

# THE NEW FRONTLINE IS INSIDE THE NEWSROOM

It is a truism bordering on cliché that the growth of social media has brought the news closer to the newsroom. For a while, user-generated content, filtered back at base, has been a crucial component in the coverage of big stories like wars and disasters, providing a first wave of material before conventional news operations kick in.

And even before the emergence of social media, agency wires and pictures – piped into the newsroom at home – gave war correspondents in the field the context necessary to make sense of events happening immediately in front of them.

But the events of the past few months have seen the emergence of a new, virtual, frontline – not thousands of miles away in the desert where battled-hardened war correspondents operate, but right in the heart of the newsroom.

Previously, exposure to difficult content and editorial decisions in reporting conflict or disaster was generally limited to journalists in the field or a small number in the newsroom. Now, almost any journalist in the newsroom can find themselves faced with this kind of material.

It's an important development. The emergence of this new frontline raises big questions about how we practise our journalism and how we train and look after our journalists.

Let's take a look at some examples:

Firstly, raw content. Conventionally shot agency footage is certainly graphic – planes taking off, bombs being dropped, guns being shot. Journalists in the newsroom are not spared the sight of the resulting horrific injuries, death and destruction.

But until now it has been rare to see the bomb or the bullet arriving at its destination with its resulting devastation. More significantly, agency pictures tend to be shot by professional cameramen who are arguably more aware of the power of the images and how they are likely to be used. They tend to be shot from a wider angle, with limited attention to the worst injuries.

Now, it is not unusual for user-generated content to capture events as they happen – like the fatal shooting of Neda Agha-Soltan on the streets of Tehran, or a bomb landing a few yards away from a group of rebels in Misrata.

Shaky mobile phone images taken by participants or bystanders tend to focus in, close and long, on the most graphic and upsetting injuries, because the individual taking the images either wants to make a point or because they themselves have no previous experience in such extreme situations, so their attention is gripped.

There is also, of course, simply more of it; more readily available; found and shared. Some of the sharing is done responsibly – with many tweeters re-tweeting hard-to-watch video with warnings about its graphic nature, but someone has to view it nonetheless.

And it is the personal testimony provided by user-generated content that gives the emotional power to the storytelling – unlike much of the professionally shot material which is one step removed from the events portrayed. It is an emotional power that has an impact on our audience and newsroom journalists alike.

But it is not just the graphic images that make up this new frontline. Technology – from mobile phones to Skype – now allows participants and bystanders to share their experiences direct and unmediated.

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Most famously, in 2008, Mark Abell, a British lawyer caught in his Mumbai hotel room a few floors above a group of terrorists holding scores of people hostage, gave the BBC regular, real-time updates about his situation.

That kind of direct conversation between journalists in London, and frontlines anywhere, is now commonplace. Calls or emails to and from doctors in hospitals that are under attack, with rebels and campaigners, with local loyalists and expats, bringing the conflict directly into the newsroom for the first time, are now part of daily business.

One tragic example hammers this issue home. BBC journalists had been in regular contact with an activist based in Benghazi, in eastern Libya. He had been supplying us and other news organisations with images, eyewitness reports and live interviews, until one Skype call asking if he would do a two-way was answered by his wife, who told the journalist that he had been killed.

Journalists now constantly have to make difficult decisions about protecting the safety of people caught up in these events. The BBC won't use the real names of anyone in Yemen, Syria, Libya or Bahrain. It won't even identify people outside of those countries who have family there.

But being aware of the need to do this doesn't always come naturally if you're not used to reporting wars from the newsroom. What about the monitoring of phone calls or even email traffic? What language can be used to identify yourself without endangering the contributor? How do we introduce ourselves? Is Gmail safer than Hotmail?

In 2009, a number of individuals in Tehran who had previously been happy to talk to BBC journalists asked us to stop contacting them because they were worried about their safety. And however brave or secure individuals feel about their current situation, journalists have an obligation towards them, as contributors, to be aware of potential future developments.

Activists and campaigners are feeding news organisations intelligence about the military action of both sides: what are the editorial issues there? The newsroom has always played a role in supporting the reporting of conflict and disaster. But now that role is central, feeding back more content and information to the field than ever before. As a result, what were once relatively specialised skills have become essential, core skills for the entire newsroom.

That transition, already well under way, calls for some careful thinking about the implications for both the training and support of individual journalists and wider editorial issues about the handling and dissemination of raw material which arrives in the newsroom.

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