Ambient News and the Para-imojo

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There are pivotal moments that identify a change in the way that our societies function far beyond the significance of the event itself. For example, when Heinrich Hertz detected radio waves, he dismissed the phenomena: "I do not think that the wireless waves I have discovered will have any practical application." However, when Hertz died in 1894—and his obituaries summarized his work—Guglielmo Marconi, who was then nineteen years old, is said to have read one obituary and realized the possibilities that Hertz's work presented. Naturally, Marconi could not have foreseen the far-reaching effects that wireless technologies would have on our lives in the twenty-first century.

A similar key event in the timeline of communication technology and its relationship with journalism took place on 13 January 2009, when Janis Krums, a nutritionist, was traveling on a ferry across the Hudson River in New York. Along with many others, including the local Coast Guard, he witnessed the emergency landing of a passenger jet on the river and the successful evacuation and rescue of all of its passengers and crew. Significantly, Krums used his iPhone to take a picture, which he sent to the social networking site Twitpic with the comment, "There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy!"

Krum's use of his iPhone to take a picture and disseminate it with a short textual comment and without reference to other media organizations testified
to a sea change in news gathering, and the dissemination and consumption of news, that was already taking place but was crystallized in this event and its reporting. Over the last two to three years, scholars from the areas of media and journalism, along with news activists, professional journalists, and news organizations, have been engaged with the converging technologies that the iPhone encapsulates. They are seeking to explore, theorize, and understand what its impact is—and will be in the future as smartphone technology develops. The online services sent from news providers were the initial frontier of these changes. Web feeds and SMS texts send news headlines and targeted news to individual subscribers and give specific information that they wish to receive, for example, on sport or financial matters. More recently, smartphones, including the iPhone, have begun to bring users a full news service. However, this is simply dissemination from the news industry. More extraordinary is the contribution of the news consumers who, given the ability to record and upload pictures, sounds, videos, and text via their mobile handsets, are doing so and becoming a part of the generation of news and its coverage.

This chapter attempts to give a snapshot of the current relationship between news journalism and the new media technologies common on the iPhone and other smartphones. It begins by identifying the technologies that may be embedded in smartphones that both professional journalists and amateur news creators are using. I then discuss current terms and concepts in order to draw together and try to pin down activities of current news production. The chapter concludes by suggesting some bad news and some good news in the era of the iPhone journalist and news consumer.

Smartphone News Technologies

During a televised sports event, an outside broadcast unit can usually be seen housed in several large caravans outside the stadium. But these days, a journalist with a smartphone in his pocket effectively has a miniature outside broadcast unit with similar abilities. The handset can send a live commentary via a phone call; a live video stream using facilities such as Qik or Bambuser; capture both still and moving images; record sound; or be used to type and file a report or a brief update. Crucially, all these feeds can be sent directly from the phone handset to a mainstream news provider, a group of like-minded contacts, a few friends, or another individual.

Besides transmitting material, the mobile handset can also receive and exchange information and search and select data, including data from GPS services. Many smartphones have a number of these attributes, but the iPhone developed the “killer app.” Its screen behaves and looks, to some degree, the same as a screen on a desktop computer. Smartphone users can do more than make phone calls and send text messages; they can use voice-over-Internet protocols such as Skype; read, write, or respond to a blog or e-mail; use Facebook to chat with more personal contacts; or send a Tweet to a large
group of other Tweeters as Janis Krum did. Since the iPhone’s release in 2007, social-networking sites have developed rapidly. Twitter’s growth from its beginnings in 2006 to the 100 million daily messages at the time of writing would appear to owe much to the growth of smartphone use. Twitter’s 140-character messages are an obvious tool for mobile phone users, and by September 2010, 62 percent of users accessed Twitter on a mobile handset, 8 percent using their Twitter for iPhone app and 7 percent Twitter for BlackBerry. Since its inception Twitter has been used to disseminate a number of stories that would traditionally been labeled “news.” The death of the singer Michael Jackson in June 2009 is a well known case where many people first became aware of the event on Twitter and then spread the news to their own groups of friends and contacts. But can these users be termed journalists? The many uses of a smartphone are available to almost any user, not just a professional journalist. Journalists who rely heavily on their mobile phones to collect and file stories have been nicknamed “MoJo.” The term is fluid and used to describe stringers or freelance or professional journalists who spend much of their time on their mobile handsets, and it is associated with a particular set of journalistic practices. MoJo was also the name used by Nokia to describe an initiative it had with Reuters, which it tested with Reuters journalists and further field-tested with students in South Africa. Indeed, a number of African nongovernmental organizations and activists were early adopters of mobile journalism. For example, the Voices of Africa project started in 2006 and set about training journalists who compiled and filed their reports using mobile handsets. It is difficult to assess the number of professional journalists using iPhones, although the use of a smartphone seems ubiquitous. However, iPhone apps and other kits specifically designed for journalists are widely available, for example, the Paddock, a sound- and video-editing app that is a part of the iPhone 4 package.

What Is News?

“News” is viewed as a prime good in society, and a healthy press is regarded as a measure of the democratic nature and active citizenship of that society. James Curran and Jean Seaton summarize the traditional liberal view of the press as “the agency through which private citizens are reconstituted as a public body, exercising informal supervision of the state.” This view also enshrines the concept that the news media educates citizens and champions the individual against the abuse of power. The ability to publicly chart events, issues, and developments in society and open these to debate and discourse is viewed as a crucial element of a healthy society. Article 19 of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Some countries have the freedom of the media enshrined in their constitutions or laws, for example, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Other countries, such as China, impose a high level of media censorship. The Chinese government even imposed a news blackout on their citizen Liu Xiaobo’s winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

There is little agreement on what constitutes news. If the definition comes from a journalistic background it tends to concern information that is fresh and important to society in that the event or action may influence or cast a shadow over society in some way. So politicians, war, crime, financial matters, and health and well-being get a high level of coverage by professional news personnel. But a cursory glance at a news outlet demonstrates that this is merely a small part of news and certainly of journalistic interests. Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’Neill’s study of U.K. newspapers in 2001 found that a large part of professional news includes much that may be better regarded as gossip concerning the lives and actions of those already in the public view. Further areas of news include much that may be considered to be lifestyle journalism, which details fashions, entertainment, hobbies, and activities and is often aimed at not participants but at spectators, sports coverage being a notable example. There are specialist periodicals and websites for sports participants, for example, Sport Diver or Runners World, but mainstream news coverage is for the sports spectators. Harcup and O’Neill’s study was conducted using printed newspapers, and, by 2001, both the British news consumers that they studied and the wider global public were more commonly getting news from broadcast sources. However, in the last decade there have been declines in both newspaper readership and the viewing of TV news, and numerous commentators point to an increase in lightweight leisure journalism and a decline in serious professional news journalism. It is clear from a number of different studies that by 2010 large sections of the population in the developed world were getting their news from websites. In addition, there has been a growth in the use of RSS news feeds to mobile handsets, including the iPhone, which accounts for three-quarters of the mobile visits to U.K. newspaper websites. It seems inevitable that the news agenda is changing with the changing patterns of its dissemination and the reporting of
factual news providing the catalyst for comment from professionals and the wider public on blogs and Internet forums.

The Professional and Amateur Mojo

Although the news stories disseminated on mobile phones are selected and written by journalists, the content is limited, with little room for comment or editorial. This is provided by links to other web pages or to journalists' blogs. Professional journalists provide informed and researched comment rather than necessarily giving the first report of the story, and it is now regarded as de rigueur for a professional journalist to have a blog, which may give a more extended and personal account of a news story. Paul Bradshaw has even suggested that professional journalists ought to be adept and active on Twitter to keep abreast of stories, pick up on unpredictable events, and look out for the amateur mojo’s contributions to the news agendas. The news agenda that Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky once felt was being manipulated by governments and commercial interests undoubtedly still remains, but, increasingly, local, national, and international events are being given an extra dimension by those who are physically present. These are the amateur mojos who collect material via their mobile smartphones and upload this to websites, social-networking sites, or as user-generated content to mainstream media providers. The material may still be subject to editorial control, although the roles of news creators, news curators, and news consumers are becoming increasingly blurred.

As a consequence, user-generated content is now a feature of most mainstream news websites. Some are recent entrants to this field, and other news services were early pioneers. For example, the BBC website was an early adopter of UGC, it encourages the public, particularly after a major incident, to upload photographs, videos, and written accounts. A notable case that received international attention was Alexander Chadwick’s picture taken on his mobile phone in a smoke filled London underground tunnel on 7 July 2005 after the terrorist bombings. His picture of the passengers walking through the blackened tunnel became one of the iconic images of that day and was used by professional news media. Less well known is the poignant account he also uploaded onto the BBC's website:

Smoke was everywhere so we were a little concerned about fire but it soon became clear that there was none so we just stayed put and waited

for someone to tell us what to do! No one in my carriage panicked which is quite surprising as the smoke was really thick and nasty, everyone was breathing through shirts and tissues. We were stuck on the train for about 25 minutes before an official came and told us what was going on, and we evacuated quite calmly. I don’t know what happened up at the front of the train though.

What Chadwick’s photograph lacks in technique it makes up for in poignancy and a narrative about the behavior of people that day in London. There is no blood, hysteria, or colorful movement. Those involved are walking through darkness in an orderly way toward a light. Chadwick’s Nokia picture captured a moment that was expressive, moving, and important to Londoners and others. He told the story of Londoners’ restrained response to the events, which was not what the international media expected to hear.

So can Chadwick and Knuts claim to be mojos, or could they be “citizen journalists”? The word “citizen” confers reticence, but can an opportunist witness be termed a journalist? Surely the job of the journalist is inherently a professional one, with ethical values and certain skills associated with it. The
term "citizen journalist" is in common use but is problematic. Professional journalists are likely to be citizens of the country where they live or work, yet asylum seekers, refugees, and displaced populations and individuals seeking sanctuary well away from the locale claiming them as a citizen may be practicing journalism. They may do this as contributors to forms of media that John Downing summarizes as "alternative media, citizens' media, community media, tactical media, independent media, counter-information media, participatory media, Third Sector media, social movement media," with each sector having associated journalists and journalistic techniques to provide it with material. These individuals have been termed activist, public, community, civic, and hyper-local journalists. Each term gives a slightly differing angle, but all suggest a canon of reporting outside the commercial or established media authorities.

It is likely, however, that neither Krumns nor Chadwick considers himself to be a journalist of any sort. They witnessed events and used the technologies available to them on their mobile phones to provide immediate eyewitness material, which was quickly taken up by the mainstream media as user-generated content. Alfred Hermida uses the term "para-journalism" to describe Krumns's and Chadwick's actions, borrowing the term from "paralegal" and "paramedic," although both of these groups are professionals. Para-journalism may be thought of as content collected by individuals who are not full-time journalists but who alert others to situations and events. They augment and enrich mainstream coverage. Hermida argues that "new para-journalism forms such as micro-blogging are 'awareness systems,' providing journalists with more complex ways of understanding and reporting on the subtleties of public communication." These new forms merge para-journalism with smartphone mojos, and there have been a number of recent dramatic examples of a para-moji with an exceptional view of a news story that professional journalists did not have access to. Hermida also describes the idea of "ambient news," that the public is receiving news almost constantly even if not aware of it. He suggests that the growth of micro-blogging services such as Twitter and Facebook is providing "ambient journalism," where news consumers can be almost constantly alerted to and aware of events and can contribute to the dialogue if they wish.

New(s) Consumers

As news consumers we use an array of platforms to obtain our news, including newspapers (actually on paper), TV, radio, and Internet and mobile Web feeds. But we are also a part of its dissemination. In 2010 more than 3.3 million visits to U.K. newspaper sites came via a phone handset—1.7 million were from an iPhione. A Pew Research Center study conducted in the United States in early 2010 found that although news consumption generally was steady, 27 percent of mobile Internet users surveyed had received news on their mobile phone the previous day. Stories accessed on mobiles and the Internet also get passed among consumers using social networking sites: journalists' blogs are responded to; curious or momentous incidents may be recorded and uploaded to another social networking site or a mainstream or specialist news curator; and day-to-day actions are recorded on a micro-blog.

Care must be taken when generalizing internationally from country-specific statistics. However, as figures from the International Telecommunication Union note, the adoption of mobile telephony is growing globally and the adoption of smartphones is leapfrogging simpler formats in developing countries. By the end of 2010, there were an estimated 3.1 billion mobile cellular subscriptions, corresponding to 76 per 100 inhabitants globally (116 per 100 in developed countries and 68 per 100 in developing countries). The report further stresses that "people are moving rapidly from 2G to 3G platforms, in both developed and developing countries. In 2010, 143 countries were offering 3G services commercially, compared to 95 in 2007." These figures indicate where global mobile phone use is likely to be headed.

Conclusion

The Bad News

A consequence of these changing news patterns is that the days of the news-hound reporter, press pass in hatband, nobly putting himself at risk to defend society from the excesses of the ignoble politician or wealthy autocrat, are long gone. The professional journalist's role sometimes seems to have been demoted to that of the purveyor of gossip about the sexual doings of minor celebrities and those seeking fifteen minutes of fame. The technologies
available to us embedded in our smartphones can offer almost unlimited gossip on inconsequential matters.

Is the old ideal of the "scoop" relevant either? Does it really matter which Web feed has a second or two lead time? With the development of smartphones and their ability to access the Internet, it is inevitable that individuals who find themselves a witness to or participant in a critical event will record and share their experiences rapidly, scooping the professionals who can only parachute in later to provide factual comment. Surely anyone can be a para-mojo and have pictures and text up on the Internet in seconds? The ambient news consumer may be aware of a dramatic news story before the professional newshound has donned his trilby.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, the news consumer has a relatively high level of media literacy and is wary and wary of the news being used to "spin" politics or the manipulation of the news agenda by public relations companies. Publicity stunts by extremists groups or those seeking to promote their own activities, views, or commercial businesses have eroded confidence in the objectivity of the news and its relevance to our lives and society at large. A further erosion of confidence in news values stems from the fact that an obsession with the dramatic has led to the orchestration of tragic and extreme events by those who would use violent actions to gain publicity and force reprisals. Furthermore, although it is felt that news is important in our society, we are reluctant to pay much for it, and informed, quality reporting that requires research and consideration is expensive. The professional news services have to redefine how they sell news.

The Good News

The good news for ambient mobile news consumers, however, is that there is a multiplicity of news sources available on their mobile handsets to suit their own community and interests. These services may be from the major providers and mainstream news services or smaller, niche-news providers that are nevertheless run in a professional manner. Alongside these are the professional bloggers and "Tweeters," often skilled journalists, who give added value to their published news stories by the rich detail of user-generated content coming in via blogs, micro-blogs, or social media. UGC may come from a fixed-line source or from a para-mojo such as Alexander Chadwick. It may be uploaded to an open-access site or a curated site. These sites may be deliberately aiming for or devoted to UGC, as is Jasmine News in Sri Lanka. For the news creators and professional mojos there is a similar multiplicity of news alerts and tip-offs. A professional mojo can find eyewitnesses to an event via Twitter or respond rapidly with a piece of dramatic coverage.

In countries where news services are tightly controlled by the state, the mobile phone has, in addition, become a method of comparing actual events and factual information from witnesses and those involved, who upload material to blogs and micro-blogs and get information to the outside world that would otherwise not be available. Arguably, the richness and ease of news sourcing and dissemination is a social good. However, the sifting, editing, and verifying of all this material may still need the attention of skillful news curators.

And Finally

It is evident that we are currently in a transitional period with regard to news journalism and its creation, curation, and consumption. Much of this has come about because about 5.3 billion people on the planet now carry around varying degrees of their own mobile news service and news desk. In particular, as smartphones such as the iPhone have a greater penetration into the mobile phone market, it is likely that the definitions of "news" will continue to change. Both Alexander Chadwick's and Janis Krums' pictures tell personal stories that added to our understanding of the events that they were a part of. The difference between them is that whereas Chadwick's picture was uploaded to a curated website that used it as user generated content, Krums became one of the first para-mojos by sending his iPhone picture directly to Twitpic without any intermediary. It seems likely that the role of the professional journalist will increasingly be to provide verification of events along with informed analysis and comment, rather than be first with a scoop at the scene. But ambient news journalism is in our pockets, and news consumers will need to expect to pay for quality sources of information and accuracy.

Notes

9. It is worth noting that in the United Kingdom, radio listening has hardly changed. See http://www.rajac.co.uk/listening/quartermly_listening.php (13 February 2011).
12. The story in the international news the following day was that Londoners were going back to work. CNN confessed that they had expected to be reporting the deserted, closed streets and found that many Londoners were going about their business.

CHAPTER 15

Party Apps and Other Citizenship Calls

ANU KOIVUNEN

"I just tweet; that's just the way I roll."
—SARAH PALIN

GIVEN THE 2008 publicity surrounding Barack Obama's affection for his Blackberry and the news in 2009 about the decisive role of social media in the Norwegian parliamentary election, it is no wonder that some radical change in campaigning methods was expected in the Swedish parliamentary election in 2010. News about "Obama's social media advantage" and Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg's "hyper-active" and "teenage-like enthusiasm for facebooking, blogging and tweeting" circulated across Swedish media.1 "E-readiness" is important to the Swedish self-image, and Sweden tops three recent global indexes relating to information and communications technology access, use, and skill. Eighty-four percent of Swedes have Internet access at home; half of Swedes are members of social networks; and 75 million make status updates. While the Internet is predominantly accessed from home, the use of the mobile Internet is increasing with wireless broadband and the explosion of smartphones, especially among young people between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five.2 Furthermore, blogs played a major role in the 2009 European elections in Sweden, and the Pirate Party, lobbying for more free content on the Internet, sensationalized won 7.1 percent of the vote and a seat in the European parliament.3

Against this background, it seems a given that the nature of the media would be one of the major questions during the election campaign. Indeed, it