

Mobile journalism: A snapshot of current research and practice

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Introduction

Descriptions of journalistic practice have long been compartmentalized by the media forms in which news output is published. Broad distinctions are often made between print and broadcast journalism, or magazine, newspaper, radio, or TV reporters. Recent variants include references to online or Web journalism, or to newer publication forms such as blogging and podcasting. Journalism is also differentiated by the technological means by which it is produced, such as with the solo videojournalist ('VJ') equipped with a compact video camera, or the photojournalist now able to publish digital images straight to the Internet. The past decade has seen the diffusion of terms such as 'backpack journalism' to describe how a solo journalist equipped with a laptop computer, digital camera and satellite uplink can report across a variety of media from almost anywhere in the world.

Another emerging form is that now described as 'mobile journalism' ('MoJo'). The term has been loosely applied to describe a journalistic practice based on reporters equipped with portable multimedia newsgathering equipment. This conference paper examines a more specific form of mobile journalism based on the rapid convergence of handheld and wireless computing, digital photography and mobile telephony. Attention is now turning to the newsgathering potential of highly compact – even pocket-sized - digital field reporting kits based upon mobile phones.

Mobile journalism practice

The mobile handset has rapidly moved beyond voice telephony or even simple text-based communication into more complex multi-platform delivery systems; some of the latest models are portable digital media production and data transfer systems with configurations of features such as still and video camera capabilities, multimedia file swapping, global positioning satellite receivers, music players, access to radio and television content, email and Web browsers, databases, address books, calendars, clocks, games and many other downloadable and upgradeable software applications (Cameron, 2006).

The dominant example of current MoJo practice described in the literature revolves around an experimental toolkit developed by Reuters. The kit is based around a Nokia N95 smartphone, a small tripod, a compact wireless keyboard, a solar battery charger and an external microphone. In late 2007, selected Reuters journalists used the kit to provide field reports that were published on a Website established specifically for the project (<http://reutersmojo.com>), and it continues to be cited as one of the main examples of a mainstream mobile newsgathering. Reuters journalists used the MoJo kits as part of their coverage of the Beijing Olympics, though plans to issue MoJo kits to delegates at the 2008 U.S. Democratic and Republican conventions were hampered by a lack of 3G and wireless services in the convention venues (Oliver, 2008). *Washington Post* reporter Ed O'Keefe used his mobile phone at the Democratic convention to capture footage of Hillary Clinton's endorsement of Barack Obama – this was later edited with TV broadcast footage to form an online news package (O'Keefe, 2008).

Video is one of the mobile phone features driving current MoJo practice. The Voice of Africa mobile journalism project operating since 2007 describes its reporters as ‘camjos’ (camera journalists) although they are equipped with mobile devices as an alternative to expensive computers and cameras (http://www.africanews.com/site/page/voices_of_africa). Australian academic Stephen Quinn (2008) recently outlined other examples of mobile journalism, all of which centre on video recording as a key element. These include experiments at Norway’s national broadcaster NRK, where various departments reportedly plan to use MoJo content for mainstream platforms like television, while reporters at the online site of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* in Manila (<http://www.inquirer.net/>) have been filing stories remotely via Nokia N80 mobile phones. Reporters at German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle plan to introduce the MoJo concept later this year (Quinn, 2008). There are also examples of highly productive MoJos working outside of mainstream media, such as Dutch MoJo, Ruud Elmendorp, operating out of Kenya with a Web site offering more than 130 video news reports from 22 countries in Africa (<http://www.videoreporter.nl>). A number of Elmendorp’s stories cover the use and diffusion of mobile technology across that continent. In another example cited by Quinn (2008), Californian technology blogger Robert Scoble (<http://scobleizer.com>) has been broadcasting live video from his phone since 2007 using the *Qik* mobile video streaming service (<http://qik.com>). Scoble’s work is possibly the inspiration for experiments with mobile journalism by BBC technology reporters (Waters, 2008).

Increased use of mobile technology by reporters has also started to raise questions about how to best incorporate this form of newsgathering into existing publication activities. To date, much of the professional practice of MoJo appears to have originated within print-based newsrooms that are experimenting with adding multimedia elements to their Web-based publications. Mobile journalists are generally seen as being able to respond quickly to breaking news events, often operating away from the newsroom environment for extended periods of time. For example, a model of the self-sufficient reporter responding to grassroots issues and working with the local community has developed at *The News-Press*, a daily broadsheet newspaper located in Fort Myers, Florida. Although the *News-Press* MoJos do not rely solely on mobile phone technology they illustrate the belief that untethering reporters from the newsroom can increase their ability to work more closely with the communities in which they operate:

“Their job is to share the things that people are talking about over the back fence. Some of it is information that our mojos provide -- an update on a traffic jam, the water leak at the elementary school, the opening of a new restaurant. Other information is from readers -- their comments on that new restaurant, speculation on who will win the mayor's race, pictures of their kids' soccer game. Our goal is to give readers everything they could want to know about their community” (Marymont, 2006).

The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism has found a growing acceptance of MoJo’s among U.S. newspaper editors, despite some dismissing the practice as a fad. Again, the flexibility and speed of the mobile journalist is a key factor to their acceptance in the newsgathering process:

“Anecdotal evidence suggests ‘Mo Jo’s’ are usually deployed to cover geographical rather than themed beats and tend to act as carpet sweepers, reporting and filing a stream of short, quick stories for the paper’s website on minor or routine developments during the course of the day” (“The changing newsroom,” 2008).

MoJo research

Beyond discussion on the practical experiments being conducted by Reuters and others, there is very little research literature on mobile journalism. It tends to fall within the examinations of so-called citizen journalism or participatory reporting, reflecting recognition of the power of mobile phones as a potential newsgathering device with wide diffusion through the populace. As with the practical experiments, there is an emphasis on the ubiquity of cameraphones, and their impact on the future of newsgathering. In less than a decade, the ability to take still photos and/or video footage with a mobile phone has contributed to the “radical personalisation of news-gathering” (Goggin, 2006, p. 147).

Mobile communication technology equipped with still and video cameras in the hands of the public has given rise to a new level of audio/visual coverage of newsworthy events. Recent examples of the impact of mobile media as a news recording device include the 2004 South-east Asian tsunami, the 2005 London transport bombings, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the execution of Saddam Hussein in late 2006, and the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007. In all cases professional news coverage initially drew heavily on the resources gathered via mobile phone by eyewitnesses to those events, and in some cases these still and moving images have become iconic representations of those news stories. Commercial services such as *Scoopt* (www.scoopt.co.uk) and *Cell Journalist* (www.celljournalist.com) emerged to act as intermediaries between the mobile-equipped public and news organizations, collecting a percentage of the royalty sales in return. Norwegian newspaper *VG* has even developed software called the *VG News Portal* specifically aimed at helping publications provide the means for mobile phone equipped reporters and citizens to submit content to an online publication – again with an emphasis on handling images and video content.

Beyond contributions to mainstream media, the consumer/producer role is evident in the increased use of shared or social media sites to publish media content gathered with mobile media. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina for example, citizens of New Orleans began using online sites such as *Flickr* and *Blogger* to publish their stories, photos and footage of the conditions being experienced in the city as victims waited for assistance. In response some mainstream Websites such as *CNN.com* created their own special Hurricane Katrina citizen journalism sites to tap into this grassroots coverage of the event. Similarly, the bomb attacks on London’s transport system in 2005 were seen as a watershed moment in participatory journalism. In addition to the eyewitness mobile phone camera footage and voice reports ‘filed’ by victims and witnesses to mainstream news organizations, vast amounts of text, images, video and audio were self-published in the aftermath of the blasts. In particular ‘moblogging’ - the combination of mobile media and self-published Web logs or ‘blogs’ - proved a popular and fast way for these accounts and supporting commentary to be published. It is claimed that the first pictures of the bombings appeared on a moblog site, and that 3,000 mobloggers contributed content to one UK moblog site alone (Quinn & Quinn-Allan, 2006, p. 63). Mainstream media such as the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *Sky News* also attracted and made use of eyewitness or public-supplied media material, much of it captured and supplied via mobile media.

More recently, the development of social media and content sharing sites – particularly for video and still images – has provided a significant publishing outlet for mobile content. *YouTube* for example allows for simple and free sharing of video content, including items that could be considered newsworthy, and has introduced tools to facilitate easier uploading

of mobile phone content. Steve Rosenbaum, creator of MTV Unfiltered, one of the first viewer-contributed video programs on television observes that:

“The average person witnesses something that is considered news once every 10 years ... When it’s time to put something on the Internet, they will put it in the place they have used before. The numbers tell us that is YouTube.” (in Hansell, 2006).

Another emerging research area considers the adoption of mobile phones as newsgathering and dissemination devices in developing nations. Across the globe a range of factors such as the prevailing political, economic and social conditions, and the technological infrastructure available influence the adoption of new technology. Wireless technologies, represented most pervasively by the mobile telephone, are therefore diffusing at different rates around the world. However, the speed of mobile phone adoption has outstripped that of other forms of communication technology so far, so that within the past decade “mobile telephony has moved from being the technology for a privileged few, to essentially a mainstream technology” (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2004, p. 5).

Wireless telephony is increasingly being seen as a means of bridging the ‘digital divide’ in developing nations by skipping a stage in the development of communication infrastructure. Rather than spending money on underlying wired systems, which tends to favour major cities or population centres, the GDP available for telecommunications can be spent on developing wireless technology in rural or remote regions (Critical Friends of Technology, 2003). In the absence of other viable media and communication tools, it is possible that the mobile phone will become a grassroots media production and dissemination device in developing nations. Even in developed countries, the mobile phone is opening the media up to increased commentary by the ‘average’ person to a degree not imagined even a few years ago.

MoJo and the journalism curriculum

Reflecting the nascent professionalization of mobile journalism, consideration of the potential uses of mobile media remains at an early stage among journalism educators. There is increasing awareness of the significance of mobile phones as part of young people’s media biographies (Stald, 2008), and the potential to co-opt them as learning devices generally (Prensky, 2005) and for journalism training in particular (Cameron, 2007). In one practical example, journalism students covered the 2004 Republican and Democratic Party Conventions, updating websites with text, images, video and audio captured on their mobile phones (Covington, R quoted in Quinn & Quinn-Allan, 2006, p. 59). Journalism does not often match other professional education programs, like medicine and engineering, where academics and researchers have a track record of leading the industry into new areas (Davenport, Fico, & DeFleur, 2002). A notable mobile journalism experiment that seeks to address this trend is based at Rhodes University in South Africa, where it is:

“government policy in general that universities are supposed to generate graduates fit for purpose -- meaning in the case of journalism schools, students qualified to work in the media. Overshadowed by such a vocational focus, however, is the role of universities as hotbeds of research and innovation -- with a community service benefit. This mix is exactly what Rhodes is hoping to achieve with this project” (Berger, 2008).

This Knight Foundation funded project will see experiments in citizen generated content and mobile delivery of news, as well as exploring mobile reporting methods with the Rhodes journalism students. Another experiment based in South Africa is the University of the

Witwatersrand's 'Mojozone' campus-based news service, which will use Nokia MoJo kits. Course creator Indra de Lanerolle believes it is important to engage students with mobile media forms that are transforming journalism:

“The challenges they are grappling with are the same ones that media organisations in print, television and online are also grappling with – how best to deliver content to phones. It's like being around at the very beginning of television – no one knows the answers yet and these students have as good a chance as anyone of finding some of those answers” (in "Students launch a new experiment in mobile media," 2008).

Some of the issues to be considered will be the training of students to understand the technical and practical parameters of producing content for mobile delivery, the nature of mobile media audiences, and the development of cross-platform content. Students will also generally need to develop skills for and a greater sense of working within a broader participatory media ecology (Jenkins, 2006). Nguyen (2006) suggests journalism education would benefit from embracing the theory and practice of participatory journalism, a form that increasingly includes the use of mobile phones. Future journalists will need to act as “listener, discussor and forum leader/mediator in an intimate interaction with audiences” (Nguyen, 2006, p. 152). However, embracing the practical aspects of participatory journalism would also require greater exploration of the ethical, social and political dimensions increasingly associated with this form. It may be that some of these features may not be compatible with the expectations and agendas of some news organizations, or the political or regulatory bodies that impact on journalism.

Conclusion

Common mobile phones are increasingly digital media toolkits featuring various combinations and configurations of text and multimedia message capability, still and video cameras, GPS locators, radio and TV receivers, and a range of software applications from games to personal organizers. As a production device and a media form the mobile phone is becoming increasingly interesting to news organizations seeking to make use of both professional and amateur content recorded in the 'field'. Mobile journalism is also becoming an important area of study, particularly as mobile media continues to reach out globally in a way that other rapidly changing digital technologies, still largely reliant on wired infrastructure, wealthy populations and high literacy levels cannot. The impact of the ubiquitous presence of video and still cameras is of particular interest, fuelled by real world examples of eyewitness reporting based on cameraphone technology. As mobile technology continues to be taken up readily by younger users, ensuring the continued development of the technology as new social uses emerge, it is also an area of particular interest to educators both generally, and particularly in the areas of journalism, media and communications.

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