

The Video Revolution



A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Jane Sasseen

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**

Supporting freedom around the world

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. The Center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

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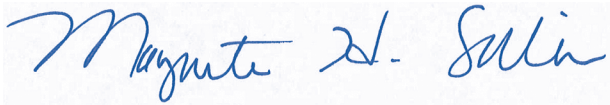
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy is pleased to publish *The Video Revolution*. The report traces the dramatic rise in the use of crowd-sourced video and examines how this is affecting the international news media landscape.

CIMA is grateful to Jane Sasseen, a former journalist and a veteran media consultant for her research and insights on this topic. We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is set against a light blue rectangular background.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
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Executive Summary

Live footage of street fighting in Syria.¹ Russian election officials caught stuffing ballot boxes.² Libyan rebels capturing and killing strongman Muammar Qaddafi.³

Not many years ago, citizens of those countries—never mind audiences around the world—would never have been able to watch video images of these events. But as the explosion of crowd-sourced footage during the Arab Spring and its aftermath have made clear, global news coverage is in the midst of a crowd-sourced video revolution.

Never before have so many people been able to shoot video showing what’s happening in their local communities—or been so able to circumvent the censorship of traditional media to get that footage in front of national and international audiences.

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Thanks to the growth of video-enabled cellphones⁴ and small, inexpensive video cameras⁵, human rights workers, political activists, citizen-journalists—and often, simple bystanders—are now filming a wide array of events. And with the rapid expansion of high-speed broadband⁶ and the creation of services like YouTube and Bambuser, which make it easy to upload or live-stream video, those images can now readily be viewed by anyone with access to the Internet at home or abroad.

It is a revolution that is transforming the images seen around the globe and the very definition of news.

“When every phone can become a camera, everyone gains the ability to produce video and put it online,”

said Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a co-founder of Global Voices Online, an international news blogging site. “It is changing the paradigm for news coverage; increasingly, front line reporting will initially be done by bystanders who happen to have a video camera.”⁷

No longer do professional journalists have a monopoly on the footage that is shot and broadcast. Perhaps most importantly, in repressive countries where media is heavily controlled by the state or other powerful interests, the video revolution has destroyed their monopoly on what will be covered or deemed newsworthy.

Instead, the man or woman on the street has a powerful new ability to record what is happening around him or her. Citizens shooting video and spreading it through social media have become critical eyewitnesses in exposing government repression and abuse.⁸ The shift has put them at

the nexus of a rapidly evolving media food chain: Their footage frequently is helping to free up press coverage at home even as it serves as primary source material both for newspapers such as the *New York Times* and international television channels such as al-Jazeera, CNN, and the BBC. They, in turn, have magnified its impact by broadcasting clips shot by citizen videographers to hundreds of millions of viewers around the globe.⁹

“These new forms of media have become the agenda setters,” said Charles Self, the director of the Institute for Research and Training at the University of Oklahoma’s Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication. In the Middle East and beyond, “their videos set the agenda for mainstream media. They have reshaped the landscape, creating alternative ways of getting information.”¹⁰

If the rise of video has created new opportunities and increased accountability, however, it has also created increased challenges for journalism. Much of the footage shot by citizens around the globe and loaded onto YouTube or elsewhere is of poor quality, with little context or clear narrative.¹¹

As they have come to rely more on such amateur footage, newspapers and television stations often must grapple with clips of indeterminate origin in which it is far from clear exactly what is happening. In situations of conflict, such as the Syrian uprising, that problem is exacerbated by the fact that activists engaged in the fight are shooting much of the footage. They are not—nor do they pretend to be—objective, balanced journalists by any traditional standard. Their goal, instead, is to rally support to their side. As a result, they may only portray a limited or partial view of what is taking place. Inadvertently or not, that can slant the coverage.¹²

Unearthing outright fabrication is another challenge, forcing news organizations to develop extensive new practices to authenticate footage that, in many cases, has been shot or uploaded anonymously.¹³

The growing ubiquity of video has brought other new risks as well, chief among them the security dangers faced by those who shoot, upload, or simply appear in the videos. While the spread of video-enabled cellphones and cheaper Internet access has done wonders to fuel the video revolution, those technologies also carry grave dangers for those who do not use them carefully. The Global Positioning System (GPS) technology built into mobile phones can easily be traced by security services, as can the massive data usage that signals someone is uploading video to the Internet.¹⁴

Without the proper training, resources, and technology to avoid such detection, citizen videographers and those who aid them can face serious reprisals from governments or others unhappy with their coverage. Even those who show up in videos shot by their fellow citizens—whether knowingly or not—can find themselves in trouble. And beyond security, there are issues of simple human dignity. The privacy of those caught unwittingly on camera can sometimes be sacrificed in the rush to get revealing footage online.¹⁵

“We’re getting into totally uncharted territory when it comes to using these technologies,” said Eric Chinje, the former head of the Global Media Program at the World Bank Institute who now oversees communications for the London-based Mo Ibrahim Foundation, which supports improved governance and leadership in Africa. “We’ve got to weigh the greater good that comes from them, but we also have to be conscious of what the potential dangers are.”¹⁶

Such questions are certain to grow as cellphone use multiplies in the coming years. As ever more citizens around the globe gain the ability to record video of what’s happening around them, journalism organizations stand to benefit hugely from the added voices and perspectives the footage will bring. But they will also have a key role to play in adding context, in ensuring that such videos provide audiences with a deeper, balanced understanding of events around the world, and perhaps most importantly, in minimizing the risks to those shooting from the front lines of the video revolution.

The Power of Video

The video revolution is part and parcel of the broader revolution of social media and citizen journalism that has swept the news media in recent years—and the impact of the two cannot be separated. Citizen journalists across the globe are using blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other new tools to spread articles, blog posts, videos, and photos of news happening in their countries. Moreover, the new video journalists use these broader tools as well, taking full advantage of social media to share their videos and tell their stories to a wider audience.¹⁷

But within the broader rise of social media and citizen journalism, video has a special place. It is a visceral medium, whose impact as a storytelling tool cannot be overstated. Images evoke an emotional response that text struggles to attain, says Colin Delaney, the founder and editor of Epolitics.com,¹⁸ a website that focuses on online advocacy. Reading that someone has been beaten

“If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a thousand times more.”

— Ausama Monajed,
London-based member
of the opposition Syrian
National Council

up or shot by security forces is a very different experience than watching them be pummeled—or seeing their life’s blood drain out on the street.

“If a picture is worth a thousand words, a video is worth a thousand times more,” said Ausama Monajed, a London-based member of the opposition Syrian National Council at a recent speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum.¹⁹

Chris Anderson, the technology media entrepreneur who now curates the well-known TED conferences, goes further. He argues that the advent and accessibility of Web video

may ultimately be as transformative as was the arrival of the printing press. “Video is sometimes more powerful than print; it is showing as well as telling,” he said in a 2010 TED talk (which itself has been viewed on YouTube more than 650,000 times). “There’s a lot more being transferred than just words.”²⁰

The reason is simple, Anderson added. “Video packs a huge amount of data, and our brains are uniquely wired to decode it.”²¹

Consider a few facts from the emerging video ecosphere:

- During the height of the Arab Spring, 100,000 videos were uploaded to YouTube from Egypt—a 72 percent increase over the previous three months.²² The top 23 videos have been viewed nearly 5.5 million times.²³
- Bambuser, the Swedish site that allows users to live-stream video directly from their cellphones, now receives between 5,500 and 6,000 new video streams each day.²⁴ Roughly 25 percent—up from 5 percent a year ago—are related to protests or other activist movements.²⁵

- The 10 most popular clips of the tsunami and subsequent flooding that hit Japan in early 2011 have received a combined total of more than 135 million views worldwide.²⁶
- A video of Arturus Zuokas, the mayor of Vilnius, Lithuania, driving a tank over illegally parked cars has drawn more than 3.7 million hits.²⁷
- The most-watched video of the death of Libyan strongman Qaddafi has been seen nearly 6 million times.²⁸ More than 9,500 videos tagged with “Libya” (in English or Arabic) were uploaded to YouTube in just one week at the height of the revolt.²⁹
- More than 17 million have watched a short film created from clips shot by survivors of the tsunami that hit Thailand and other Asian countries the day after Christmas in 2004.³⁰
- In May 2012, a video by Mexican university students protesting government corruption and the close ties between presidential candidate Enrique Peña Nieto and Televisa, the country’s biggest media company, went viral, garnering 1.8 million hits.³¹
- In by far the most successful viral video campaign, the half-hour long KONY video produced by non-profit Invisible Children drew 112 million views in just six days, the fastest video ever to top 100 million.³² The controversial film sparked a huge backlash, including many who produced their own videos critiquing the original as misguided.³³

The Rise of the Video Era

It's worth noting that the impact of such citizen-shot video on the news media is not an entirely new phenomenon. Twenty-one years ago, a bystander with a camera filmed seven Los Angeles police officers beating up Rodney King. The amateur film, widely aired on television, led to explosive protests over police brutality and the arrests of the officers involved. It also marked the first time that a citizen-shot video had such a major impact on news coverage.³⁴

The King video was a result of happenstance. But the shrinking of video technology into hand-held cameras over the last decade allowed journalists and activists to begin using video more strategically, shooting and collecting video to bring attention to human rights violations and other abuses in their countries. Perhaps most prominent was Egyptian blogger Wael Abbas, who began posting videos in 2005 of voting irregularities, anti-government demonstrations, and

The widespread introduction of video cameras into cell phones and smart phones completely changed the game by putting video cameras into the hands of hundreds of millions across the globe.

police torture to YouTube and other sites.³⁵ And in 2008, the Oscar-nominated film *Burma VJ* followed the efforts of a group of clandestine video journalists to document the uprising of students and Buddhist monks in the so-called "Saffron Revolution."³⁶ The VJs smuggled their footage into Thailand so that the exile media organization Democratic Voice of Burma could beam it back into Burma by satellite. Though it was primarily at a domestic audience, CNN and the BBC aired some of the most dramatic footage primarily at the height of the demonstrations.³⁷

Those efforts were largely the province of small groups of dedicated activists and reporters, however. In Burma, a team of roughly 30 reporters who secretly worked together produced the footage.³⁸ But the widespread introduction of

video cameras into cellphones and smart phones, accelerated by the arrival of the iPhone in 2007, completely changed the game by putting video cameras into the hands of hundreds of millions across the globe.

Tragically, events during Iran's Green Revolution in 2009 showed the potential created by the spread of technology. A jumpy video of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman who was shot at a protest against electoral irregularities, went viral on the Internet. More than 1.2 million viewers globally have watched the 40-second cellphone clip on YouTube,³⁹ while other videos containing the original footage have garnered several million more hits.⁴⁰ And as clips from the video ran in newspapers and on news programs around the globe, says Jillian York, director of international freedom of expression with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, it irrevocably demonstrated the power of such amateur video to capture news and grab the world's attention.⁴¹

"It was a strong turning point," she said.⁴²

Over the last two years, the massive outpouring of citizen-shot videos from the Arab Spring and its aftermath has taken the phenomenon to an entirely new level. The success of citizen videographers in that region has led citizens, activists and bloggers elsewhere around the globe to try to replicate their efforts.⁴³ Among the latest to turn to the power of video as part of their arsenal: since mid-June, videos of anti-government demonstrations in Sudan have appeared on the Internet, part of a campaign by student protesters to organize and publicize their efforts in the face of state media censorship and a clampdown on independent newspapers.⁴⁴

“At the time of the Rodney King beating, it was revolutionary to have someone there who happened to have a camera and could monitor events,” says MIT’s Zuckerman. “Now it’s the new normal.”⁴⁵

Mobile Technologies Fuel the Growth of Video

We are just at the beginnings of the video revolution. Already, it has resulted in an enormous explosion of traffic on the mobile Internet, with no slowdown in sight.

Global mobile data traffic more than doubled for the fourth year in a row in 2011, to 597 “petabytes” per month.⁴⁶ (a petabyte equals one million gigabytes.) That’s more than eight times the traffic of the *entire* global Internet in 2000, according to Cisco, the Silicon Valley-based technology company that builds much of the backbone of the Internet.⁴⁷ Cisco projects that mobile data traffic will continue to expand at a compound annual rate of 78 percent through 2016.⁴⁸

Video is the biggest driver of that growth: Mobile video accounted for more than half of all mobile traffic for the first time ever in 2011.⁴⁹ With video expanding faster than other uses, it is expected to make up nearly 71 percent of all mobile data traffic zipping around the web by 2016.⁵⁰

The sharp rise in mobile phone penetration and the expansion of high-speed broadband, which enables the heavy data demands of uploading or watching video, lie behind those numbers. Although the rates of adoption vary considerably by region and by country, both are growing rapidly everywhere.

Global subscriptions for mobile phones, many of which are now video-enabled, hit nearly 6 billion in 2011, according to the International Telecommunication Union. That is more than double the figure five years prior, in 2006.⁵¹

The fastest growth is in the developing world, where rates have nearly tripled since 2006, to 4.5 billion mobile subscribers at the end of the year. Overall, says the ITU, mobile penetration in the developing world now stands at 79 percent.⁵²

Mobile Cellular Subscriptions	Per 100 Habitants	
	2006	2011
Africa	17.9	53.0
Arab States	39.3	96.7
Asia & Pacific	28.8	73.9
Russia & other CIS countries	81.8	143.0
Europe	101.2	119.5
The Americas	62.0	103.3

Broadband access is also growing at a rapid clip, fueled by a sharp drop in prices. Fixed broadband prices dropped an average of 50 percent in the developing world over the last two years, while mobile broadband prices fell 22 percent.⁵³

Mobile broadband accounts linked to cellphones accounted for the majority of the growth: Mobile broadband subscriptions have risen 45 percent annually for the last four years.⁵⁴ Everywhere, mobile is now the predominant source of broadband coverage.⁵⁵ Indeed, for many in the developing world, mobile is the only source of Internet access. In Egypt, for example, 70 percent of mobile Web users never or infrequently use a fixed connection.⁵⁶

Fixed (wired) Broadband Subscribers	Per 100 Habitants	
	2006	2011
Africa	0.1	0.2
Arab States	0.5	2.2
Asia & Pacific	2.8	6.2
Russia & other CIS countries	1.3	9.6
Europe	14.8	25.8
The Americas	9.1	15.5

Active Mobile Broadband Subscribers	Per 100 Habitants	
	2007	2011
Africa	0.2	3.8
Arab States	0.8	13.3
Asia & Pacific	3.1	10.7
Russia & other CIS countries	0.2	14.9
Europe	14.7	54.1
The Americas	6.4	30.5

Source: ITU, 2011

Those trajectories are expected to continue. Sam Gregory, the program director for Witness, a non-profit organization that promotes the use of video to defend human rights, points out that a heavy user of video on a mobile phone uses one gigabyte of bandwidth a month. Just half of 1 percent of mobile users around the world use that much today, but that number is expected to rise by a factor of 120 by 2016, most of it driven by the use of smart phones. At the same time, mobile access will grow tremendously—in the Middle East and North Africa alone, mobile data traffic is expected to increase 36 times over current usage, primarily due to video.⁵⁷

“There is a massive expansion of video content creation” on the horizon, said Gregory, the co-author of *Cameras Everywhere*, a recent report looking at the implications of the video expansion for human rights. “One of the key challenges will be understanding how (that content) will be used in the media.”⁵⁸

Crowd-Sourced Video

Fostering a New Accountability Journalism

The availability of all that video is changing global news coverage in fundamental ways, creating both enormous new avenues for journalism, along with significant challenges.

The crowd-sourced video comes in varying forms—and with varying degrees of sophistication and professionalism. Much of it consists of brief, poorly shot clips filmed by bystanders and activists who find themselves in the midst of protest marches or in neighborhoods under attack.

In the Egyptian and Syrian uprisings, for example, literally thousands upon thousands of such clips have been filed on YouTube. With little context or explanation, many are difficult to follow; the vast majority gets no more than a few hundred or thousand hits at best.⁵⁹

When was the last time an image that really changed news coverage was taken by a professional photographer, rather than a citizen with a video camera?

At the same time, sophisticated networks and collectives outside the countries have come to play key roles, primarily in sorting through the videos, posting and translating the strongest among them, and working closely with international media organizations to get them the most compelling footage. They are also working closely with those shooting video on the ground, sending in equipment, providing training in video skills, Internet technology and safety, and helping them compile packages.⁶⁰ In the Tunisian uprising, the dissident blog network Naawat performed many of these roles, while in Egypt, a non-profit media collective named Mosireen has focused on producing more structured, narrative-driven

videos.⁶¹ Syrian exiles based in Cairo, London, the United States, and elsewhere have set up several groups, including the Shaam News Network and the Activist News Association, that have been prominent in aggregating, translating, and disseminating videos and other citizen journalism coming out of the country.⁶²

The one constant in the various forms, however, is that the footage is being shot and curated by people outside of traditional journalism circles, giving the citizen videographers a broad new role in defining the stories that are being produced and consumed as news. “It changes what we receive as news,” York said.⁶³

In part, that reflects the fact that there are now many more eyes and ears on events, wherever they might transpire. When every citizen with a cellphone can bear witness to events in his or her community, far more territory can be covered. That’s particularly true in an era of tight media budgets, when traditional news organizations have limited resources to put reporters in the streets.

“It’s a numbers game; when so many more people in the world have the ability to take pictures and video, the images that matter can be made by anyone,” said Ivan Sigal, the executive director of Global Voices. “It means a different role for journalism in the ecosystem; journalists are no longer the gatekeepers.”⁶⁴

Sigal poses an interesting question: When was the last time an image that really changed news coverage was taken by a professional photographer, rather than a citizen with a video camera? Many of the defining images from across the globe the last few years—the tsunamis that struck Thailand and Japan, the earthquake in Haiti, the US Airways flight crash landing in the Hudson River in New York, and protests throughout Middle East, have come from those on the spot. Producing video journalism, Sigal added, “is now a thing anyone can participate in.”⁶⁵

Beyond simple numbers, citizen journalists are also using video to open coverage up to a broader array of voices, issues, and communities than local media in many countries have been willing or able to cover. In doing so, the citizen videographers have become key players in creating a new accountability journalism, shedding light on government and military excesses in countries

When state television claimed that no more than several hundred protestors were in Tahrir Square, citizen journalists uploaded footage showing crowds numbering several hundred thousand.

where the media are under the control of the government or other private or political interests. Unbound by the restrictive laws—and at times, self-censorship—of media in these countries, they have taken up the role of watchdogs that the news media have traditionally played in countries with a free press.

“In countries where there has been repression of traditional media, video has been absolutely crucial; it has played an astonishing role,” said George Azar, a Lebanese American photographer and filmmaker now producing documentaries for al-Jazeera. “It has been central in bringing stories to light and keeping them alive.”⁶⁶

Nowhere has that been clearer than with the flood of video that has come out of the Middle East in the nearly two years since the Arab Spring first exploded onto the world stage. Starting with Tunisia in late 2010, and on through Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and the ongoing coverage of the conflict in Syria, local activists, bloggers, and other citizen journalists have defied state censorship and repression to produce reams of dramatic footage that has kept citizens of the region, and the world at large, informed about what has taken place.

It was video of protests in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid that first helped fuel the spark under the Arab Revolutions. After Mohamed Bouazizi, a young Tunisian fruit vendor, set himself on fire on December 17, his cousin and others video recorded a wave of protests over the next few days on their mobile phones. Though state-run media initially denied reports of the protests, the jumpy video clips of rioting youths soon filled the Web in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arab world; eventually, al-Jazeera and other international media picked them up as well.⁶⁷

As protests spread following Bouazizi's death in January, citizen-shot video of the government's brutal attempt to crack down increasingly went viral. As the revolution unfolded, the actions of one young video journalist, Saifeddine Amre, a 22-year old student, were typical. As described by the *Washington Post*, Amre used a video camera and his cellphone to shoot footage of uprisings in Sidi Bouzid and other towns. He and his classmates then uploaded them on to Facebook. With state-run news organizations forbidden to cover the riots, Amre and his compatriots "created, in effect, a shadow news agency that helped break the barrier of silence," according to the *Post*. "Facebook was the means of our revolution," Amre told the paper. "We used it to apply pressure on the regime, to make sure the truth came out."⁶⁸

That pattern quickly played out on an even larger scale in Egypt, as protests against the Mubarak government gathered steam in late January. Bloggers and citizen journalists posted thousands of videos of the demonstrations, even as state-controlled media first denied and then downplayed the growing uprising. Uploaded footage of retaliatory violence and torture by the security

forces also fueled the rebellion.⁶⁹ As the government attempted to isolate the country by shutting down cellphone and Internet access and limiting foreign journalists, bloggers and other citizens again operated as a "proxy free press," said Sahar Khamis, an assistant professor of communications at the University of Maryland-College Park and co-author of *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*.⁷⁰

While some have referred to the Egyptian revolution as "Facebook Revolution," the Syrian uprising can be more accurately thought of as a "YouTube Uprising."

The crowd-sourced video also helped debunk false claims spread by the government. When state television claimed that no more than several hundred protestors were in Tahrir Square, for example, citizen

journalists uploaded footage showing crowds numbering several hundred thousand. They also debunked government claims that the Muslim Brotherhood was bribing people to remain in Tahrir with offers of money and food.⁷¹

But perhaps the most powerful debunking came in December 2011, as crowds again gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the military's continued control of the country. A crackdown by soldiers ordered to clear the square turned violent, and the military blamed the protestors.⁷² But footage of soldiers in full riot-gear rampaging through unarmed civilians quickly surfaced, and a now notorious clip of a man savagely stomping on an unconscious abaya-clad woman—known around the globe as "the blue bra girl"—went viral and was picked up by traditional media. Within two months, it was watched more than 3.9 million times.⁷³

"The world first saw her on YouTube, through the realm of citizen journalism," said Khamis, an Egyptian woman who has written widely on digital technology and the media in the Middle East. "If not for them, no one would have known about her."⁷⁴

Khamis argues that the critical role video has played in ensuring coverage of the Arab revolutions has been even more important in Syria's ongoing conflict than elsewhere. While some have referred to the Egyptian revolution as a "Facebook Revolution," she argues the Syrian uprising can be more accurately thought of as a "YouTube Uprising."

The reason: Foreign journalists worked in Egypt before the revolution, and while they were often harassed, they were allowed to remain in the country. Some independent media existed, and Wael Abbas and others had also created a vibrant blogger culture widely followed both within and outside of the country. As a result, there has been extensive media coverage of the revolution and its aftermath from numerous points of view. While state-run media remains strong, it has not dominated the narrative.

In Syria, by contrast, foreign journalists have been banned from the country and state control of the media has been far tighter than in Egypt. "Syria has a much more oppressive regime that did not allow any space for independent media—no conflicting voices have been allowed to be heard," Khamis said.⁷⁵

As a result, international news organizations have been forced to rely almost exclusively on videos surreptitiously shot by activists and citizens and uploaded to YouTube or live-streamed on Bambuser for coverage of the ongoing conflict.

"Without these videos, there is no revolution," said Mohammad Al Abdallah, a Syrian journalist who fled the country after being imprisoned for his writing.⁷⁶

Working with the Shaam network, Al Abdallah has been a key player in the global network of Syrian exiles who work as go-betweens, linking the videographers shooting footage inside the country to the international journalists and television producers who run their clips.

He argues that video has played a critical role in preventing the current situation in Syria from ending up like that of the 1982 Hama massacre, when the Syrian government killed an estimated 10,000 or more of its citizens. "The government tried to copy what happened in 1982, when people were wiped out with no evidence," he said. "Now, we have live shots of missiles hitting populated areas; it is not hidden. The videos put the international community in front of their responsibilities; the world can't say they don't know what is happening."⁷⁷

If the dramatic rise in crowd-sourced video as a source of accountability journalism has been most prevalent in the Middle East, it is hardly a phenomenon of that region alone. Elsewhere around the globe, citizens have also picked up video cameras to get around censorship and tell stories that reverberate locally, even if they don't make it onto CNN or the BBC.

Around the globe, citizens have also picked up video cameras to get around censorship and tell stories that reverberate locally, even if they don't make it onto CNN or BBC.

During three days of protests in the Burmese town of Pyi in late May 2012, for example, townspeople upset about electricity shortages posted film of their demonstrations—and violent police efforts to shut them down—on Facebook and sent footage to outlets such as Radio Free Asia (RFA) and the Democratic Voice of Burma. Earlier in the spring, similar footage had been sent in from factory workers protesting their low pay. “We have a lot of citizen journalists sending us things from places we can’t reach,” said Khin May Zaw, senior editor for multimedia at RFA “There are a lot of cameras now. Farmers, factory workers—they all know how to take advantage of media to be their witness.”⁷⁸

Video has also become a critical tool to call attention to official abuses in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Footage of election officials stuffing ballot boxes with fraudulent votes played heavily on the Russian Internet following last December’s general election, for example, as did footage of demonstrations when Vladimir Putin was sworn in as president in the spring. “There is a real trend of citizens making videos of things you couldn’t talk about,” said Josh Machleder, vice president for Europe and Eurasia and global human rights at Internews.⁷⁹

In one well-known example, a police major from the Black Sea port of Novorossiisk made a video alleging corruption within his precinct in 2009. It quickly drew more than a million hits and became so heavily discussed in the Russian blogosphere that the national television stations were forced to acknowledge it.⁸⁰ “His video could never have gotten on TV, but he put it up on YouTube and it went viral,” said Machleder. “When you see that kind of thing going viral, they cannot avoid it.”⁸¹

A Force For More Independent Local Media?

Such experiences raise another critical question: To what extent is citizen-shot video helping open up the landscape for local media? With so much footage showing up on YouTube, on Facebook, and in blogs, it has become much harder for governments to completely suppress news they do not like. But it is one thing for foreign media or bloggers who have a limited following to run coverage critical of government or military authorities; it is another for professional journalists working either for state-owned or independent media to gain the freedom to report and run critical stories directly themselves.

Put another way, has the growth of citizen-shot video given journalists from independent media more leeway to cover abuses themselves that they would not have been able to in the past? And is it forcing state-run media to open up and report more objectively as well?

The answer to those questions, media experts say, varies considerably from country to country as governments and independent media grapple with the newfound power of citizen videographers to get around censorship. “It very much depends; in some countries media remain fairly controlled, without a lot of leeway; in others they have been more able to break away from the centralized government,” said Self, of the University of Oklahoma. Governments “can’t ignore it entirely, particularly if news is emerging in al- Jazeera or other international channels. But there are still many constraints.”⁸²

Luis Manuel Botello, the head of Latin American programs for the International Center For Journalists (ICFJ), cites a recent example in which indigenous people from the provinces of Veraguas and Chiriqui in western Panama protested government plans to allow mining in their lands. When police used violence to try to disperse them, protesters immediately uploaded videos of the reprisals. They spread so quickly that the government asked the local telecommunications company to shut down service. The move backfired, however, when the minister for public security was seen on TV blaming the service shutdown on sabotage by protestors, even as officials of the telecommunications company were captured at the same time telling local residents that they had cut off the service at the government's request.

The dispute was widely covered in the national press, largely because of the “good use of videos by the indigenous people,” Botello said.⁸³ But even more importantly, that incident and others have led to broader coverage in which the voices of rural and indigenous people are starting to be heard in debates over land use and other issues that concern them.

In many instances, local press outfits that pick up citizen-shot video from the Internet take on considerable risk.

“Panama has a fairly vibrant independent media, but it was fairly government-centric,” Botello said. As in much of Latin America, he said, newspapers and TV tend to cover official news, most of it centered on the large cities. They rely heavily on government sources and ignore much of what happens in the provinces. In the wake of the demonstrations, reporters from local TV and newspapers are now following the stories of the indigenous people more closely. “It has pushed the media to be closer to the people; to cover stories from their point of view and not just that of the government,” Botello said. “There is no question that this is really changing the media landscape.”⁸⁴

Such changes can be slow in coming, however, when they come at all. In Armenia, for example, human rights activists and others shot photos and video of army recruits undergoing brutal hazing rituals that circulated for more than two years before they began to gain significant public traction, Machleder said. “Young men were dying or severely injured, and it was never reported in the mainstream media,” he said. Only in recent months did the story get widely reported on broadcast television and become an issue in parliamentary elections, he added.⁸⁵

Machleder pointed out that a similar issue has played out in Russia regarding the footage shot by citizen journalists of election officials stuffing ballot boxes in favor of Putin's United Russia party in last December's elections. Though the videos were easily accessible online,⁸⁶ they were never shown on TV, where the vast majority of Russians get their news.⁸⁷ Instead, the government attacked the citizen videographers and those who posted them. In a blog post, Gregory Asmolov, a Russian journalist now studying for a doctorate in new media at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), wrote that prosecutors dismissed the videos as frauds. Alleging that the footage was a “falsification of falsification,” they blamed “an American cover operation (since the movies were hosted by American server in California, meaning YouTube).”⁸⁸

The electoral irregularities sparked widespread protests that were harder to ignore, however, and the broader media did cover those. “In the end, Russian TV broadcasters continued to deny that the elections had been falsified, but they acknowledged the protests as they grew larger,” Machleder said.⁸⁹ The government also had to make concessions, such as a promise to install video cameras itself to watch over the final round of elections in March. It reportedly spent the equivalent of \$300 million to put two cameras into every polling station,⁹⁰ and viewers were able to watch the votes being tallied once the election was over.⁹¹ But those moves were widely derided by bloggers and political activists. In his LSE post, Asmolov dismissed them as little more than an “imitation of transparency.” With the government in charge, they were able to put the cameras where they wanted.⁹²

Others warn that in many instances, local press outfits that pick up citizen-shot video from the Internet may take on considerable risk. “In many ways it raises the dangers” for independent

The steady supply of citizen-shot video has given greater the mainstream media to run stories on events that would have been ignored in the past.

media organizations to use such video, said Craig LaMay, an associate professor of journalism at Northwestern University’s Medill School and a former editorial director of the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center.⁹³

Local officials may tolerate such videos when they appear on YouTube or in blogs, which generally draw a limited audience. They cannot stop international channels from running the footage. But when the local media picks up the footage, officials may see it as a much greater threat. “They can’t do anything about CNN or al-Jazeera, but they can

crack down on the local players” for running the same footage, said LaMay. “It’s the local guy who will get a call from the cops.”⁹⁴

The strains of those contradictory forces—governments still eager to control the news narrative, media organizations trying to find their footing in the transition to a freer press, and citizen videographers posting footage aimed at circumventing whatever new limits apply—are perhaps most apparent in post-revolutionary Egypt. The political situation remains unsettled, with newly elected President Mohamed Morsi only recently moving to assert his authority over the military. As a result, the media landscape remains very much unsettled, too.⁹⁵

Certainly, the media is considerably freer than in the past, when the government of Hosni Mubarak tightly controlled coverage. In the early days of the revolution, reporters and anchors from state-run television and newspapers openly sided with the government and ran widely discredited reports that vilified the protestors and underplayed abuses by the security forces.⁹⁶ In the months since Mubarak was overthrown, there has been an explosion of private satellite channels and other media startups;⁹⁷ by early 2012 alone, eight new television stations had opened along with a handful of new newspapers.⁹⁸ The growth of new outlets, along with the continued activity of citizen journalists and videographers, means a greater multiplicity of voices and viewpoints are now being heard.

The steady supply of citizen-shot video has also given greater political cover to editors in the mainstream media to run stories on events that would have been ignored in the past, said Patrick Butler, the vice president of programs for the ICFJ. “Once something surfaces on YouTube or the blogs, then mainstream media is more able pick it up than they were; they have more freedom now than under Mubarak,” he said.⁹⁹ Added Stephanie Thomas, the associate director of the Kamal Adham Center for Television and Digital Journalism at the American University of Cairo and the managing editor of the journal *Arab Media & Society*: “The barrier of fear has been broken; the ability to post stories in direct contradiction to what state TV says now exists.”¹⁰⁰

The medium also matters. In the aftermath of the December 2011 attacks on the “blue bra girl” and others in Tahrir Square, military officials insisted that reports of rampaging soldiers had been fabricated or exaggerated.¹⁰¹ At a news conference, military officials also produced their own video purporting to show that protesters were just common hoodlums—a tactic reminiscent of Mubarak’s regime. The next day, *al-Tahrir*—a paper newly-formed by long-time dissident journalist Ibrahim Eissa—ran a photo of the blue bra girl topped by a “stark, two-inch red headline” proclaiming “Liars.” The coverage, unthinkable under Mubarak, was seen widely within Egypt as posing a bold challenge to the military rulers.¹⁰²

“The barrier of fear has been broken; the ability to post stories in direct contradiction to what state TV says now exists.”

— Stephanie Thomas
American University, Cairo

But that boldness was not universally shared. In a February interview with Arab affairs magazine *The Majalla*, Shahira Amin, a presenter for the state-run channel Nile TV, said that she proposed shooting a program about the blue bra girl, but had been prevented from doing so by her boss. “She said it was not the right time to talk about human rights,” Amin told *The Majalla*.¹⁰³

Indeed, the importance Egypt’s military leaders place on video imagery—and their continued determination to control the news narrative—was on full display at a June 18, 2012, press conference held to announce severe restrictions on the powers of the newly-elected president. The military itself decided which parts of the press conference could be broadcast: News organizations were not allowed to carry it live. Instead, state television broadcast an edited version several hours later.¹⁰⁴

That dominance is now being challenged by Morsi’s government, however, in a manner that is increasing concerns about press freedom. In early August, Salah Abdul Maqsood, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a former spokesperson for Morsi, was named Egypt’s Information Minister. A private television channel critical of the Brotherhood was soon taken off the air, issues of the privately-owned daily *al-Dostour* were confiscated, and two prominent journalists have been accused in criminal court of insulting the president, spreading false rumors and inciting violence. New editors and other senior staff seen as loyal to the Islamists were also named at 55 state-run media outlets, leading to immediate allegations that articles critical of the

government are being censored.¹⁰⁵ The moves have been widely perceived as an effort by the Islamists to clamp down on the press as well as to gain control over state-run outlets now largely wielded by the military.¹⁰⁶

Journalistic Challenges of Crowd-Sourced Video

In holding governments more accountable and opening coverage to a wider array of voices, citizen-shot videos have brought enormous benefits to news coverage. But the use of such videos, generally shot by ordinary citizens and local activists with little training or background in journalism, also raises significant issues for both media organizations and news consumers.

The first of these may simply be the quality of the journalism created. When anyone with a flip camera can be a reporter, and any brief clip can vie for its 15 seconds of YouTube fame, much of what is shot is meandering, unclear, or shaky footage. Even YouTube's new Human Rights Channel, which is curated by Witness to highlight the strongest material uploaded from around the globe, includes many clips with little context that garner only a few hundred hits at best.¹⁰⁷

Most of that material is coming from people trying to get a reaction, said MIT's Zuckerman but few have the skill set to create compelling stories out of raw footage. "They are hard to make sense of."¹⁰⁸

The difficulties that can create for news organizations forced to rely on such footage were highlighted in a September 2011 post in the *New York Times's* Lede blog by J. David Goodman.¹⁰⁹

In the post, entitled "What's happening in this video of gunfire in Syria?" Goodman examined footage uploaded to YouTube by Syrian activists, who claimed the clip showed a one-sided fight, with security forces shooting at unarmed civilians. But the footage is far from clear; from one angle, it appears that the soldiers are also under fire. It is impossible to truly determine what is happening. "The ambiguity of the action points to the challenge faced daily by journalists struggling to assess events in a country where reporters are severely hampered from doing their jobs and are faced with a steady stream of short, violent video clips, mostly posted by activists," Goodman wrote.¹¹⁰

Clarity isn't the only issue; many also lack broader context and balance. In a sense, that is understandable: Most of those who post and shoot video around the globe are not journalists; they are generally citizens fighting on one side of a conflict. As such, they have an agenda. Many are human rights or political activists whose footage is aimed at winning national or international opinion to their side; they are actors in a revolt, not journalists attempting to portray the full dimensions of a conflict as broadly and objectively as possible.

This means that viewers of their images may get a very different perspective of what is going on than they might from a professionally trained reporter. Nuance is lost, and the video-shooting activists have a much larger role in setting the narrative the world sees than might otherwise be the case.¹¹¹ They may exaggerate the wrongdoing of their opponents, or downplay problems

The Critical Video Services Transforming the News Ecosphere

It's easy to forget that YouTube, the most prominent of the video upload services, is just seven years old. Yet its impact has been profound; people around the globe now upload an average of 72 hours of video to the site every minute of every day. At the same time, global viewers watch 4 billion videos daily.¹ While much of that is music, entertainment, and educational and other material, a significant portion is news-oriented content.

For news organizations, the key point is this: The free video site has become the go-to hub for global citizens posting footage of breaking news, protest movements, human rights abuses, and other events in their communities.

"Perhaps the single most important way that the Syrian people convey the truth of what is happening is through the lens of YouTube videos," said Ausama Monajed, a London-based member of the opposition Syrian National Council in a recent speech to the Oslo Freedom Forum.²

According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, "news events now account for one-third of the most-searched for terms on YouTube." Citizen journalists who uploaded video produced nearly 40 percent of most-watched video news during the 15-month study.³

In an insightful blog post exploring the implications of widespread video technology, Zeynep Tufekci, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina and a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society writes: "In fact ... it would not be incorrect to say that YouTube is probably the biggest news site in the world—and that fact is often overlooked because there is also so much else on the site."⁴

Within an hour of something taking place anywhere in the world—be it a natural disaster in Asia or a street protest in Bahrain—video can generally be found on YouTube. "We are on the pulse of current events," said Victoria Grand, director of global communications and policy for Google, which owns YouTube. "Anytime something happens, we see it first."⁵

Given that flood of information, however, one difficulty has been making it easier for viewers to find and make sense of videos that document news of human rights issues.⁶ To address that issue, Olivia Ma, the news manager of YouTube, announced the creation of a new Human Rights Channel in June, to be run in partnership with Witness, a non-profit that champions the use of video for human rights, and Storyful, a social newsgathering organization.

The site will be "dedicated to curating hours of raw citizen-video documenting human rights stories that are uploaded daily and distributing that to audiences hungry to learn and take action," according to Ma. "[It] aims to shed light on and contextualize under-reported stories, to record otherwise undocumented abuses, and to amplify previously unheard voices."⁷

A different approach has been taken by Bambuser, a Swedish video site that has become widely popular in the Middle East and elsewhere over the last two years—so popular, in fact, that Syria is one of numerous governments that bans its use.⁸

The site allows users to instantly broadcast and share live video directly from their cellphones. Egyptians used it to broadcast demonstrations from Tahrir Square in real time and to monitor subsequent elections, while Syrians evading the government restrictions use Bambuser to send 100 to 300 videos a day documenting the ongoing conflict.⁹ And when a Russian videographer who was filming protests was arrested three times in the same day, he used Bambuser to document his trips in and out of jail.¹⁰

“The main reason we have succeeded is that the video is live: it’s raw, it’s unedited, it’s happening now,” said Hans Eriksson, the chairman of Bambuser, “There’s also the breaking news factor; this creates a much more emotional experience for the viewer, knowing it’s happening in real time.”¹¹

Distribution has also been critical: In April, the company signed a deal with the Associated Press, which sends Bambuser’s amateur videos to news organizations around the globe. BBC, CNN, al-Jazeera, and other international channels have picked them up, bringing enormous audiences to the citizen journalists’ videos. Eriksson said that one video showing the bombing of an oil pipeline in Homs reached an audience of up to 2 billion people. Frequently, he adds, citizen-shot footage submitted to Bambuser is the most-viewed video on the AP site.¹²

Eriksson believes the ability to transmit live footage directly from cellphones marks another significant ratcheting up in the evolution of crowd-sourced video. No longer does television have a monopoly on live broadcasting of exclusive footage from places with unrest. “What has traditionally been the broadcaster is no longer; the broadcaster now is the person in the street who has the opportunity and has a mobile phone,” says Eriksson. “The likelihood of one of our users being anywhere in the world where something happens is so much higher.”¹³

1. Annie Baxter, YouTube Global Communications and Public Affairs, email correspondence with the author.
2. Ausama Monajed, Syrian National Council member, speaking at the Oslo Freedom Forum, May 9, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iDH0KE-cvoE>.
3. “A New Kind of News Emerges on YouTube,” Pew Research Center Publications, July 16, 2012, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2307/youtube-news-citizen-journalism-most-popular-news-video-attribution-ethics>
4. Zeynep Tufekci, “The Syrian Uprising Will be Live-Streamed: YouTube & The Surveillance Revolution,” Technosociology blog, February 20, 2012, <http://technosociology.org/?p=832>.
5. Victoria Grand, director of global communications and policy for Google, which owns YouTube, interview with the author, April 27, 2012.
6. Sam Gregory, program director for WITNESS, interview with the author, May 4, 2012.
7. “A New Human Rights Channel on YouTube,” Broadcasting Ourselves ;) The Official YouTube blog, May 24, 2012, <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2012/05/new-human-rights-channel-on-youtube.html>.
8. Hans Eriksson, chairman of Bambuser, interview with the author, June 15, 2012.
9. Notes 9-13, Ibid.

within their own camp. They may also ignore legitimate voices or viewpoints that they don't agree with.

Because of the government-imposed media blackout, this issue may be most acute in Syria, though it exists elsewhere. In a blog posted earlier this year, York, of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, wrote about the difficulties of relying too heavily on activists when nuanced coverage is needed.¹¹² Though her post refers broadly to citizen journalists, not only videographers, her point may be even more true for video, given the power of the imagery and the dependence of international satellite channels on video shot by citizen activists. She writes:

A quick glance at the reporting done by the *New York Times*, CNN, *Alarabiya*, and others shows that 'unnamed activists,' 'Syrian opposition activists,' and 'human rights activists' are their primary—and often, only—sources ... The media's almost total reliance upon activists—not simply *citizens*, but self-described activists—is therefore problematic ... The international community largely appears to view Syria in terms of black and white when the situation is in fact quite grey ... or at the very least, unclear, unverifiable.

This brings me back to the point about the media. At the moment, you have what is essentially a divide between journalists, commentators, and media bureaus that are very clearly pushing the opposition line and those that appear to be shilling for the regime. And there's no middle ground—there's almost no one condemning the regime, for example, whilst simultaneously questioning the dominant opposition narrative. Those who dare search for truth are immediately labeled as being on one side or the other.¹¹³

Authenticating Crowd-Sourced Video

The issue goes well beyond the point of view being covered. Verifying the accuracy and authenticity of videos uploaded onto YouTube or other sites is also paramount, said Medill's LaMay.¹¹⁴ In countries with little tradition of neutral press coverage or journalistic ethics, the temptation for activists and citizens to exaggerate their claims or fabricate outright in order to gain attention for their cause cannot be denied.

“What gets posted on YouTube has to be taken with a grain of salt,” said the University of Maryland's Saher. “It may be manipulated, so we have to be careful what material we accept as the truth.”¹¹⁵

In one well-publicized incident, captured in a documentary by Britain's Channel 4 last spring, a young video journalist reporting on the shelling of Homs was caught embellishing his footage.¹¹⁶ As the VJ, Omar Telawi, speaks into the camera from a rooftop in the city, swirling clouds of dark black smoke unfurl behind him. It appears to be smoke from a nearby battle—but in fact comes from a tire the videographers set on fire to give the footage a more dramatic look after realizing they were too far from the action.¹¹⁷

Sometimes, the fabrications are far more extensive. In working with independent media organizations in the Caucasus and the former territories of Yugoslavia, LaMay said that it was common to discover citizen videos that had been manufactured to smear political opponents.¹¹⁸ “Over and over, what I have heard from newsrooms is that they get stuff sent in, but they have a very difficult time trying to verify it,” he said.

In one incident, a television station in Moldova was sent a link to a Facebook site purporting to show video of a high government official engaged in the sex trafficking of children. Reporters spent several days attempting to confirm the tip, which appeared to come from a reliable source.

The BBC, which was among the first major journalism organizations to work extensively with citizen journalists around the globe, is widely seen as being at the forefront of developing best practices for dealing with verification and other issues raised by merging traditional journalism with citizen journalists.

They discovered that the entire Facebook site was a fraud. Moreover, the person who supposedly sent the link had nothing to do with it.¹¹⁹

“The news organizations I’ve worked with are trying to be responsible; they won’t use material unless they can verify it. But someone else will invariably put it up,” he said. “In a world where news organizations are increasingly relying on this material, that’s a real danger.”¹²⁰

In many cases, though, verification is difficult. Many videos are shot or uploaded by anonymous sources, leaving news organizations with limited ability to judge veracity with 100 percent certainty.¹²¹ If they decide to run a clip, they will generally include a disclaimer warning viewers that what they are seeing may not reflect the truth. In language typical of that

situation, the Associated Press included this description with a two-minute video it distributed in November: “Amateur video purportedly shot on Wednesday in the Syrian city of Homs showed tanks in the street, and what appeared to be shelling in residential areas of the city.”¹²²

Or, they simply don’t post them. In one recent incident, horrific footage purporting to show Syrian soldiers burying a man alive was posted on Facebook and shared on Twitter.

Journalists with organizations such as Storyful, NPR, and the BBC tried to verify the material, working with Syrian video experts to check such things as the authenticity of the language accents and the background of the site where it was first posted, as well as technical details in the audio and visual tracks for signs of forgery.¹²³ Even upon close examination, however, they could neither authenticate it nor definitively dismiss it as a fake.

“Suspicious were raised. He had pebbles thrown in his face, but there was no change in his voice as his mouth filled with gravel; the video cut off very quickly after a shovelful of dirt went over his head,” said Chris Hamilton, the social media editor for BBC News. “It’s very disturbing if true, but we’ve got to be sure, on balance, of the probability.”¹²⁴

How best to address those issues? Media experts working with citizen journalists say they have developed a series of steps in recent years to assist in authenticating videos posted or sent in anonymously. The BBC, which was among the first major journalism organizations to work extensively with citizen journalists around the globe, is widely seen as being at the forefront of developing best practices for dealing with verification and other issues raised by the merging of traditional journalism with citizen journalism. It now has a staff of more than 20 at its London-based “user-generated content hub” who scour the Internet to find videos, pictures, and other content that can be used to supplement the journalism created by BBC staff.

In describing the process his editors go through to verify video footage, Hamilton said that where possible, his editors talk directly with the videographer. “If we can talk to the person, ask them ‘tell me what you saw,’ that’s the best; it helps in sorting out if it’s not what it appears to be,” he said. Even if the person is anonymous, he added, “everything flows from that.”

Such direct contact is possible only with a small percentage of video posted from conflict zones, however. Many are sent in anonymously, and for safety’s sake, the person who shot the footage often is not the same person who uploads it to YouTube or forwards it to global news stations. Indeed, even those working with such groups as Nawaat or Shaam to curate and disseminate video may not know who originally shot the footage they’re seeing. In many cases, Hamilton said, “we can’t find them—they don’t want us to find them.”¹²⁵

Across the Arab world, videographers also watched what worked as the uprisings moved from one country to the next and learned from each other’s experience.

In that case, editors turn to a more technical analysis. “We have a checklist of things we look at—the data associated with the video; and when it purports to be shot,” Hamilton said. “We’ll look at what the video is showing—does it look right? What are people saying; does it match with the local accents? Did it take place in a recognizable location? If so, does the video match what that location looks like—we’ll check Google. Does the weather match with the time and day it was filmed?”¹²⁶

Activists and other citizen journalists have also become increasingly sophisticated in documenting where and when they shot their videos over the last two years. They know that the more information they include, the greater the credibility and therefore the chance it will gain attention from national or international media.¹²⁷ Across the Arab world, videographers also watched what worked as the uprisings moved from one country to the next and learned from each other’s experience: Egyptian videographers built on what was done in Tunisia, Al Abdallah said, while Syrians in turn have learned from the Egyptian experience.¹²⁸ After some videographers started authenticating their footage by including a shot of the daily newspaper containing the date and the day’s headline, others began to do the same. They also learned to include known landmarks or street signs into their footage, to authenticate the locations where street protests or government troop movements took place.

“Once one person started adding this data to document places, dates and times, and their video got aired broadly, then every single person started doing it,” Al Adballah said.¹²⁹

Those efforts have improved the credibility of much of the anonymous video coming from the Middle East and influenced the work done by citizen videographers in other regions as well. But is it enough? To protect their own credibility, argues Chinje, of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, journalism organizations will need to develop stronger safeguards to address audience concerns about the potential for manipulated or one-sided citizen video. “This is something we will all be grappling with for many years; there’s a downside risk to traditional media,” said Chinje.¹³⁰

He said that it’s not enough to simply run footage with the caveat that its authenticity couldn’t be verified, as is frequently done now. Journalism organizations will also need to provide at least “minimal training” to citizen journalists and reinforce the concepts of ethical journalism. “That’s a form of intervention that will help—by emphasizing the need to be balanced in reporting, clarifying what is ethical or not, we’re more likely to see credible views of the news that comes from the untrained,” he said. “People know that software can be used to manipulate pictures, so addressing the whole question of credibility and authenticity of images—there’s an urgency in dealing with this.”¹³¹

The Security Challenges of Crowd-Sourced Video

As ever more people around the globe turn to video to bring attention to abuse by governments or other powerful entities, perhaps no issue is more critical for journalism organizations than improving security for those who shoot or upload videos. Under many repressive regimes, citizens who do so face imprisonment, torture, or other retaliation if caught.

“Standing up in a dangerous situation and holding a camera is a threatening thing to do; it will lead to a dangerous situation for the person,” said MIT’s Zuckerman. “And video is easy to detect and upload. If someone is uploading huge amounts of video to YouTube, it’s pretty clear what they are doing.”¹³²

Ironically, the desire by news organizations to authenticate video coming from unknown or anonymous citizen journalists is in many ways at odds with the need to enhance security for those who produce or transmit the footage. The cellphones that many citizen journalists and other eyewitnesses use to capture footage of events are linked to GPS systems that track exactly who the phone belongs to and where it is located at any given time.¹³³

Theoretically, that phone data could provide news organizations with much of the information needed to verify where and when a video was shot—but left untouched, it could put the videographer’s life at risk as well. When governments or security forces get access to that information, they can use it to locate and go after users – a problem made particularly acute by the fact that in many repressive regimes, the telecommunications companies are partly or wholly-government-owned and closely monitored.

“There is a whole bucket of challenges linked to the rise of mobile video; the risks, and the potential contradictions are embedded right in the device,” said Gregory, of Witness. “Mobile phones are potentially a very good authentication device, but they also have privacy and security holes.”¹³⁴

News organizations must also grapple with the fact that many citizen journalists may be opening themselves up to reprisals without fully understanding the risks they’re taking on.

“Citizens who take up the camera—they don’t necessarily think of themselves as journalists,” said the University of Oklahoma’s Self. “There is a new awareness that has to be taught.”¹³⁵

To better protect themselves, citizen videographers must learn to take several critical steps. “First, we tell everyone, ‘Turn off the GPS.’ Otherwise, you can be located down to the meter,” warns Hans Eriksson, the chairman of Bambuser, a Stockholm-based company that enables users to broadcast and share live video directly from their mobile phones.¹³⁶ The service has been widely used throughout the Arab revolutions; some of the most powerful footage of the

Syrian government’s shelling of Homs came from a citizen who used Bambuser to stream hours of live video of the destruction from his home on a street high above the city.

News organizations must also grapple with the fact that many citizen journalists may be opening themselves up to reprisals without fully understanding the risks they are taking on.

Eriksson, like others who work with citizens in such dangerous situations, said he encourages the videographers to be extremely cautious in choosing where to shoot and how much to expose themselves. “The second thing we tell them is ‘Never show your face.’”¹³⁷

Ultimately, though, he argues there is little more he can do to protect those who choose to stay near scenes of conflict. “When there are shootings or bombings, we tell them to get out; to leave the camera running and put themselves in a safe place,” he said. “But someone who has a strong belief in the importance of that footage, they are not willing to leave. We can only tell them we don’t want them to risk their lives. What we can do is help them distribute that content.”¹³⁸

Another potential danger point comes when video is uploaded or live-streamed. Governments can easily monitor local Internet connections; the amount of bandwidth it takes to transmit video would be a clear giveaway. “Anyone who used Syria’s 3G network would be tracked down and immediately killed,” said Eriksson.¹³⁹ The activist networks have developed alternative means of accessing the Internet, however. Many small satellite dishes, which let users bypass the Syrian system altogether, were brought into the country as the conflict escalated. Others are able to tap into virtual private networks (VPNs) or Tor, an online network that enables anonymous communications, while some use SIM cards from Turkey that connect them to the Turkish cellphone and internet service.¹⁴⁰

And, as has been the case under other repressive regimes, footage is often simply smuggled into a nearby country: In Burma, video was carried over the border into Thailand for many years,¹⁴¹ while much of the footage from Syria is loaded onto USB drives or memory cards and taken to Egypt or Turkey for uploading to YouTube and Facebook.¹⁴²

Unfortunately, it isn't just those shooting or uploading videos that need protection. Dangers also exist for citizens who are inadvertently filmed participating in, or even simply watching, demonstrations. They may not have given their permission to be filmed; they may not even have known that they were being shot. But they, too, can face retaliation. Those risks will grow as the live-streaming of video becomes increasingly common.¹⁴³

“People who hold a camera, they know the risks to themselves,” said Machleder of Internews. “But what are the risks to the people you're filming? Most video journalists are not getting releases from them; they are not thinking through the ramifications.”¹⁴⁴

The responsibility also falls on news organizations broadcasting such footage, yet it can be a difficult line to toe. The BBC's Hamilton gives voice to a common newsroom view in arguing that

Dangers also exist for citizens who are inadvertently filmed participating in or watching demonstrations. They may not have given permission to be filmed. But they, too, can face retaliation.

if people show up at a large public event, they have effectively consented to be filmed. “We will look at each case carefully, depending on the context,” he said. “If a protest is small, with few people, we do blur the faces. But if it's a mass public demonstration, if someone goes, they know the risks.”¹⁴⁵

Yet those risks have repeatedly proven far higher than many likely realized, as governments have reacted to the potency of video. In one of the most dramatic examples, the government of Burma went after many involved with the shooting of *Burma VJ*, even if only peripherally. “In Burma, shooting video, owning a video, speaking in a video, sharing a video, or even shouting out in glee after watching television, can earn you years in jail,” Gregory wrote in a 2009 blog post. The military government, he added, “systematically hunted down the people

filmed and the people who filmed and distributed the material. Over 1,000 people were arrested last year, and many of them have received sentences of up to sixty-five years.”¹⁴⁶

A similar crackdown occurred in Iran in the wake of electoral protests in 2009. Security forces created a crowd-sourcing website on which they posted videos and photos of protesters that had been uploaded to YouTube and other social media sites. They offered rewards to anyone who could identify the people within. Many were arrested—often thanks to video they themselves had posted. As individuals were caught, a red stamp reading “captured” was splashed across their photos on the government website, a none-too-subtle public reminder of the dangers of being seen crossing the regime.¹⁴⁷

Syrian activists and journalists familiar with the country say much the same thing is happening in Syria today, as the Assad regime has used protest videos to identify rebel neighborhoods and arrest people seen in the clips.¹⁴⁸

To help reduce such dangers, Witness and other organizations have worked extensively with activists and other amateur videographers in recent years, holding seminars or private meetings to teach techniques to minimize the risks of shooting video—both for the videographer, and for those whom they film.¹⁴⁹

With demand for video training intensifying, Witness is also broadening its online efforts to go beyond whom it can work with directly. In April, it launched a new five-part video Web series entitled “How to Film Protests,” expanding the already extensive library of training and tips it has compiled on its website.¹⁵⁰

“This series, along with our Video for Change tips, incorporates the best practices we’ve developed with over 300 partners in 80 countries over the past 20 years,” wrote Chris Michael, the manager of video advocacy training for Witness, in a blog post outlining the new series. “They also work to address the unique real-life challenges we’ve discovered in the last year working with and training exceptional activists—particularly those throughout the current epicenter . . . of the Middle East and North Africa.”¹⁵¹

In five short clips, the series distills advice for video novices on everything from effective shot composition to the importance of planning an escape route in advance in case of danger. To ensure the best footage—and accurately relay the actions of both demonstrators and security forces—it suggests shooting from rooftops or balconies, rather than street level. To lower the risks of retaliation against witnesses, it advises filming demonstrations from behind or out of focus, so that faces cannot be identified. And it walks through the steps needed to gain informed consent from those who do appear within a video, so that they are not heedlessly exposed. “Always assess the risks to yourself, those you film, and the communities affected,” advises the narrator.¹⁵²

Many of these methods can now be seen in the best footage coming out of Syria and elsewhere, as many citizen videographers have improved their techniques over the last two years.¹⁵³ But training alone may not be enough: Witness is also developing technology that allows videographers to address many of these security issues more directly as they film. Along with the Guardian Project, it is working on an open-source project known as the SecureSmartCamera, which aims to create a suite of mobile apps that will improve security and privacy for smart phone users.¹⁵⁴

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The first of the apps for video, ObscuraCam, was introduced in March. Based on an earlier version created for still photographs, the ObscuraCam app allows a videographer to obscure the identities of people who show up in a film. Their faces can be automatically pixilated or blacked out using facial detection software. The app also eliminates all of the video’s identifying “metadata”—the background data such as GPS location, the time, or the make and model of the phone—that could be used to identify who shot the footage.¹⁵⁵

Witness and the Guardian Project have also created a plug-in, known as InformaCam, which extends the app by allowing videographers to encrypt their sensitive metadata. They can also add additional contextual material, such as the names or pseudonyms of subjects in the film, whether they consented to being filmed, and any rules the videographer may set concerning how the video can be shared, and with whom. The encrypted version of the video, with the critical authentication data, can then be shared privately with news or human rights organizations, while a stripped-down version without the incriminating data can be posted publicly to YouTube, Facebook, or other social media sites.¹⁵⁶ “The idea is to give people more control, at different points; to give them the choice of when to be more private,” Gregory said. “With more and more media being created, the challenges to trust are higher. InformaCam allows you to add data to prove that the image is from where you say it is, but show that data only to trusted people.”¹⁵⁷

Protecting the security of those who shoot or show up in videos may be the most critical of the issues facing citizen journalists, but the challenges don’t end there. What of the privacy and human dignity of those filmed as they’ve been injured or killed; are there limits to what should be shown? Should their faces be blocked? What is the impact on survivors or family left behind, who may have preferred to mourn outside of the spotlight? “If a family member believes showing someone’s death violates their privacy, do you leave it up or take it down?” asks Victoria Grand, the director of global communications and policy for Google, which owns YouTube. “There is always a balance between privacy and free expression.”¹⁵⁸

In a blog post written several days after the death of Neda Agha-Soltan became a viral sensation and turned her into a symbol for the government’s opponents, Priscilla Neri of Witness pondered the contradictory impulses raised when such a personal tragedy becomes a public event:

What are the moral and ethical implications of bearing witness to such a horrific image? As concerned citizens, activists, and fellow human beings, how do we balance the need to “spread the word” of what’s unfolding in Iran with the need to respect Neda’s dignity as she dies, as well as the grief of her family faced with such tragedy? What is our responsibility when receiving and watching a video like this? Do we repost it? Forward it to everyone we know and encourage them to watch as well? One side of me—the journalist and activist—has a very instinctive gut reaction to this: of course we show it, it needs to be seen and people need to know what’s really happening. Another side of me thinks about this young woman, her family, and how they might feel about the video of her death becoming viral and turning into a symbol for so many complex things at once.¹⁵⁹

Friends and families, too, can become unwitting victims of government retaliation. Neda's family suffered serious consequences after the video of her death went viral. Within days, they were forced to move from their Tehran home.¹⁶⁰ They were also prohibited from holding a funeral or mourning for her publicly. Her boyfriend was imprisoned and eventually fled the country; as did the doctor caught on camera trying to save her life.¹⁶¹

The privacy of those shown in videos can be inadvertently violated in other ways as well. In an episode in Malaysia that became known as "Squatgate," police forced a young woman who had been arrested to strip naked and do squats in her cell. The incident was filmed on a cellphone and circulated widely within the country, leading to an investigation of police practices.¹⁶²

For the young woman involved, however, the exposure was deeply damaging. Several months later, she asked that the video be destroyed. "I want to forget the whole episode ... I am embarrassed by the video. Please give me my life back," she said at a press conference. "I cannot even get out of my own house these days without getting a stare. I am scared, ashamed and embarrassed."¹⁶³

Less than a decade after getting underway, it is clear that the rise of crowd-sourced video is opening up enormous opportunities to develop deeper, more accountable news coverage in countries around the globe where press freedom has been suppressed. At the same time, it is equally clear that tremendous new challenges exist for local and international media alike in ensuring the security and privacy of those involved. Those challenges will only grow as the number of people with video-equipped phones mushrooms in the coming years.

"It's increasingly likely, as we move further into a video-mediated era, that people in vulnerable situations will feel the need to get video out but may not have thought through the consequences," Gregory said. "At a news level, this needs more discussion."¹⁶⁴

As he writes in the recent *Cameras Everywhere* report, the biggest challenge of all will be ensuring that the many thousands of citizens who are turning to video to tell their stories can do so safely, effectively, and ethically.

Recommendations

Journalism organizations should work with journalism schools, human rights organizations, and other groups that foster and distribute citizen journalism to ensure the benefits of crowd-sourced video while minimizing the risks to those who shoot or appear in such footage. Elements include the following key recommendations:

- Organize training in all aspects of shooting video for citizen journalists: how to shoot and edit effective video, storytelling and narrative techniques, and safety practices for citizen journalists and their subjects.
- Combine that technical training with broader training in reporting and journalism ethics for citizen journalists. Where possible, make both types of training available online, in local languages, so it is widely accessible. ICFJ's IJNet provides a good model.
- Establish and promulgate best practices for authenticating video shot or uploaded by anonymous or unknown sources.
- Develop higher standards for alerting viewers when crowd-sourced video is used and to warn that some footage may not be accurate or authentic.
- Promote best practices in the safe use of mobile technology. Where feasible, encourage the use of emerging technologies such as the SecureSmartCamera or the ObscuraCam that help minimize the exposure risks for citizen journalists and their subjects.
- Develop standards to ensure that those visible in citizen-shot video have given informed consent to appear. Provide training to citizen journalists on the need for such consent and the methods for obtaining it. Where consent cannot be obtained, develop higher newsroom standards on when to blur the faces or otherwise hide the identity of those who might suffer harm from being inadvertently caught on camera.

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