# THE V WORD –
## and the value of breaking news on social media

Every minute, according to recent figures, 300 hours of footage is uploaded to YouTube, 350 000 tweets are shared and 150 000 images uploaded to Instagram. Ninety-nine percent of this content is ephemeral: pictures of people's coffee, updates from holidays and honeymoons, and videos of giggling babies. **But within all of this noise, there is valuable news content.**

**By Claire Wardle**

Ten years ago, London was rocked by four suicide bombs detonated during the morning commute. Some of those who scrambled to escape captured photos and videos using the cameras built into their mobile phones and sent these on to news organisations, or uploaded them to message boards. It's worth remembering that in July 2005, Twitter had not yet been created, YouTube was only a couple of months old and Facebook was for students only.

That evening, the BBC ran some of these images in their bulletin. It was the first time non-professional content had been integrated into a main BBC television news programme.

Now, whenever a news event happens, whether that's a relatively minor bus crash on a UK street or a terrorist incident on a Tunisian beach, there is an expectation that footage will emerge from the scene. Eyewitnesses document what they see in the same way as they document most aspects of their lives. They are not consciously reporting, they are instinctively capturing a moment that they have experienced.

For newsrooms, this phenonemon has changed the way newsgathering happens. Stories are now more likely to break first on social media rather than the wires, and the first pictures will almost always come from a bystander not a professional journalist. But it is relatively rare for the person who captures this content to even understand the value of what they have on their phones. They don't go seeking out the telephone number of a news organisation, they upload their images to Instagram or Twitter, mostly as a way of showing their friends and family what they've just witnessed.

That means journalists have to go looking for this content. It means setting up keyword searches in one Tweetdeck column, and setting up lat-long searches for geo-located content in another, it means doing the same on another monitor on Gramfeed.com to find the most valuable images on Instagram.

But in the chaos of a breaking news event, when many people start tweeting on the same hashtag regardless of whether or not they are caught up in events, or re-tweeting content they're seeing, knowing who and what to trust can be extremely difficult. Verifying any content that has been discovered on the social web can be terrifying for newsrooms. How do you know that what you're seeing is true? Has the photo been manipulated? Is it from a previous event? Are you being hoaxed?

In 2013, I led a team that carried out a large piece of research, funded by the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism on the ways that

television newsrooms around the world include user-generated content in their output. One journalists admitted that verification was often referred to as the "v-word". They shamefully explained how people in the newsroom groaned when they were asked by their editors if they had verified a piece of content. This viewpoint was supported by many of our 64 interviewees who explained that knowledge of even basic verification processes and techniques was relatively low in their newsrooms.

Many newsrooms outsource verification to the agencies, whether that's AP, Reuters or AFP, or newer social media agencies like Storyful. Many newsrooms explained that they didn't have the resources to verify content, and in many cases admitted that they liked to use the agencies as an insurance policy.

Browne's tips for verifying a video of a rocket attack in Syria are all excellent examples. By reading some of these, you can learn a great deal about what is possible.

But for most journalists, reading the Verification Handbook, and pinning this checklist to their computer, would prevent manipulated, hoaxed or fake content being shared.

Recently, a group of journalists, practitioners, trainers and academics who have in-depth experience of verification techniques came together to create First Draft, a coalition dedicated to supporting journalists who work with content sourced from the social web. Representatives from Bellingcat, Emergent, Eyewitness Media Hub, Google News Lab, Meedan, Reported.ly, Storyful and Verification Junkie contributed advice, case studies and training guides to a central resource site, currently hosted on Medium. If you are a journalist who works with eyewitness media, I recommend you bookmark the site, follow the Twitter account, and keep up to date with the work of First Draft. A new dedicated website is in development and will be launched later in the year.

> Eyewitnesses document what they see in the same way as they document most aspects of their lives. They are not consciously reporting, they are instinctively capturing a moment that they have experienced.

Some people even argued that it just wasn't possible to verify content sourced from the social web. This simply isn't true. With some very rare exceptions, it is possible to verify content sourced from the social web. By following tried and tested processes, such as searching the digital footprint of the person who uploaded the content, or cross-referencing landmarks in a photo or video with Google Earth, along with some more technical processes such as checking the EXIF data from a photograph, it is possible to have a much clearer understanding of who captured the footage, where they captured it and when they captured it.

These basic verification checks don't have to be time consuming. If you are covering a storm, and you find an image online of a very large cloud hovering over the skyline, upload the photo to Google reverse image search or tineye.com. They will immediately show you whether that photo, or a version of that photo, has appeared on the web previously. If you see the photo come up, you know that this is clearly an old picture which is doing the rounds again, and you can stop right there.

Some journalists have become experts in forensic verification techniques and often write detailed blog posts about their work. Andrew Haggard's explanation of how he geo-located the Walter Scott shooting, Eoghan Sweeney's explanation of checking images that purported to show looting in Baltimore, and Malachy

*Claire Wardle is the Research Director at Columbia University's Tow Centre for Digital Journalism. Prior to joining Columbia, she designed the social media training programme for the BBC in 2009 and went on to train journalists around the world on social newsgathering and verification. Wardle has also worked with Storyful and UNHCR. She has a PhD in Communication from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. claire.wardle@gmail.com*

JOURNALISM
**NEXT>>**