

Citizen journalism: With all those cell phones out there, who needs journalists?

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During the October wildfires, as I sat with four other families at my brother's house (there were 14 of us, four dogs and a cat), glued to the television for any news of our neighborhood, my teenage daughter got a text message on her phone. "There's a fire at Highway 52 and Santo Road," she announced to us. One of her buddies had seen a flickering flame at that intersection on a TV screen on another channel. We immediately switched to that channel, but the announcers had moved on.

Eventually, we saw the animated television flame at that intersection. Grateful that we had left the neighborhood before a possible forced evacuation, but saddened that our neighborhood was in danger for the second time in four years, we settled in for a long night.

But my daughter kept texting with her buddies. I noticed that she was not paying any attention to the traditional news coverage but was absorbed by the chatter occurring on her cell phone. There's an apt metaphor, I thought.

"Andrew says there's no fire -- the TV is wrong," she declared. Several other friends verified Andrew's account via text. No fire in Tierrasanta.

Yet the flame at that spot on the TV remained. About three hours later, the anchor said that the information about fire at 52 and Santo was incorrect. But we already knew that.

This is how we know much of what we know about the recent violent protests in the otherwise impenetrable nation of Myanmar. People with cell phones recorded video, took still photos, gave text-message accounts of the monks marching and then being beaten. It's how we knew about the first developments of the Interstate 35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis. And the gruesome hanging of Saddam Hussein. And the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse.

Citizen-held recorders combined with the Internet are what did in Trent Lott when he gave racist remarks at a birthday party. That's how we found out that Rodney King had been beaten by police.

Citizen accounts reached their apex with footage they provided during the tsunami in South Asia in 2004, and during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. With the tsunami's remote location, no news cameras were in place for something so sudden and so seemingly random. But residents and tourists with their personal recorders were there, and within minutes the footage was on the Internet.

Very little of this information, early on, was provided by those who practice the craft of journalism for a living.

There is a dark side to this, of course. After the London subway bombing in 2005, citizen journalists gave a moment-by-moment account of what was happening underground. But some of them also took ghoulish cell-phone pictures of mangled victims and posted the images on the Web.

George Orwell gave us reason to fear Big Brother, and was talking primarily about the invasiveness of government and technology. But it seems like we have another sibling to fear -- Little Brother with a cell phone camera -- the new paparazzi of average citizens. It used to be hard to hide a camera with a long telephoto lens. Some cell phones are little bigger than a credit card.

Since there are so many cell phones that have camera functions, along with digital cameras and video recorders for people to put whatever they see on a Web site for all the world to watch, do we even need journalists anymore? Have citizen journalists made the professional journalists obsolete?

Not in my opinion. We need journalists now more than ever. While all of journalism (and the public) can benefit from getting information from many more sources now, there is a sizable risk of depending on cell phone photographers and bloggers for the information that will help us understand our world and make informed decisions.

The reason we need journalists is for the crucial task of verification. Just because a hunter in Pennsylvania saw something recently on his digital camera and declared it a young Sasquatch doesn't mean that's what it was. Verification by the news media revealed that it was a young bear with a bad case of mange.

Lack of verification perpetuates myths and reinforces preconceived ideas. It can even lead a country into war on a false premise. And no, I'm not referring to Iraq alone. History is full of examples of governments using misleading information and outright lies to justify an invasion.

But journalists aren't always known for going that extra verification mile. We've been guilty of publishing or airing or posting things that we believed were true, or wanted to believe were true, or even hoped were true, and did it without getting multiple perspectives. We almost always get caught when we do that, usually by other members of the news media who try to verify what we reported, or by citizen journalists. Our credibility, which is our only commodity, suffers every time it happens.

Journalism is at a crossroads today. Traditional news sources such as newspapers, television and radio are bleeding readers, viewers and listeners. Some of that audience could be reclaimed, I believe, if those news sources strengthened the very thing that separates them from the citizen journalists and focused on verifiable facts. Walter Lippmann, the great columnist of the early 1900s, made this distinction nearly 100 years

ago: "News and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them in relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act."

We need citizen journalists to tell us about specific events. But we need journalists to verify and make connections so that we understand what the events mean.

If journalism does not exploit its strength of getting multiple accounts, with the truth somewhere in their midst, then we're going to be sitting for a long time, frozen in our ignorance, wondering if the world is on fire.

Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University. His latest book is "The Power of Serving Others" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006).