Henrik Schneider   # The Reporting Mobile
A New Platform for Citizen Media

Introduction

Professional journalism has come a long way in recent times. Changes have happened in almost all aspects of its responsibilities of finding, gathering, investigating, reporting, editing, publishing, commenting, and correcting stories. The diminution of time for news to reach people resulted in close-to-real-time global coverage. But high-visibility top news live presence was for a long time given only to selected fortunate and powerful participants.

Modern communications networks have changed the dynamics. Nyíri[1] discussed at the 2005 *Seeing, Understanding, Learning in the Mobile Age* Budapest conference[2] how collective thinking and knowledge sharing emerges from networked communication. These "fruits of that enhanced scientific and technological creativity" can also help to connect the voluntary reporters and the individuals and communities seeking information in a global dialogue. It is not surprising then that ever smarter connected communities take the initiative. This paper first introduces the new option of participatory journalism and secondly will discuss the importance of the mobile in the new media landscape as an excellent tool that complements present practices and for learning about our world.

Movement from Push Media to Share Media

We are living in a communication revolution where new options of information sharing are provided to online users and groups. Besides regular media sources, the present information and communication technological environment offers direct, instantaneous connections between people, either

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[1] Kristóf Nyíri, "Collective Thinking", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding: The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2006, pp. 91–100.

[2] See http://www.socialscience.t-mobile.hu/konf_en.htm.

individuals or communities. Furthermore, this can be achieved without the presence of professional reporters and without the robust editing mechanism and infrastructure of large media corporations. This is referred to as citizen or participatory journalism.[3]

One of the largest and most successful examples of participatory media initiatives is the Global Voices Project.[4] The initial vision was that blogs – as means of personal communications – offer a much better contextualized insight into the life of people living in very different parts of the world. These blogs are windows to learning about the lives of other people, reading their testimony of what is happening with and around them, and thus to understanding their culture. A massive reader interest around blogs brought them into a position to challenge the reporting hegemony of traditional media. But they immediately came under fire from at least two major aspects: reliability and objectivity.

Firstly, many blogs are written using pseudonyms. This is especially true – but not exclusively – under conditions where the authors would face charges if their identity could be uncovered by the authorities. Various technological solutions also aid and almost encourage the anonymous posting of articles. Nonetheless, this claim regularly comes from major professional news organizations, as demonstrated by a recent article from CNN, where the direct comparison is made: "Unlike the mainstream media, also known and often maligned among bloggers as MSM, blogs do not always have the same reliability as established news organizations."[5] These accusations against blogs can go as far as media theory books stating that "[b]logs are controversial because they are often untrue"[6], although without any proper research or analysis presented to prove these claims. Prejudice and rightful criticism both surround the so-called blogosphere.[7] Why should we trust such an information source then?

In this seeming crucifixion of civil community-built news sources one must not forget that the traditional media players also carry similar burdens. Journalistic deception, endangering of lives through revealed information, unchecked sources, cultural bias, and misunderstanding are all

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[3] Also as "citizen or participatory media".

[4] See http://www.globalvoicesonline.org.

[5] Marsha Walton, "Cell Phones: A New Tool in the War-Zone Blogosphere", CNN 2006, http://www.cnn.com/2006/TECH/internet/08/01/newblogs/index.html.

[6] Michael B. Salwen, "Online News Trends", in Michael B. Salwen et al. (eds.), *Online News and the Public*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005, p. 69.

[7] Rasha A. Abdullah et al., "Online News Credibility", in Michael B. Salwen et al. (eds.), *Online News and the Public*, pp. 147–163.

in the repertoire of mainstream media as well.[8] It is undeniably a valid claim that consumers of participatory content must take great caution regarding what truth they take for granted, but projections have been made that "most people in future will be happy to decide for themselves what is credible or worthwhile and what is not".[9] "The old media model was: there is one source of truth. The new media model is: there are multiple sources of truth, and we will sort it out."[10] It remains to be seen whether the majority of users are ready for this selection.

Secondly, the citizen reporter (e.g. the blogger) in most cases is highly embedded in the story she or he tells, thus objectivity is questionable. A blog regularly tells personal experiences and opinions.[11] One might legitimately raise the question: shouldn't the point of view of local community members be shifted by stronger bias compared to an independent outsider reporter? But even for mainstream professional journalism, Levinson shows us how the regular editorial chain[12] or the sometimes embedded nature of journalists[13] do reduce objectivity regarding the story as well.

It seems Global Voices has been able to build an acceptable solution to both of the above dilemmas, proven by the referrals and sponsorship of even large news organizations like Reuters. This was achieved basically using a hierarchical flow of information. Bloggers do their share by writing about their experiences and opinions. Volunteer editors – with understanding of the regional culture, history, and present situation[14] – continuously watch and gather posts from various blogs, aggregating, translating, and shaping these into articles around a certain issue, trying to show different perspectives and attitudes. These articles and other roundups are then published on the same top-level portal of Global Voices, where this

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[8] For a number of examples and theories see Lee Wilkins and Renita Coleman, "The Moral Media: How Journalists Reason about Ethics", London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005, and William A. Hachten, *The Troubles of Journalism: A Critical Look at What's Right and Wrong With the Press*, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005.

[9] *The Economist*, "Among the Audience", 22 April 2006.

[10] *Ibid.*, citing Joe Kraus.

[11] This has been demonstrated by the research of Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, "Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers", Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/186/report_display.asp. Although this research is made solely with a U.S. scope, practice tells us that at least the referenced statement can be generalized to other geographies as well.

[12] Paul Levinson, *Cellphone: The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything!*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 140–141.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

[14] And with a small amount of compensation in case of the highest-level regional editors.

information can be accessed and commented upon. This latter activity is of equal importance in online community information sharing, as it is the means of debating and clarifying the published materials.

Citizen media is further burdened by additional important questions of traditional reporting. What information, and in what ways, can be shared without hurting personal rights, freedom of speech, or even endangering the personal safety of others? These questions are especially critical with the ease of publishing anything almost instantly. It is almost impossible to control this aspect from the outside, self-control is mostly up to the author, but hate speech and false information do erode authenticity even in the short run. Also, how easy or hard is it to apply censorship? Examples show that leveraging the architecture of the worldwide network, the filtering of these sources on the internet is not unprecedented and in autocracies it can even be a common practice.[15] Another obstacle citizen media efforts sometimes have to overcome is basic access to the story, as professional press journalists currently have better chances of getting near events than ordinary citizen journalists.[16]

The age of digitalization brought several changes to the way media work both technically and operationally. However, as Krotz[17] concluded upon the basis of media theory work, the so-called new media does not supersede the old media, these two are likely to coexist. This does not mean that there are no changes; rather, each different type of media influences how the others are evolving. Thus, we should not expect participatory journalism to substitute professional reporting. The media landscape should not be judged by the sole performance of each individual medium, but rather as a cross-connected and interrelated network. This is even more important for reportage pieces created with a mobile phone, as these are frequently transported for viewing onto different platforms (e.g. the internet, or sometimes even television) which nowadays are still not primarily accessed via mobile.[18]

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[15] For details see the continuous analysis and results published on internet content filtering worldwide by the OpenNet Initiative (http://www.opennetinitiative.org).

[16] This is discussed e.g. by Randy Covington on their efforts of mobile blogging events of the 2004 US presidential election, see Randy Covington, "The Year of the (Mo)blogger", *Receiver Magazine* 12, March 2005, article available online at *Receiver Magazine* homepage.

[17] Friedrich Krotz, "Mobile Communication, the Internet, and the Net of Social Relations: A Theoretical Framework", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005, pp. 447–457.

[18] This multi-platform nature of cross-country community-shared information is shown by Jeff Axup, "Blog the World", *Receiver Magazine* 15, April 2006, article available online at *Receiver Magazine* homepage.

The Role of the Mobile in Citizen Media

The mobile connection has a lot to offer in the evolution of information sharing. And the mobile environment also has distinct differences as compared to the regular participatory media environment of the internet. Although most of past mobile research is focused on personal usage, it still offers insight into the characteristics of the mobile as a reporting tool.

Kato[19] demonstrated how a camera-phone can be used for "environmental knowing", in his research set up to see the life of real-world communities through camera-enabled phones. The experiment was conducted in two phases; in the first, the observer was separated from the community, and in the second the observer participated as a "temporal resident". Based upon his research, this is how Kato formulates his conclusion about the dilemma of objectivity: "By knowing that an individual is actively engaged in alternate shifts between two different views, he/she may become aware of a set of assumptions and understandings about the life of the local community." He adds that "mobile phones and their cameras may play a significant role as a trigger to critically (re)examine the surroundings within which one is embedded" and that such usage of the mobile phone offers a chance "to reflect upon one's ways of seeing, as well as seeing the 'seeing' of others". This understanding is exactly what is useful for someone who is looking for local information in the realms of participatory media, thus the mobile phone can indeed help in that sense.

The feasibility of a mobile journalistic participatory system is highly dependent on the reporters' ability and will to share experiences and tell stories. Harper[20] argues that a mobile blog "is to create an experience of expressive intimacy, it is not an opportunity for social solidarity" and that the interviewed people in his research "explained that this kind of 'storytelling' was a step too far". Also, it has been pointed out by the research of Döring et al.[21] that the present usage of MMS is mainly personal. In their research, only around one fifth of MMS messages have been used for information and news exchange. Should these conclusions lower the impact of the mobile in citizen journalism? Definitely not. The

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[19] Fumitoshi Kato, "Seeing the 'Seeing' of Others: Environmental Knowing through Camera-Phones", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding*, pp. 183–195.

[20] R. H. R. Harper, "The Local and the Global: Paradoxes of the Mobile Age", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place*, pp. 83–90.

[21] Nicola Döring et al., "Contents, Forms and Functions of Interpersonal Pictorial Messages in Online and Mobile Communication", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding*, pp. 197–207.

experiences of online communities (from blogs to wikis) have proven that we do not need each and every user to be an active provider of information. Only a small group of dedicated and enthusiastic people is needed to provide the wider interested (sometimes even global) community with coverage of the phenomena they are reporting about.

Mainstream media is sometimes accused of airing too many tragic stories. Would this be different for a mobile citizen journalist? As Cohen and Lemish[22] discussed in their research of Israeli mobile usage in emergency situations, people tend to own a mobile partly for safety reasons. In unexpected and dangerous emergency situations they tend to use their mobile phones with higher frequency. This could imply that if anyone can become a reporter of events if they posses a phone, the nature of events reported could more likely be about unexpected, undesired, and emergency situations, than about ordinary life. The mobile phone might even further enhance or sometimes speed up this effect compared to the internet: "If you see a car bomb blast, your first thought is not to go to an Internet cafe and start blogging."[23] The sense of security provided by a mobile is also described by Ling: "For those who have chronic conditions, the device allows a broader freedom of movement and sphere of action. In addition, the device is seen as being useful in acute problems, ranging from punctured tires to life-threatening situations."[24] The journalistic use of mobile phones is also put into a war reporting focus by both Levinson[25] and the recent CNN article referred to earlier.[26] That shift of topic and coverage has to be realized, understood, and perceived, otherwise the picture envisioned by the mobile report might build false impressions about the phenomena or the geographical area studied.[27]

What forms of mobile media communication can the citizen media best leverage? Some of the previous studies also have to be redefined in this sense, as the messages in this case are not sent to a familiar person (or group),[28] instead these reports are especially targeted at a wide audience

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[22] Akiba A. Cohen and Dafna Lemish, "When the Bombs Go Off the Mobiles Ring: The Aftermath of Terrorist Attacks", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A Sense of Place*, pp. 117–128.

[23] Walton, *op. cit.*, quote from digital media expert Erik Sundelof.

[24] Rich Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2004, p. 54.

[25] Levinson, *Cellphone*, pp. 135–162.

[26] Walton, *op. cit.*

[27] The bias caused by this selection of topics originates from the implication that instead of normal life, there is only danger and emergency in that region, country, or settlement.

[28] Ling, *The Mobile Connection*, chapter 7: "Texting and the Growth of Asynchronous Discourse", pp. 145–167.

whom the publisher surely does not know personally. Text-only messaging in a journalistic setup presumable will only gain momentum with the mobile e-mail capabilities further extended (with the text entry mechanism becoming faster and more convenient). Multimedia messages offer a much better way of almost instantly sharing experiences by combining still or video pictures, voice, and text. But messaging is not the only and definitely not the most recent and advanced capability of the mobile phone. Real time video coverage via video phoning is a feature that will give a citizen journalist reporting abilities never before seen outside of professional media.

Limitations of Mobile Participatory Journalism

Even if the reporter is able to use the most technically sophisticated ways of communicating the story, there are going to be three key challenges. First, the information-seeker must locate the most relevant sources and the reporter must gain visibility among many other reporters. Secondly, the ability to keep the anonymity of the reporter is important. And thirdly, reach a balanced representation in the reports.

In internet-only participatory media efforts, one of the key obstacles is also finding the voices that are most relevant to our interest in the cacophony of the online world. With the mobile phone-enabled journalist, the amount of sources and conversations can increase at an even higher rate. Currently, two main solutions seem to help blogs to unravel this overflow of information: search engines and thematic aggregation. For search engines,[29] what can help is if bloggers aim at gathering lots of outside links pointing to their article, as this is an important factor in the ranking of search results. Aggregation is a much more sophisticated solution, but requires extra effort.[30] It means the gathering, categorizing, and republishing of posts in a thematically ordered fashion. Categorization tasks can be distributed among the blogger and the aggregation service provider, e.g. the blog and the entries might be labelled with keywords to help categorization,[31] or the aggregation service provider might do this for its own sake, in order to have some of the individual voices together by their subject matter. Presumably, these solutions can and will have to be all extended into the mobile realm as well, otherwise usability will suffer significantly because of the low chances of locating the most pertinent voices.

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[29] As search engine rankings depend on the links pointing to the target.

[30] Either from the publisher of the material or the central aggregator.

[31] Referred to as "tagging".

Compared to the internet, in its standard setup the mobile offers less privacy protection of the user's identity, owing to the terrestrial cell network architecture and the system for the identification of individual end-user equipment. On the internet, various technological solutions have been developed to shadow the identity of the user, from proxy access to new networks built upon the existing internet infrastructure.[32] The mobile user has much less control over the flow of data in the network, thus making tracking and limiting access much easier. This aspect will certainly limit the capacity of mobile phones[33] to participate in citizen media efforts in areas where personal anonymity and the defence of location and activity has to be guaranteed for reporters.

As with every participatory news creation, representation also has to be taken into account. If there are more active contributors from a region, then that area will be overrepresented not so much due to the pertinence of issues, but rather due to a simple majority of authors.[34] Similarly, the chance is there for advanced countries to gain an upper hand in mobile journalistic coverage because of the better availability of mobile phones and networks. What good does a video broadcasting-capable phone do in a conflict zone if the present network is not ready to transmit the required data stream. This aspect seems similar to the case of the internet, but there is at least one major difference. Mobile penetration generally is higher than internet penetration in developing countries, which makes the mobile network a better way for narrowing the so-called digital divide and also for sharing news and information with the rest of the world. In regions where landline-based internet coverage can only be extended very slowly via enormous investments,[35] mobile access has and will have a clear advantage.

Does the Mobile Help to Cover the Story or Is It also Influencing It?

If we want to better understand how a mobile journalist can aid to map the social diversity of our world, we must also not miss the facts about how our society is changed by the mobile itself. Meyrowitz[36] described

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[32] Two examples are FreeNet and the Thor network.

[33] Except perhaps satellite phones.

[34] This effect has been demonstrated clearly by the early operation of a Wikipedia sister project called Wikinews.

[35] E.g. the Africa One network.

[36] Joshua Meyrowitz, "Global Nomads in the Digital Veldt", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 91–102.

how "[o]n the surface, the development and spread of a new form of technically complex electronic equipment and media of communication … would seem to move the historical segregation process yet another step forward". And that is not the only thing happening, as "when we look at the basic social structure of early 21st-century America and of other electronic cultures, we can see some striking echoes of hunter and gatherer societies". Walls of separation built around our social environment by past millennia can be torn down using the electronic means of communication. The question might arise here of whether by introducing mobile phones to cultural reporting, are we not giving a higher chance for the development of "cultural noise" connected to the mobile described by Bertschi?[37] Are we really mapping the true culture or is the survey medium itself changing the studied phenomena in a way that is causing flaws in understanding? The spread of mobile networks and communication is an ongoing reality, whether we use it for reporting about our life and its surroundings or not. Thus, the mobile in this sense is again helping to better understand even the changes that originate in its own use.

Conclusion

Citizen media has gained such momentum that it is rightfully considered an emerging counterpart of traditional professional journalism. The mobile environment has a lot to offer in that process of change. With the rapid spread of mobile access and the advancements in the capabilities of end-user mobile equipment, many people will have a chance to participate in this evolution of information sharing. Probably the majority of users will not feel obligated or motivated to take part in these efforts. But the enthusiastic and active minority who will take it on shall have a chance to help us better understand different perspectives on cultures and issues. So in the near future – and in some aspects in our present too – it will be only up to us whether we are interested in listening to them or not. Since due to the mobile, voices and pictures will be available. We'll then merely have to care and pay attention.

[37] Stefan Bertschi, "The Meaning of a Mobile Age: Is It Just Cultural Noise?", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Understanding*, pp. 239–252.