisis. Technological advances and the increasing use of social media see people sharing experiences almost instantly. Government needs to think about how it wants to deal with the anticipated false reporting, ensuring that the correct information is delivered to the general public in a timely fashion and educating the public on how to manage this information.

Equally important is how we explain this type of event to our young ones. When I arrived home that day, I was greeted excitedly by my 4-year old son who said with such eager eyes: “Daddy, tell me what happened with the bombings!” And like most parents, I struggled to explain what had really happened.