ONLINE ACTIVITY RELATED TO "NEW JERSEY DRONES" INCREASES BY 1900% WITH "FEAR" AS THE DOMINANT EMOTION IN 116,000 SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Researchers

Dr. Yi Luo

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Luo has conducted research in the areas of organizational change, sensemaking, leadership, social media and communication management, activism, organizational justice, and global public relations. Dr. Luo received her Ph.D in Communication from the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Luo's research has been published or accepted to be published in Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, among many more. Dr. Luo teaches a variety of courses in organizational communication and public relations such as Cases and Campaigns, Communication Theories, Communication Research, Global Public Relations, Public Relations Ethics, New Media Applications in Organizations, and Digital Production.

Dr. Jin-A Choi

Assistant Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Choi received her PhD from the Stan Richards School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Texas at Austin. Dr. Choi's scholarship focuses on target advertising celebrity/social media influencer endorsements, digital advertising, text mining, and data analytics. Her research has been published in journals such as Journal of Global Marketing, Communication Studies, and others. Dr. Choi teaches a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses such as Social Media Analytics, Influencers and Opinion Leaders and Integrated Communications.

Dr. Bond Benton

Associate Professor, School of Communication and Media

Dr. Benton's doctorate is from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr. Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr. Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media, Public Relations Tactics, and many more. His first book, The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce, was released in 2014.

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Online activity related to "New Jersey Drones" increases by 1900% with "fear" as the dominant emotion in 116,000 social media posts

By: Dr. Yi Luo, Dr. Jin-A Choi, & Dr. Bond Benton

Mysterious Drones in New Jersey

Background and Research Focus

On November 18, 2024, drones were first reported in the skies above New Jersey. Over the following weeks, sightings increased dramatically, sparking widespread attention on social media. Online users shared images, videos, and theories about the dones' origins, which quickly became a viral topic. As the discourse around the drones intensified, so did uncertainty about their origin and purpose, creating online flashpoints where various views and speculations flourished (Martin et al., 2024). When events happen that are tangible but difficult to explain (such as the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic), the public tends to seek out and share alternative explanations. As Uscinski et al. (2020) noted, people frequently "view major events as the product of conspiracies" (2020, p. 1), with the likelihood of interpreting these events as a result of intentional actions or hidden forces.

Given the virality of the New Jersey drone story and the tendency for unusual events to affect the tone of discourse around these events, this study seeks to explore two critical dimensions of the event. Specifically, it will evaluate the extent to which the drone story has spread online and examine the emotional and psychological impact on the online public. In doing so, two key research questions will be considered:

Research Question 1: How extensive was online activity related to the New Jersey drone story?

Research Question 2: What was the sentiment/emotion of online content related to the New Jersey drone story?

Method

To answer these questions, a multi-process approach was utilized. First, to capture social media discussions, this study utilized Brandwatch, a leading social listening tool designed to monitor and analyze online conversations across various platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Reddit. Prior to creating a search query, the researchers conducted exploratory research across these platforms to identify the most commonly used keywords and phrases related to the New Jersey drone story.

Terms such as "drones in New Jersey," "drone sightings in New Jersey," "flying objects in New Jersey," and "mysterious drones" were identified and used to create a search query on Brandwatch. The data collection focused on the period from November 26 to December 13, 2024, a time frame selected due to notable surges in social media discussions during this period. Brandwatch's capabilities allowed the researchers to gather a wide range of posts, comments, and mentions associated with the drone sightings, providing insights into public sentiment and key themes in the online discourse.

Second, a trend analysis was utilized to evaluate search behavior online. Google Trends analysis was employed to see if the New Jersey drone story had affected broader internet search behavior. A key feature of Google Trends analysis is that it allows for identification of items of interest for internet users (Nghiem et al., 2016). These analyses are "normalized to the highest volume of searches for that term over the time period being studied. This index ranges from 0 to 100, with 100 recorded on the date that saw the highest relative search volume activity for that term" (Arora et al., 2019, p. 338). Search interest in a specific topic has reliably forecast social media posts and actions related to that topic (McCarthy, 2010). Essentially, a topic trending on a significant social media platform should have a corresponding level of movement in search activity that a trends analysis will reveal. This will suggest the extent to which the New Jersey drone story has penetrated the online and social space.

Results

RQ 1: How extensive was online activity related to the New Jersey drone story?

Between November 26 and December 13, online conversation surged to 170,000 mentions (with 93,000 unique discussions) across social media platforms, marking an astronomical 19,000% increase compared to the prior period, which saw just 878 posts. A dramatic spike in activity occurred on December 11, with discussions increasing nearly 800% from the previous day. X emerged as the dominant platform, accounting for 86% of social discussions, leading the discussions surrounding the unidentified drones in New Jersey. The focus of these heated exchanges involved a series of mysterious drones reportedly flying over New Jersey, sparking intense speculation and conflicting statements from officials.

The controversy centers around the origin of these drones, with some social media users pointing fingers at Iran and China, while others question why the U.S. government hasn't been able to identify them. Congressman Jeff Van Drew fueled the fire by suggesting the drones could be linked to an Iranian mothership, a claim the Pentagon quickly denied, asserting there is no evidence of foreign involvement.


Viral posts, some garnering between 600,000 and over a million views, showcased the range of public theories:

- "What kind of President lets Iran fly their drones over New Jersey?"
- "Did you know that there are assassin drones? What's the likelihood that Iran and China are flying assassin drones over New Jersey to geo track so they can map out and extract tracking location to assassinate President Trump with an assassin drone while he's golfing at his Bedminster club?"
- "👀🚨 BREAKING: The drones in New Jersey are now spraying something in the sky. What are they spraying & why?"
- "FBI agents investigating mysterious drones and UFOs over military bases are now reporting sightings of the same drones hovering over their homes, as if intentionally targeting them."

With little official information and a patchwork of contradictory statements, public anxiety is growing. The lack of clarity has fueled a range of conspiracy theories, from fears of foreign interference to speculations about covert government operations. This uncertainty has ignited widespread concern over national security, intelligence capabilities, and the government's ability to address the growing mystery surrounding these drones.

Additionally, search trend data suggests there has been substantial online interest in the topic. This has spiked sharply in direct correlation with widespread reports of appearances of drones in November.
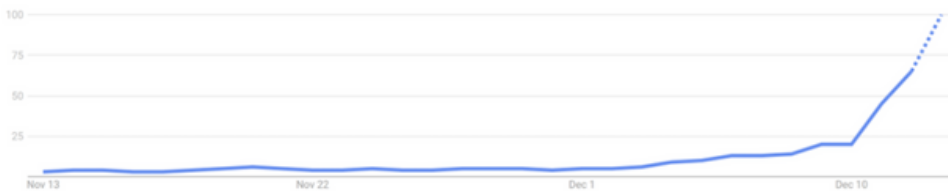
Search activity for the word "drone" has increased by 1900% from the period before the first sighting of a drone in New Jersey. Brandwatch data confirms this spike with over 116,000 posts on X (formerly Twitter) appearing in this period. Noteworthy also is the geolocation of search activity. The state searching for "drone" most regularly was New Jersey.

1 New Jersey	100	
2 Pennsylvania	28	
3 Delaware	25	
4 New Hampshire	20	
5 Maine	19	
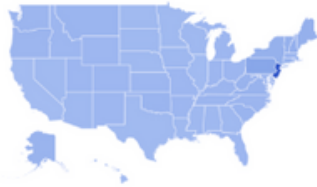
RQ 2: What was the sentiment/emotion of online content related to the New Jersey drone story?

The emotions expressed in social media posts related to the mysterious drone activity over New Jersey were overwhelmingly dominated by fear, which accounted for 45% of the identified emotions. When combined with disgust, the two emotions together accounted for 83% of the overall sentiment. The ongoing saga of the drones triggered widespread concern over national security and public safety. Many users expressed fear about the potential threats posed by the drones, including surveillance of U.S. Coast Guard vessels, suspicious activities attributed to "non-human intelligence," the possibility of terrorist attacks at mass gatherings, the spraying of unidentified materials, and surveillance of sensitive locations such as military bases, residential areas, and federal buildings.

The uncertainty surrounding the drones' origin and purpose fueled widespread anxiety. The lack of official clarity on the situation contributed to growing frustration. In New Jersey, some residents even resorted to shooting at the drones in an attempt to take matters into their own hands, reflecting their concerns about the government's failure to address the situation. The Pentagon's denial of foreign involvement and the White House's reassurances that there was no immediate threat did little to calm public fears. As authorities struggled to provide clear answers, fear and confusion spread among social media users, exacerbated by the ongoing investigations and conflicting reports.
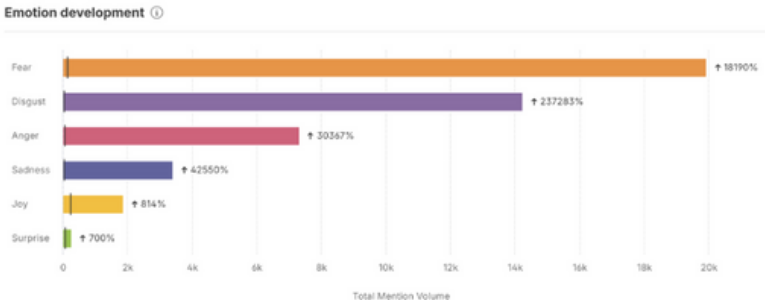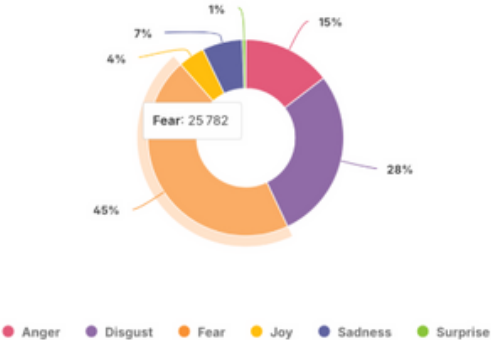
The rise in fear is consistent with Uscinski et al. (2020)'s work that suggests fear is a common response for populations to manage the challenge of explaining new and unusual phenomena. As a loss of control and understanding of an event can create dissonance, the corresponding rise in emotions like anger and disgust is consistent with previous scholarship as well (Szymaniak et al., 2023). Cumulatively, the emotions reflected in the collected data provide perspective for understanding the sentiments associated with the New Jersey drone story. Public officials met at the New Jersey Police headquarters on Dec. 11 to discuss what was known about the origin of the objects. The Pentagon, Department of Homeland Security, New Jersey Coast Guard officials and even Governor Phil Murphy have made statements acknowledging the existence of the drone encounters or admitting to not knowing their origin. Some went a step further, "I'm legitimately concerned for what the hell is going on because nobody knows," state Assemblyman Brian Bergen told CNN affiliate News 12 New Jersey after a briefing at state police headquarters on Wednesday.

This event also saw a rise of conspiracy theories, further amplifying the hysteria online. Influential figures, particularly from the far-right, such as Lauren Loomer, fueled speculations about foreign interference, extraterrestrial involvement, and even false flag operations. Some conspiracy theorists went so far as to claim that the drones were connected to a larger political agenda, with claims that COVID-19 was a hoax or part of a plot to remove President Trump from office. These speculations gained traction in the absence of transparent and accountable communication from authorities, highlighting the challenges posed by misinformation in such an ambiguous crisis.

Alongside fear, disgust emerged as a prominent emotion, driven by public distrust of how the government agencies were handling the situation. Social media users expressed frustration over the contradictory statements and lack of clear actions from the Pentagon and the Defense Department, which denied any foreign involvement despite widespread speculation. Many criticized these agencies for being "completely clueless" about the situation, leading to a growing sense of skepticism and distrust. The perceived lack of transparency and decisive action fueled suspicions that the government was either incompetent or engaged in a cover-up. As a result, the online public's sense of unease and distrust deepened, further exacerbating the sense of crisis surrounding the mysterious drones.

Conclusion

This study highlights the extensive online activity surrounding the drone sightings over New Jersey, revealing both the volume of discourse and the emotional tenor of public responses. The sheer scale of the online conversation—166,000 mentions across social media platforms—illustrates the public's deep engagement with the story, which saw a staggering 19,000% increase in activity compared to previous periods. This surge in conversation was not merely a reflection of curiosity but also of intense emotion, primarily fear, which dominated 45% of the sentiment expressed. When combined with disgust, these two emotions accounted for a striking 83% of the overall sentiment, underlining the growing anxiety, frustration, and distrust felt by the online public.

The fear expressed in social media conversations was largely driven by concerns over national security, the potential threats posed by the drones, and the government's inability to provide clear answers. The widespread confusion and the lack of transparency from official sources, including the Pentagon and local authorities, further fueled this fear and skepticism. These gaps in information, coupled with contradictory statements and speculation, contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty that amplified emotional reactions, particularly anger and disgust. Social media users were particularly critical of the government's handling of the situation, expressing frustration over what they perceived as incompetence or a possible cover-up.

Conspiracy theories surged in this environment of uncertainty, with far-right figures and online influencers fueling speculations about foreign interference, extraterrestrial involvement, and even political manipulation. These theories, often disconnected from evidence, gained traction in the absence of clear and consistent communication from authorities, highlighting the vulnerability of public discourse in the age of misinformation.

Ultimately, the New Jersey drone saga provides a lens through which the dynamics of modern information flow can be examined, especially in the context of novel and unusual events. It underscores the importance of transparency, effective communication, and swift action by government agencies in addressing emerging threats. In conclusion, while public interest in novel and unexplained events may be inevitable, the emotional and psychological impacts—driven by fear, distrust, and conspiracy theories— emphasizes the need for clear, accountable communication from authorities to mitigate the risks of misinformation and ensure public safety and confidence.

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Thank You!

Media Inquiries

Keith Green

School of Communication and Media,
973-655-3701 or greenk@montclair.edu

By: Dr. Yi Luo, Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Bond Benton

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About the School of Communication and Media: The School of Communication and Media offers a range of dynamic programs in communication and media to a talented and diverse student population of more than 2,000. Offering degrees in film and television, social media and public relations, advertising, journalism and digital media, sports communication, communication and media studies, animation and visual effects, and an MA devoted to strategic communication, the School prepares the next generation of communication and media practitioners and leaders. The School houses award-winning student programs that include **WMSC Radio**, **The Montclarion** newspaper, **Hawk Communications** Agency, the **Red Hawk Sports Network**, **Hawk+** OTT streaming platform, and **News Lab**, as well as the **Center for Cooperative Media**, which serves the public by working to grow and strengthen local journalism. Student projects and programs have recently received national recognition from PRSSA's Bateman Competition, an Edward R Murrow Award, several Marconi Award nominations, and a College Television Award from the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

Joetta Di Bella and Fred C. Sautter III
Center for Strategic Communication