

Mobile media and the journalism curriculum

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Abstract

This paper considers the application of mobile media to the university journalism curriculum. Mobile phones are emerging as a media production platform, combining audio/visual recording tools with networked communication. The availability of these devices, and a developing non-professional production culture, highlights the blurring of distinctions between media consumption and production made possible by networked digital technology. The mobile telephone has become a significant instrument in the development of this journalistic form.

Placing mobile communication technology equipped with still and video cameras into the hands of the public has given rise to a new form of audio/visual coverage of news events. The ease and speed with which such images can be captured and disseminated around the world is changing the traditional news cycle. News organisations now regularly call on their audiences to contribute mobile phone content of newsworthy events as soon as they occur, and audiences have become equally accepting of grainy images and poor audio as a component of mainstream news coverage.

This paper reports on a pilot survey of graduating journalism students and their use of mobile telephones, and considers what aspects of the emerging mobile content production model may have future application to the teaching of journalism in the university setting.

Keywords

Journalism, education, mobile, media, phones, participatory, curriculum

Mobile media and the journalism curriculum

The mobile telephone 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 a portable digital media production and data transfer system with the capacity to replace the basic functions of other media technologies such as computers, music players, radios, TVs, PDAs, digital cameras, and games consoles. In Australia, mobile service providers such as Telstra, Hutchison 3, Vodafone and Optus are transforming themselves into media networks by growing the channels of information, entertainment and social networking services available to their subscribers via mobile devices (Flavell, 2006). The future data exchange capacity of the mobile network is set to rival other less portable broadband options. The mobile telephone has quietly become the convergent personal media device that many of us always have with us, and which is almost always turned on ready to send and receive data.

One of the areas being affected by this shift towards the mobile device as a personal media hub is the practice of journalism. The ubiquitous nature of mobile telephony in many parts of the world has affected the practical process of newsgathering, particularly coverage of breaking stories or events where media professionals are absent or yet to arrive. Deuze (2005) describes a “super-charged” media ecology in which content and connectivity converge to allow a hybrid storytelling form to evolve, and which is now known as participatory journalism. The mixture of portability and connectivity fused with audio/visual (particularly visual) recording and editing tools has prompted new challenges to definitions of journalism. It has also altered the media landscape by opening up new paths to deliver the work of journalists, as well as for sharing information with potential audiences.

Participatory journalism and mobile media

The form of social communication emerging in the digital media environment has been variously described as *alternative* (Couldry & Curran, 2003), *grassroots* (Gillmor, 2004), *citizens'* (Rodriguez, 2003), or *participatory* (Bowman & Willis, 2003) journalism. At its core, this form of journalism can be conceptualised as a philosophy and set of practices embedded in the everyday lives of individuals, and as media content that is both driven and produced by those people (Rodriguez, 2001). It is often portrayed as a radical challenge to the professionalised and institutionalised practices of so-called mainstream media (Atton, 2003, p. 267). Equally it is sometimes dismissed as eyewitness media or even the work of amateur paparazzi and not deserving of the title 'journalism'. The blurring of boundaries between media production and media consumption afforded by technology is not in itself a new concept. Toffler (1980) predicted the rise of a "prosumer" economy fuelled by the commodification of science and technology. Jenkins (2003) offers commentary on the participatory media culture that grew with the availability of photocopiers ("the people's printing press"), video-cassette-recorders, super-8 movie cameras and more recently digital video cameras and editing software. To that list of tools enabling a more hands-on media consumption/production culture must now be added portable personal media such as phones, pocket pc devices, and even hand-held games consoles.

As Lasica (2003, para. 2) observes, "participatory journalism is a slippery creature. Everyone knows what audience participation is, but when does that translate into journalism?" Often the dominant criterion used to define journalism in response to open digital publishing forms has been the level of editorial intent present. Although

the technical means of gathering and publishing information are increasingly more widely available, the application of a conscious editorial filter – for example applying a principle of balance to a multi-sided story, checking the veracity of details, and more generally adopting an intended ‘newsy’ style - is seen as one of the defining elements that turns content into a piece of journalism. Nonetheless, the blurring of the boundary between news production and news consumption that is at the heart of participatory journalism remains most obvious in audience contributions to mainstream news coverage.

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 by mobile phone carrying eyewitnesses to those events, and in some cases the still and moving images provided have become iconic representations of those news stories. Commercial services such as *Scoopt* (www.scoopt.co.uk) and *Cell Journalist* (www.celljournalist.com) have now emerged to act as intermediaries between the mobile-equipped public and news organisations, collecting a percentage of the royalty sales in return. There is an awareness of the potential for amateur paparazzi to emerge, stalking celebrities and other newsworthy figures.

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 was 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 organisations, 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. The controversial mobile phone footage of Saddam Hussein's execution was spread widely via such sites, with many mainstream news organisations linking directly to these online files as part of their own coverage of the story. Sites such as *YouTube* also allow ranking and

commenting on the items that are posted, and some of this discussion takes the form of short video editorials called 'videoblogs' – many of which are recorded on mobile phones and posted directly to a Website. Like text-based blogging, videoblogging suggests a new form of participatory journalism that often falls into a category of meta-commentary (Deuze, 2001) rather than straight reportage, with much of the content a commentary on events in the news.

Mobile media and the journalism curriculum

In 1994, journalism educator Mark Pearson challenged his peers to “take on a role as innovators and lead our students and our profession into the new era of journalism” (Pearson, 1994, p. 102). The possible alternative was for Australian journalism courses to be caught lagging behind developments in the media landscape, particularly the rise of new information delivery systems such as e-mail, the World Wide Web, and indeed mobile phones. Consideration of the potential uses of mobile media remains at a very early stage among journalism educators; yet equally experimentation with the use of mobile media beyond basic telephony remains limited among journalism professionals and news organisations. Davenport, Fico and DeFleur (2002) observe that journalism does not match other professional education programs, like medicine and engineering, where academics and researchers have a track record of leading the industry into new areas. However one example of industry willingness to explore mobile media’s potential for newsgathering is the *BBC’s* video journalism experiment with specially modified *Nokia* camera/phones (Quinn & Quinn-Allan, 2006). Other examples of encouraging mobile media production include competitions for mobile phone produced documentaries such as the *Mobifilms* competition recently staged by *Nokia* and *Discovery Networks Asia* (www.mobifilms.net).

One of the reasons for limited examination of mobile media is that journalism academics in Australia tend to come from industry backgrounds (95% according to a study by Patching in 1997), and there is a time lag between the introduction of new technologies and processes into industry and the movement of suitably experienced people across to academia. In turn there is potentially a technological 'generation gap' between the teacher/trainers and their students (Cameron, 2005) that places different emphasis on the importance or utility of some media technologies or their future impact.

However, there is also evidence to suggest that some Australian journalism educators and trainers have attempted to pursue opportunities to make use of new technology in the classroom, and that there is broad recognition of the need to continually review and update the curriculum as necessary to keep pace with developments (Pearson, 1999, p. 50; Huesca, 2000; Broderick, 2001; Nicholson, 2001). Blood notes the "dramatic change occurring in journalism and journalism education", involving a shift away from traditional news sources toward a more active form of newsmaking based on data manipulation, and supported by global computer networks (Blood, 1998, p. 207). Cameron (2004) outlines several examples of the introduction of new technology into Australian journalism curricula, such as Computer-Assisted Reporting as newsroom practice and the use of digital training simulations. However, to date there has been little academic research into the likely impact of mobile media on the journalism curriculum, or indeed upon journalism as a practice.

Even the exploration of online forms such as blogging and podcasting, and the use of social media such as *YouTube* remains limited and is considered experimental among Australian journalism educators, if recent regional journal and conference papers are any guide. In a sense the mobile phone has so rapidly adopted existing digital technologies and standards, and been taken up so readily by the population, that it has become a significant media form almost by stealth (Cameron, 2006). Although most consumers would probably state that they have been buying the device primarily for voice and text telephony they have been getting a camera, radio, multimedia player, and game platform as well. Journalism educators are only now beginning to consider mobile media's impact and viability in educational programs as a content-delivery system. In one notable 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, p59). 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 need to develop skills for and a greater sense of working closely with audiences that seek a direct input into the newsmaking process. This may range from simple technical issues of dealing with mobile phone-produced files, through to managing online communities or collaborative groups formed around such coverage or particular news events or stories.

Students and their mobile phones

In November 2006 a pilot study was conducted with undergraduate Communication students at Charles Sturt University (CSU) exploring their ownership and use of

digital technology, particularly mobile phones. The addition of questions concerning mobile phones brought a new dimension to similar studies of some 600 CSU and University of Sydney students in total surveyed about their use of digital technology in two surveys conducted in 2005 and 2006 (Cameron, 2005).

This pilot study involved 64 Communication students at Charles Sturt University in November 2006. Participation was voluntary, with students notified about the survey via email and invited to participate. The survey was conducted online using the Web-based system *Survey Monkey* (www.surveymonkey.com). Participants were divided among several major studies areas within CSU's Communication degree, with about one third majoring in Public Relations and the rest fairly evenly divided among students specialising in Journalism, Commercial Radio, and Advertising. Almost half (47 percent) were aged 19 to 20 years, and 73 percent of the respondents were female.

While only a small sample the pilot provided useful feedback that will be used to refine the survey questions, and it provided a snapshot of data allowing some insight into how these young people are using their phones. Perhaps not surprisingly, 100 percent of the respondents owned a mobile phone. Vodafone was the most popular carrier (34 percent) followed next by Optus (25 percent), Telstra (22 percent), 3 (nine percent) and Virgin (eight percent). The majority (45 percent) use a pre-paid plan, followed by a capped fixed-term contract (28 percent). Given the average age of the group it was interesting to find that a total of 78 percent of the respondents had owned three or more mobile phones, with 29 percent of the group having owned three, and 28 percent having owned five or more. A majority of the group (61 percent) had owned their current phone for less than one year.

The use of the mobile phone for voice calls was not a priority for this group, with SMS or 'texting' considered the most important application. When asked to describe their feelings about their mobile phone features, the respondents rated the following in order as being so **vital** they could not do without them:

1. SMS (94%)
2. Clock (91%)
3. Address Book (78%)
4. Voice Calls (73%)
5. Voice Mail (47%)

Similar surveys have found a high level of access to or ownership of mobile phones, with the predominant use for voice and text telephony (Cameron, 2005; Kennedy *et al.*, 2006)

Only 20 percent rated a digital still camera as vital, while 11 percent indicated they could not do without the video camera feature. Only six percent relied on their phone to access the Internet or to listen to stored music or the radio, rating well below the need for a calendar function (33 percent) and a calculator (30 percent). The limited mobile data services available in the Bathurst area at the time of the survey are most likely a factor in these responses, as only so-called 2G (second generation) options were available to students. This would affect the download charges and times, and the types of data services that could be used compared to metropolitan areas serviced by the 3G (third generation) networks and Telstra's Next G service.

Mobile phones and image capture

Of greater interest when considering the possible place of mobile phones in the journalism curriculum, particularly from the point of view of production capability, were questions concerning the students' use of mobile phone cameras for both still and video photography. Of the group 77 percent indicated they used their mobile phone as a still camera, though it should be noted that 17 percent of respondents had earlier indicated that their phone did not feature a still camera. Those who indicated that they did take photographs with their phone were in turn asked to describe the activities they performed with those photos (Table 1), with the results showing a general lack of post-production work or publishing among this group of students. In fact, there was clearly a lack of intention to edit or publish the photos beyond using them as personal wallpaper or showing them to friends or family.

Table 1. What do you do with the photos recorded on your mobile phone?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never and not planning to	Never but planning to
Save	73%	24%	2%	0%	0%
Edit	4%	21%	44%	27%	4%
Use as phone wallpaper	58%	35%	4%	2%	0%
Record over	10%	27%	38%	25%	0%
View with family	20%	47%	20%	12%	0%
View with friends	48%	44%	6%	2%	0%
Send to friends	35%	41%	12%	8%	4%
Send to family	18%	33%	31%	14%	4%
Make printed hard copies	6%	20%	31%	22%	20%
Load to Website for public viewing	6%	10%	20%	57%	6%
Load to Website for private viewing	6%	10%	18%	55%	10%
Transfer to a new format (eg DVD)	8%	18%	14%	39%	20%

Those respondents who indicated they used their mobile phone as a still camera were also asked about the type of content recorded as photos (Table 2). The most frequent (47 percent) was special personal events – defined in the questionnaire as ‘birthdays, weddings, etc’. Holidays (39 percent) were the next most frequent content for mobile phone photos, followed by other special events (35 percent) – defined as ‘sports, performances, etc.’

Table 2. Which of the following things do you record as photos on your mobile phone?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never and not planning to	Never but planning to
Everyday occurrences	25%	46%	25%	2%	2%
Special personal events	47%	29%	18%	4%	2%
Other special events	35%	40%	12%	12%	0%
Holidays	39%	29%	20%	10%	2%
Wildlife	16%	18%	43%	18%	4%
Documentary/news	2%	2%	52%	35%	8%
Erotica	0%	6%	17%	71%	6%

When asked about video recording, 26 percent had indicated their phone did not have this feature. Of the group, 41 percent of the respondents indicated they used the mobile phone to record video footage. That group was then asked to describe the activities conducted with the video content (Table 3).

Table 3. What do you do with the videos recorded on your mobile phone?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never and not planning to	Never but planning to
Save	58%	35%	8%	0%	0%
Edit	8%	12%	38%	27%	15%
Record over	8%	31%	42%	12%	8%
View with family	27%	38%	23%	12%	0%
View with friends	35%	54%	12%	0%	0%
Send to friends	31%	27%	12%	19%	12%
Send to family	23%	23%	19%	31%	4%
Load to Website for public viewing	0%	4%	23%	62%	12%
Load to Website for private viewing	4%	4%	15%	58%	19%
Transfer to a new format (eg DVD)	0%	23%	15%	31%	31%

Once more, this group of respondents showed a limited interest in sharing their mobile phone video content with a wider audience or for post-production manipulation of the footage. They were also questioned on the type of content shot using the mobile phone as a video camera (Table 4).

Table 4. Which of the following things do you record as video on your mobile phone?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Never and not planning to	Never but planning to
Everyday occurrences	31%	65%	4%	0%	0%
Special personal events	42%	42%	8%	4%	4%
Other special events	20%	52%	16%	8%	4%
Holidays	35%	35%	15%	12%	4%
Wildlife	12%	19%	35%	31%	4%
Documentary/news	4%	4%	35%	46%	12%
Video diary	4%	0%	15%	81%	0%
Music video	4%	12%	31%	54%	0%
Erotica	0%	4%	16%	80%	0%
Spoofs/parody	4%	15%	19%	62%	0%
Other fiction	4%	12%	15%	65%	0%

Again, the category of special personal events (42 percent) rated as the most frequent use, followed by holiday footage (35 percent). This sample showed a strong aversion to putting the video camera in their mobile phone to any use requiring a higher level of production or storytelling. This, and the use of digital still cameras, are areas requiring greater attention in a larger survey, as the results could have a significant impact on any plans to use the mobile phone as a tool for teaching newsgathering or mobile media production techniques.

On a lighter note, students were asked to reveal the regularity with which they send and receive SMS messages during class. The results in Table 5 probably confirm many educators' suspicions with only 12.5 percent claiming to never pursue the practice; one colleague examining the data commented that this probably shows 12.5 percent of students *lie* about their use of SMS in class.

Table 5. How often do you send and/or receive SMS messages during class?

	Response Percent
Sometimes	37.5%
Often	26.6%
Rarely	23.4%
Never	12.5%

Nguyen (2006) suggests journalism education would benefit from embracing the theory and practice of participatory journalism. This form 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.

However, given the global penetration of mobile devices, an understanding of the theory and practices of media production emerging from this technology would generally be of benefit to future practitioners. One of the defining features of journalism education in a university setting is the requirement that students demonstrate their understanding of core skills by producing professional work (Burns, 1996). Writing tasks assess writing skills. Research exercises test research skills. Conducting an interview demonstrates interviewing abilities, and so on. Most working journalists are required to be able to produce some form of product, so it seems natural to put journalism students through a rehearsal production process. It is likely that as mobile devices become an even more efficient multimedia production and reception device, more academics will take them into account when considering the practical aspects of journalism training. For example, photojournalism classes may soon be able to conduct simple field exercises using the digital cameras and editing software embedded in students’ own mobile phones. Students might shoot and edit simple TV news exercises using embedded video cameras, and share them via mobile upload services offered by Websites such as *YouTube*. Text-based news

stories could be sent via mobile phones to a Weblog, and radio reports could be filed over the phone, or delivered back to phones as mobile podcasts.

Conclusion

While it is clear that journalism students arrive at institutions each year with a core set of skills and equipment related to 'everyday' technology, it is important that educators do not assume they can automatically be harnessed for context-specific activities. Katz (2005) observes that while most students can clearly use a range of digital technologies, it cannot be assumed that these technologies can be used immediately in the service of academic work. Similarly, the adoption of mobile media technologies in the journalism curriculum will require more than an assumption that students own the necessary production tools, and are capable of using them for purposes beyond that which they may be familiar with in a non-academic and/or non-journalistic social setting.

The 'multimedia' capacity and pervasive nature of the mobile telephone may also require that the journalism curriculum draw upon a range of discipline skills beyond a journalism/communication core. The prevalence of still and video cameras for instance may open up the need for broader input from visual arts, film studies, and design disciplines. The social impacts and uses of mobile media may open up the need for input from sociologists, ethicists, and psychologists in ways not yet fully envisaged as the media form continues to develop and emerge.

At present, there appears to be only limited early consideration of the impact of mobile media on newsgathering at both an industry and academic level. If guided by the changes brought about to both journalism and journalism education by recent

technological changes, such as the World Wide Web and digital media technology, mobile phones will soon need to be taken into account as a device for production and consumption of a range of media content including news and information. The limited pilot survey considered in this paper suggests scope for examining young people's use of mobile phones as media production tools, and how this might limit or enhance attempts to better integrate these devices into a journalism or communication curriculum. Particular elements to address in a larger survey include:

- consideration of the features present in individual phones when estimating usage of production tools such as cameras;
- the network services available to the students, and the types and amounts of data that can be accessed in different locations;
- the students' overall skill levels in related areas such as still photography and video editing; and
- student perceptions of the ethical concerns emerging around mobile phone usage.

The penetration of the mobile phone into the consumer market around the world, its rapid adoption as a tool for both personal and shared communications, and the pace with which it has merged with other technologies such as digital cameras are changing the traditional perceptions of media audiences as passive consumers. The mobile phone is emerging as a powerful tool for news coverage by professional journalists, and by members of the public who wish to participate in the new journalistic processes enabled by digital communication networks.

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