How social media provides grist for the rumor mill during times of crisis

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The rumors ricocheted across social media:

Three buses loaded with protesters were allegedly headed for the south Charlotte shopping centers of Stonecrest and Blakeney on Thursday. No protesters materialized, but some retailers closed early and shopping volume slowed to a trickle.

There were predictions that protests would happen at SouthPark mall, causing police to beef up security in the area and stores to turn into ghost towns. Again, no protest happened.

And in some social media feeds, neighborhoods in north Charlotte and Concord were next.

The rumors followed protests Tuesday and Wednesday night, about the fatal shooting by police of Keith Lamont Scott. Some people at those protests became violent and police in riot gear used tear gas.

The confusion and misinformation – and assumptions that each protest could become a violent encounter – led one Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department officer, Peter Grant of the South Mecklenburg division, to send a lengthy email to residents in his South Charlotte district.

“I can’t tell you the number of calls and text messages I have gotten over the past 24hrs about whether these rumors are true, if they should cancel events or change their plans,” he wrote. “Don’t feed into the rumors, but do assess what you are hearing and seeing with a level head and common sense.”

If you think about social media like a high-tech game of telephone, one inaccurate or even vaguely misleading post can infect a whole following, then spread, viruslike, to thousands upon thousands in a matter of minutes.

Social media researchers use the term “need for orientation” as one way of explaining why rumors start during turbulent times. Because there are so many conflicting pieces of information during a crisis, especially on social media, rumors “can inaccurately shortcut that need for orientation in an attempt to reduce uncertainty,” says Jacob Groshek, an assistant professor of emerging media studies at Boston University.

“Information that is exciting, appealing or even threatening is more likely to gain attention and be shared more often, as research on clickbaiting has shown,” Groshek says.

http://www.kansascity.com/latest-news/article103983971.html
Consider this: A Pew Research Center report from 2014 found that 64 percent of U.S. adults use Facebook, and roughly half of those report getting news there – that’s about 30 percent of the population.

It’s the decentralized nature of social media – meaning anyone can share and spread information, regardless of accuracy – that makes Facebook, Twitter and other platforms such easy breeding grounds for rumors, says Ceren Budak, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Information who specializes in computational social science.

In the case of rumors involving possible violence and protest, timeliness is surely an issue: “If it is timely information, they want to spread it as quickly as possible,” Budak says, “and that leaves less time for verifying.”

But the same problems come into play when it’s not.

“People share things they haven’t read all the way through. People make quick decisions in terms of what to share and what not to share,” she says.

So what can be done to combat online rumors?

“The reasonable thing to do is to check the sources,” Budak says.