Mobile journalism: A snapshot of current research and practice

David Cameron (David.Cameron@newcastle.edu.au)
University of Newcastle, Australia

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, micro-blogging (‘tweeting’) and video and audio podcasting. Journalism is also differentiated by the technological means by which it is produced, such as with the solo video journalist (‘VJ’) equipped with a compact video camera, or the photojournalist now able to publish digital images straight to our screens via 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 highly portable multimedia newsgathering equipment, including both consumer and professional devices. This chapter 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 and tablet devices.

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 smartphone models are portable digital media production and data transfer systems with configurations of features such as still and video camera capabilities, media editing software, 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 increased availability of wireless connectivity, Web-based software applications and online storage has fuelled a trend from laptop computers towards more compact netbooks, and more recently to touchscreen tablet devices such as Apple’s iPad.

One early example of MoJo practice described in the literature revolved around an experimental toolkit developed by Reuters. The kit was based on 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, and though no longer active it is often cited in descriptions of nascent 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 Hilary 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 key mobile phone features driving current MoJo practice. The emergence of commercial services and applications such as Kyte’s (http://www.kyte.com) mobile producer application for iPhone or Symbian 60 devices has facilitated reporting from the field, and delivery of that content across multiple platforms such as broadcast, online and mobile. An example is Fox News’ use of Kyte to cover the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake (Hall, 2010). In another example of current 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 (Nyrubugara, 2008). Australian academic Stephen Quinn (2008) has outlined other moves towards 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 considered 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 filed multimedia stories remotely using Blackberry smartphones (S. Quinn, 2009).

There are also examples of highly productive MoJos working outside of mainstream media, such as Dutch producer Ruud Elmendorp who operates out of Kenya with a Web site offering more than 180 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). Other independent MoJos are working more directly with mainstream media organizations. One example is The Berlin Project in 2009, produced by a small collective of multimedia journalists known as Not On The Wires. The team used mobile devices to provide coverage of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, largely in the form of field reporting through images, video, social media updates (mostly via http://www.twitter.com), and audio (via http://audioboo.fm/).  Not On The Wires partnered with news wire service Reuters, which used the content to enhance its own coverage of the event (Reuters, 2009).

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 was explored at The News-Press, a daily broadsheet newspaper located in Fort Myers, Florida. Although the News-Press MoJos did not rely solely on mobile phone technology they believed that untethering reporters from the newsroom could 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 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 seen as 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” (2008).

**MoJo research**

Beyond discussion on the practical experiments being conducted by Reuters and others, there is still 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 camera-enabled phones, 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). However, the newsgathering potential of the mobile phone is best viewed as complex relationship between the affordances offered by combining a range of technologies in one device, such that:

“the camera phone is neither an incremental step forward from a mobile phone, nor a poor relation of a digital camera. Rather it is a device which is sometimes used rather like a digital camera, but is different in the range of activities it supports” (Kindberg, Spasojevic, Fleck, & Sellen, 2005).

The combination of wireless communication and compact digital cameras is most apparent in the coverage of crisis situations, or rapidly changing news environments (Pavlik, 2003). This is not limited to the use of these devices by journalists and other media professionals to report from the field, as placing mobile communication technology equipped with still and
video cameras in the hands of the public has given rise to a new level of eyewitness 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, the Virginia Tech shootings in April 2007, and the shooting death of Neda Agha-Soltan during the 2009 Iranian post-election protests. 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.scoop.co.uk) emerged to act as intermediaries between the mobile-equipped public and news organizations, collecting a percentage of the royalty sales in return. Scoopt was subsequently bought by Getty Images in 2007, and closed down as a separate venture in 2009.

Norwegian newspaper VG has 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. An iPhone application called 2200 Tips VG is also available through the Norwegian iTunes store to facilitate uploading of images, video and text to the VG site. Other news organizations have also realized the potential value of tapping into mobile-equipped citizens as eyewitness ‘reporters’, with iPhone applications released for example by CNN, CBS and the Straits Times to encourage and assist people to feed content to those newsrooms.

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 (Stephen 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.

A different form of blogging/moblogging is now seen in microblogging applications such as Twitter, which allow users to contribute short text updates which can include links to other media such as Websites, audio, images and video clips. Although not restricted to mobile devices, a range of software applications have been developed to facilitate the use of phones, portable computers and tablet devices to provide content for these information
streams. Some device and telecommunication companies market products specifically on the basis of their support for social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Media organizations are taking greater notice of these applications as both sources of and outlets for news content.

More broadly 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 that professionalization of mobile journalism is a new development, 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, in Stephen Quinn & Quinn-Allan, 2006). 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 (Zuckerman, 2010). The project is titled lindaba Ziyafika, which is normally translated from the Xhosa language as ‘the news is coming’. Another experiment based in South Africa was the University of the Witwatersrand’s ‘Mojozone’ campus-based news service, which used Nokia MoJo kits. At the time of the trial, Course creator Indra de Lanerolle believed it was important to engage students with the 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” (“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, discusser 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 and other personal wireless media devices 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’. Software applications to assist people to share content from their mobile phones
directly with news organisations, or indirectly through media sharing and social media sites, are becoming increasingly common and freely available for download. 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 camera phone 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.

References


Hall, G. (2010, 22 January, 2010). Fox News Reporters Using Kyte Mobile Producer for iPhone to Cover Tragic Events In Haiti. *Kyte Blog*, from 


