

**Citizen Journalism and the Rise of “Mass Self-Communication”:  
Reporting the London Bombings**

**Stuart Allan**

**sallan@bournemouth.ac.uk**

**Bournemouth University**

**Abstract**

This article offers a case study of citizen journalism in the network society. Manuel Castells’ (2007) discussion of ‘mass self-communication’ informs its examination of the spontaneous actions of ordinary people compelled to adopt the role of a journalist in order to bear witness to what was happening during the London bombings of July 2005. Identified and critiqued are a number of the ways in which the social phenomenon of citizen journalism registered its public significance. Specifically singled out for analysis is how the eyewitness reporting of ordinary Londoners caught up in the explosions, recast the conventions of the mainstream news coverage. This process was made possible via their use of digital technologies to bring to bear alternative information, perspectives and ideological critique in a time of national crisis.

Bold declarations about the importance of journalism for modern democracy, typically expressed with the sorts of rhetorical flourishes first heard in the early days of the newspaper press, are sounding increasingly anachronistic. Familiar appeals to journalism’s traditional role or mission, its public responsibilities vis-à-vis a citizenry actively engaging with the pressing issues of the day, would appear to have lost much of their purchase. Public criticism – if not outright cynicism – about the quality of the news provided by mainstream media institutions is widespread. Journalists themselves are more often than not seen to be troubled, some quietly lamenting the lost traditions of a once proud profession, others loudly resisting market-driven obsessions with ‘bottom line’ profitability. Many fear that journalism’s

commitment to championing the public interest, is being replaced with a cheap and tawdry celebration of what interests the public.

It almost goes without saying of course, that these types of concerns about reportorial integrity are as old as journalism itself. What is striking from the vantage point of today however, is the extent to which competing projections about the very future of journalism – encouraging or otherwise – recurrently revolve around a shared perception. That is to say, there appears to be a growing awareness that what counts as journalism is being decisively reconfigured across an emergent communication field supported by digital platforms. Manuel Castells (2007) describes this phenomenon as the rise of ‘mass self-communication’, now rapidly evolving in these new media spaces. “The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software,” he writes, “have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time” (2007, 246). The familiar dynamics of top-down, one-way message distribution associated with the mass media are being effectively, albeit unevenly, pluralised. Ordinary citizens are appropriating new technological means (such as digital wifi and wmax) and forms (SMS, email, IPTV, video streaming, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, and so forth) in order to build their own networked communities, he argues, and in so doing are mounting an acute challenge to institutionalised power relations across the breadth of the ‘network society’ (Castells, 2000; see also Allan & Matheson, 2004).

For Castells, the term ‘mass self-communication’ highlights the ways in which these horizontal networks are rapidly converging with the mass media. He writes:

It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. *And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.* We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive (Castells, 2007, 248; emphasis in original).

Although one may question the use of ‘mass’ in this context – Raymond Williams’ (1963, 289) observation that: “There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses” being called to mind – Castells is usefully elucidating the countervailing ethos helping to shape the contours of this communicative terrain. Similarly, despite the emphasis placed on the technological imperatives driving convergence, he takes care to acknowledge that a given medium does not determine message content, let alone its impact, in linear zero-sum terms. Rather, he draws attention to the ways in which communication flows “construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind” in diverse, intensely contested, social realms. Thus “the emerging public space, rooted in communication, is not predetermined in its form by any kind of historical fate or technological necessity,” he contends. “It will be the result of the new stage of the oldest struggle in humankind: the struggle to free our minds” (2007, 259).

In taking Castells’ intervention as its conceptual point of departure, this article offers an analysis of one instance of ‘mass self-communication’ which has since proven to have engendered a formative influence on journalism in the network society (see also Allan, 2006). Specifically, in examining the spontaneous actions of ordinary people compelled to adopt the role of a journalist in order to bear witness to what was happening during the London bombings of July 2005, this article will identify and critique how the social phenomenon of citizen journalism – a vital dimension of ‘mass self-communication’ as Castells would presumably agree – registered its public significance. Singled out for close scrutiny will be the ways in which the eyewitness reporting of ordinary Londoners caught up in the explosions and their aftermath, recast the conventions of the mainstream news coverage, a process made possible via their use of digital technologies to bring to bear alternative information, perspectives, and ideological critique in a time of national crisis.

### **Digital Citizens**

“I was on Victoria Line at about 9.10 this morning” wrote Matina Zoulia, recalling for *Guardian Unlimited’s* news blog, her experience on an underground train crowded with rush-hour commuters. “And then the announcement came as we were stuck at King’s Cross station that we should all come out.” She described how the passengers took their time, slowly making their way from the halted train. “As I was going towards the exit there was this smell,” she stated. “Like burning hair. And then the people starting walking out, soot and blood on their faces. And then this woman’s face. Half of it covered in blood.”

The morning in question was that of July 7 2005, when four ‘suicide bombers’ detonated their explosive devices on three London Underground trains and a bus in the centre of the city, killing themselves and 52 other people, and injuring over 700 others. Responsibility for the attack was promptly claimed by the previously unknown Secret Organisation Group of al-Qaeda of Jihad Organisation in Europe. A statement posted on an Islamist website declared that the attacks represented “revenge against the British Zionist Crusader government in retaliation for the massacres Britain is committing in Iraq and Afghanistan,” and that the country was now “burning with fear, terror, and panic.” For Mayor of London Ken Livingstone (2005), it was a “cowardly attack” that would fail in its attempt to divide Londoners by turning them against one another. In his words:

This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at presidents or prime ministers. It was aimed at ordinary working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old. Indiscriminate slaughter irrespective of any consideration for age, class, religion, whatever. That isn’t an ideology. It isn’t even a perverted faith. It is just an indiscriminate attempt at mass murder.

Londoners, he was convinced, would “stand together in solidarity alongside those who have been injured and those who have been bereaved.” His reference to “presidents and prime ministers” pertained to the fact that July 7 was also the first full day of the 31<sup>st</sup> G8 summit at Gleneagles, Scotland, where Prime Minister Tony Blair and other leaders of the member states were meeting to discuss issues such as global climate change and Africa’s economic development (the latter having been the focus of the Live 8 concert held five days before). Livingstone himself was in Singapore, where he had been supporting London’s bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games.

News of the explosions that morning had punctured the euphoria surrounding the city’s Olympic success, the decision to award the Games having been announced the previous day. Splashed across the front pages of July 7’s early edition newspapers were triumphant stories, complete with photographs of jubilant crowds celebrating the day before in Trafalgar Square. In the immediate aftermath of the blasts however, the day’s initial news agenda was being quickly cast aside, rewritten on the fly by journalists scrambling to cover breaking developments. “In 56 minutes,” an Associated Press (AP) reporter observed, “a city fresh from a night of Olympic celebrations was enveloped in eerie, blood-soaked quiet.” Three of the four bombs involved had exploded within a minute of one another at approximately 8:50

am on the London Underground system in the centre of the city. British Transport Police were immediately alerted that there had been an incident on the Metropolitan Line between Liverpool Street and Aldgate stations (some 25 minutes would pass however, before they were notified of the explosion at the Edgware Road station).

By 9:15 am, the Press Association had broken the story with a report that emergency services had been called to Liverpool Street Station. By 9:19 am, a ‘code amber alert’ had been declared by Transport for London Officials, who had begun to shut down the network of trains, thereby suspending all services. It appeared at the time that some sort of “power surge” might be responsible. At 9:26 am, *Reuters.co.uk*’s news flash stated:

LONDON (Reuters) – London’s Liverpool Street station was closed Thursday morning after a ‘bang’ was heard during the rush hour, transport police said.

The noise could have been power-related, a spokesman said. Officers were attending the scene.

Speculation mounted about the source of disruptions, with a number of different possibilities conjectured. “It wasn’t crystal clear initially what was going on,” John Ryley, Executive Editor of Sky News, later recalled. “Given the Olympic decision, the G-8 and the world we now live in, it was my hunch it was a terrorist attack” (cited in *New York Times*, July 11 2005). At 9:47, almost an hour after the first explosions, a fourth bomb detonated on the number 30 double-decker bus in Tavistock Square. The bus had been travelling between Marble Arch and Hackney Wick, diverted from its ordinary route because of road closures. Several of the passengers onboard had been evacuated from the Underground. At 11:10 am, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair formally announced to the public that it was a coordinated terror attack, a point reaffirmed by Prime Minister Tony Blair at 12:05 pm. In a televised statement, a visibly shaken Blair condemned the attacks as “barbaric”, appealed for calm and offered his “profound condolences to the victims and their families.” It would be 3:00 pm before the first official calculation of the number of people killed was formally announced.

For many Londoners, especially those who were deskbound in their workplaces, the principal source of breaking news about the attacks was the Internet. In contrast with the mobile telephone companies, internet service providers were largely unaffected by the blasts, although several news websites came under intense pressure from the volume of traffic directed to them (overall, traffic to news websites was up nearly 50 percent from the previous

day, according to online measurement companies). BBC News was amongst the first to break the news online, thereby attracting considerable attention. It was the most visited of the pertinent news sites (accounting for 28.6 percent of all news page impressions in the UK), prompting technicians to introduce additional servers to cope. “We know it will be, without question, our busiest day in history,” stated Peter Clifton, editor of BBC news interactive (cited in the *Independent on Sunday*, July 10 2005). Other leading sites which saw dramatic increases in their hits were *The Guardian* newspaper’s *Guardian Unlimited*, *Sky News*, the *Times*, the *Sun* and the *Financial Times*. All of them remained operational despite the pressure – in marked contrast with the crashes experienced on September 11, 2001 – although response times were slower than usual.

In addition to the more typical types of news reportage made available, several sites created spaces for firsthand accounts from eyewitnesses to the attacks. Wherever possible, minute-by-minute updates from their journalists situated – either by accident or design – around the capital, were posted. Several BBC reporters for example, contributed their own observations in blog form, titled: The BBC’s ‘Reporters’ Log: London Explosions’. The first three entries read:

Jon Brain: Edgware Road: 11:15 BST

There’s been a scene of chaos and confusion all morning here but it’s beginning to settle down. The entire area around the tube station has been sealed off and there are dozens of emergency vehicles here.

We’ve seen a number of walking wounded emerge from the station, many of them covered with blood and obviously quite distraught. They are being treated at a hotel opposite the tube station.

The concern now is whether there are still people trapped inside the tube station underground. I’ve seen a team of paramedics go into the station in the last half hour.

Nick Thatcher: Royal London Hospital: 11:30 BST

The Royal London Hospital have been receiving casualties all morning. This is a major hospital in East London. There’s an air ambulance landing on the roof behind me. There are buses behind me which have come from the Kings Cross area in central London. On board are walking wounded who have been ferried here.

Richard Foster: Liverpool Street: 11:35 BST

Houndsditch is sealed off and there are police on horseback there. Liverpool Street station is sealed off. The number of people there was in its thousands when I first arrived, but now it has thinned out. The pubs are full round here; people are gathering for news updates and sending texts to let people now they are alright. – (BBC News, Reporters' Log, July 7 2005).

Significantly however, spaces were also created online for ordinary citizens bearing witness. In the case of the BBC News site, a “London explosions: your accounts” page was posted, which asked: “Did you witness the terrorist attacks in London? How have the explosions affected you?” This request for users to send their “experiences and photos” (together with their telephone number for verification purposes), attracted a vast array of responses. Examples include:

It was hot, dark and the smoke filled atmosphere made breathing difficult. We could hear loud screams that came from further down the tunnel, although I don't think any of us had any idea of just how bad things were in the front carriages. I suppose that not knowing what was really going on was a blessing in disguise, otherwise I'm sure there would have been mass panic. About 30 minutes later station staff managed to get to us and guided us off the train. It was only when I got home that I realised that this was a terrorist attack, which sent a chill down my spine. – Jahor Gupta, London, UK

I was onboard one of the trains that was caught by the bomb at Edgware road [...]. Innocent people of all nations and creeds screaming, crying and dying. A huge explosion rocked our train and the one passing us, putting the lights out and filling the tunnel with an acrid, burning smoke. Panic set in with screams and shouts of 'fire' then came the shouts from the bombed carriage. Not strong shouts for help, but desperate pleas.

We realised that it was the train next to us that had been badly damaged, with the bombed carriage stopping directly opposite the carriage we were in, people cover in blood and with tattered, burnt clothing where trying to escape that train and enter our carriage, but we couldn't open the doors – they were calling for help and we couldn't get to them. Passengers with medical experience were found, I found a tool box and we smashed a window,

allowing the medical guys to enter the other train, There was nothing left in that carriage, nothing. Blackened shredded walls, roof buckled, heavy tube doors twisted off. We collected warm coats, water, ties for tourniquets anything to help ... but there are no medical supplies to be found on the train, not even a torch. [...] I wish I could have done more. Everyone that helped was great – the train staff, the passengers, the medics, firemen and police – all where brave, calm and professional, but we were all reacting in shock, all going too slowly for the people in real trouble. – Ben Thwaites, Crowthorne, Berkshire - UK

“People were sending us images within minutes of the first problems, before we even knew there was a bomb,” said Helen Boaden, BBC Director of News. In the hours to follow, the BBC received more than 1,000 pictures, 20 pieces of amateur video, 4,000 text messages and around 20,000 emails. “Some of them are just general comments,” Boaden added, “but a lot are first-hand accounts. If people are happy about it – and, if people have contacted us, they usually are – we put our programmes in contact with them” (cited in *Independent on Sunday*, July 10 2005).

Newspapers-based sites such as *Guardian Unlimited*, similarly sought to gather insights from readers to help round out their coverage. A page in its news blog, headlined “Your eyewitness accounts”, stated: “Tell us your experiences, and send us your photographs, by emailing us at [newsblog.london@gmail.com](mailto:newsblog.london@gmail.com).” The response, by any measure, was extraordinary. Entries included:

I was on the southbound Piccadilly line, between King’s Cross and Russell Square this morning, when the incident occurred. At just after nine, there was an almighty bang and the train came to a sudden stop. The lights in the carriage went out and the air became thick with dust and soot. [...] We left the train within half an hour. I feel very lucky. – John Sandy

I was in a tube at King’s Cross when one of the explosions happened. I was stuck in a smoke-filled, blackened tube that reeked of burning for over 30 minutes. So many people were hysterical. I truly thought I was going to die and was just hoping it would be from smoke inhalation and not fire. I felt genuine fear but kept calm (and quite proud of myself for that).



Eventually people smashed through the windows and we were lifted out all walked up the tunnel to the station. There was chaos outside and I started to walk down Euston Road (my face and clothes were black) towards work and all of a sudden there was another huge bang and people started running up the road in the opposite direction to where I was walking and screaming and crying. I now realise this must have been one of the buses exploding. – Jo Herbert

The explosion seemed to be at the back of the bus. The roof flew off and went up about 10 metres. It then floated back down. I shouted at the passengers to get off the bus. They went into Tavistock Park nearby. There were obviously people badly injured. A parking attendant said he thought a piece of human flesh had landed on his arm. – Raj Mattoo

Behind the scenes at *Guardian Unlimited*, technicians were moving quickly to dispense with unnecessary pages and links with the aim of freeing up capacity. Over the course of the day, it attracted the most page impressions for a newspaper site. At its peak between 1 pm and 2 pm, there were 770,000 page views on its site, the equivalent of 213 pages per second. “A news site has two jobs,” stated Simon Waldman, director of digital publishing at the site. “One to deliver the story accurately and as quickly as possible, and two to make sure that your site stays up. If you’re doing that, everything else will slot into place” (cited in [journalism.co.uk](http://journalism.co.uk), July 13 2005).

A range of the major news sites also made extensive use of personal blogs or online diaries written by Londoners caught up in the events and their aftermath. Some opened up newsblogs for their readers or viewers to post their stories, while others drew upon different individuals’ blogs in search of material to accentuate a more personalised dimension to the tragedy. The up-to-the-minute feel of these blogs typically made for compelling reading. While many of these blogs offered little more than information otherwise being presented from television or radio news, albeit typically with some sort of personal reaction by the blogger in question, a small number of bloggers – ordinary citizens from a wide variety of backgrounds – were engaging in news reporting online. These ‘citizen journalists’ or ‘instant reporters’ as they were self-described by some, were relaying what they had seen unfold before them. Widely credited with being amongst the first blogs to post eyewitness accounts were Londonist, Skitz, Norm Blog, and London Metroblogger. Justin Howard posted the following entry on

his blog, *Pfff: a response to anything negative*, just four hours after an underground explosion. Titled “Surviving a Terrorist Attack,” it reads:

Travelling just past Edgware Road Station the train entered a tunnel. We shook like any usual tube train as it rattled down the tracks. It was then I heard a loud bang.

The train left the tracks and started to rumble down the tunnel. It was incapable of stopping and just rolled on. A series of explosions followed as if tube electric motor after motor was exploding. Each explosion shook the train in the air and seems to make it land at a lower point.

I fell to the ground like most people, scrunched up in a ball in minimize injury. At this point I wondered if the train would ever stop, I thought ‘please make it stop’, but it kept going. In the end I just wished that it didn’t hit something and crush. It didn’t.

When the train came to a standstill people were screaming, but mainly due to panic as the carriage was rapidly filling with smoke and the smell of burning motors was giving clear clues of fire.

As little as 5 seconds later we were unable to see and had all hit the ground for the precious air that remaining. We were all literally choking to death.

The carriage however was pretty sealed; no window could open, no door would slide and no hammers seemed to exist to grant exit. If there were instructions on how to act then they were impossible to see in the thick acrid black smoke (Pfff, July 7 2005).

Members of London’s blogging community were mobilising to provide whatever news and information they possessed, in the form of typed statements, photographs or video clips, as well as via survivors’ diaries, roll-calls of possible victims, emergency-response instructions, safety advice, travel tips, links to maps pinpointing the reported blast locations, and so forth. Many focused on perceived shortcomings in mainstream news reports, offering commentary and critique, while others dwelt on speculation or rumour, some openly conspiratorial in their claims.

*Technorati*, a blog tracking service, identified more than 1,300 posts pertaining to the blasts by 10:15 am. While it is impossible to generalise, there can be little doubt that collectively these blogs – like various chat rooms, public forums and message boards across the internet – gave voice to a full range of human emotions, especially shock, outrage, grief, fear, anger and

recrimination. Of particular value was their capacity to articulate the sorts of personal experience which typically fall outside journalistic boundaries. Examples include:

Picked up a couple more messages – people who know that Edgware Road is my station. One of them was from a friend who I haven't heard from in two years. – 'Metrocentric,' from *There Goes the Neighbourhood*

Once the shock had settled, I started to feel immense pride that the LAS, the other emergency services, the hospitals, and all the other support groups and organisations were all doing such an excellent job. To my eyes it seemed that the Major Incident planning was going smoothly, turning chaos into order.

And what you need to remember is that this wasn't *a* major incident, but instead *four* major incidents, all happening at once.

I think everyone involved, from the experts, to the members of public who helped each other, should feel pride that they performed so well in this crisis.

– Tom Reynolds, an Emergency Medical Technician for the London Ambulance Service, from *Random Acts Of Reality*

Today's attacks must – and they will – strengthen our commitment to defeat this barbaric hateful terrorism. We will not bow – I will never bow – to these despicable terrorists, even if my life depends on it. What happened to London today was an outrageous evil act by shameless criminals who, sadly, call themselves Muslims. – Ahmad, from *Iraqi Expat*

Call me a coward if you like, but the first instinct was to get as far away from London as possible. And I was not alone. I have NEVER seen so many taxis on the motorway heading west away from the city. – 'Chris,' from *Metroblogging London*

I have to say that this was a strange night to be at work. It was certainly the quietest Friday night I've ever experienced. I picked up a grand total of 23 people travelling through the city late tonight. It would usually be ten times that amount. [...] I've been asked several times by members of the public whether I'm scared to drive my train now. I answer that we can't allow ourselves to be beaten. I admit that while I was driving through the city, the events were constantly in the back of my mind, but we can't let these

cowardly bastards win. – ‘DistrictDriver,’ a train driver for London Underground, from *District Drivers Logbook*

The significance of blogging was not lost on mainstream journalists, some of whom welcomed their contribution as a way to further improve the depth and range of their reporting. “I see our relationship with bloggers and citizen journalists as being complementary on a story like the one we had today,” stated Neil McIntosh, Assistant Editor of *Guardian Unlimited*. ‘Clearly,’ he added:

we’re going to be in there early, and we have people who are practised in getting facts. We’ll still be looking a great deal to blogs to almost help us digest what’s happening today. It’s very complementary in that I think the blogs look to us to get immediate news and we maybe look to them to get a little bit of the flavour of how people are reacting outside the four walls of our office (cited in *The Globe and Mail*, July 9 2005).

Certainly McIntosh’s Editor-in-Chief, Emily Bell, shared his conviction that local people’s blogging came into its own on the day. “The key thing about blogs,” she stated, “is that they are not like internet or newspaper front pages, where you get the most important thing first. With blogs you get the most recent thing first [which is what you want when] you are following a major story.” Moreover, it is quicker to update the information in a blog than other types of news reporting, she added, and also affords people a place to connect emotionally with the events (cited in *The Guardian*, July 8 2005).

### **Moving Images**

Particularly vexing for reporters during the crisis, especially those in television news, was the issue of access. Unable to gain entry to London Underground stations due to tight security, the aftermath of the explosions was out of sight and beyond the reach of their cameras. On the other side of the emergency services’ cordons however, were ordinary Londoners on the scene, some of whom were in possession of mobile telephones equipped with digital cameras. As would quickly become apparent, a considerable number of the most newsworthy images of what was happening were not taken by professionals, but rather by these individuals who happened to be in the wrong place at the right time. The tiny lenses of their mobile telephone cameras captured the perspective of fellow commuters trapped underground, with many of the resultant images resonating with what some aptly described as an eerie, even claustrophobic, quality. Video clips taken with cameras were judged by some to be all the

more compelling because they were dim, grainy and shaky, but more importantly, because they were documenting an angle to an event as it was actually happening. “Those pictures captured the horror of what it was like to be trapped underground,” Sky News executive editor John Ryley suggested (cited in *Press Gazette*, July 14 2005). “We very quickly received a video shot by a viewer on a train near King’s Cross through a mobile,” he further recalled. “And we had some heart-rending, grim stories sent by mobile. It’s a real example of how news has changed as technology has changed” (cited in *Independent on Sunday*, July 10 2005).

This remarkable source of reportage, where ordinary citizens were able to bear witness, was made possible by the Internet. A number of extraordinary ‘phonecam snapshots’ of passengers trapped underground, were posted on *Moblog.co.uk*, a photo-sharing website for mobile telephone images. ‘Alfie’, posting to the site stated: “This image taken by Adam Stacey. He was on the northern line just past Kings Cross. Train suddenly stopped and filled with smoke. People in carriage smashed tube windows to get out and then were evacuated along the train tunnel. He’s suffering from smoke inhalation but fine otherwise” (cited in *www.boingboing.net*; July 7 2005). By early evening, the image had been viewed over 36,000 times on the *Moblog.co.uk* website (cited in *New York Times*, July 8 2005). Stacey himself was reportedly astonished by what had happened to the image. “I sent it to a few people at work like, ‘Hey, look what happened on the way to work,’ ” he explained. “I never expected to see my picture all over the news” (cited in *Forbes.com*, July 8 2005). Elsewhere, Adam Tinworth, a London magazine editor and freelance writer, later recollected: “I was grabbing photos to give people a feel of what it’s like to be an ordinary person.” He posted a range of images on the web, including shots of blockaded streets, while he waited in a cafe for his wife to call. “I started posting pictures simply as displacement activity while I waited to hear if she was OK,” he said. “Eventually I did, but there was so much interest in the photos and descriptions of what was happening that I kept on going, and took my lunch break from work to grab some more” (cited in *National Post*, July 8 2005).

Handling Tinworth’s images online was *Flickr.com*, also a photo-sharing service that enables people to post directly from a mobile telephone free of charge. More than 300 bombing photos had been posted within eight hours of the attacks. With “the ability for so many people to take so many photos,” *Flickr* co-founder Caterina Fake stated, “the real challenge will be to find the most remarkable, the most interesting, the most moving, the most striking” (cited in AP, July 7 2005). Individual photographs were ‘tagged’ into groups by words such

as ‘explosions’, ‘bombs’ and ‘London’ so as to facilitate efforts to find relevant images. Many of these photographs, some breathtaking in their poignancy, were viewed thousands of times within hours of their posting. “It’s some sense that people feel a real connection with a regular person – a student, or a homemaker – who happens to be caught up in world events ... how it impacts the regular person in the street,” Fake remarked (cited in *PC Magazine Online*, July 7 2005).

It was precisely this angle which journalists and editors at major news sites were also looking for when quickly sifting through the vast array of images emailed to them. “Within minutes of the first blast,” Helen Boaden, BBC Director of News, affirmed, “we had received images from the public and we had 50 images within an hour” (cited by Day and Johnston in *The Guardian*, July 8 2005). Pete Clifton, a BBC online interactivity editor, elaborated: “An image of the bus with its roof torn away was sent to us by a reader inside an hour, and it was our main picture on the front page for a large part of the day.” Evidently several hundred such photographs, together with about 30 video clips, were sent to the BBC’s dedicated email address ([yourpics@bbc.co.uk](mailto:yourpics@bbc.co.uk)) as the day unfolded. About 70 images and five clips were used on the BBC’s website and in television newscasts. “London explosions: Your photos” presented still images, while one example of a video clip was an 18-second sequence of a passenger evacuating an underground station, taken with a camera phone video. “It certainly showed the power of what our users can do, Clifton added, when they are close to a terrible event like this” (cited in *BBC News Online*, July 8 2005).

Over at the ITV News channel, editor Ben Rayner concurred. “It’s the way forward for instant newsgathering,” he reasoned, “especially when it involves an attack on the public.” ITN received more than a dozen video clips from mobile phones, according to Rayner. The newscast ran a crawl on the bottom of the screen asking viewers to send in their material. Every effort was made to get it on the air as soon as possible, but not before its veracity was established. This view was similarly reaffirmed by John Ryley, the Executive Editor of *Sky News*. “We are very keen to be first,” he maintained, “but we still have to ensure they are authentic.” Nevertheless, according to Ryley, a video clip from the blast between King’s Cross and Russell Square stations that was received at 12.40 pm had been broadcast by 1 pm. “News crews usually get there just after the event,” he remarked, “but these pictures show us the event as it happens” (cited by Day and Johnston in *The Guardian*, July 8 2005).

“This is the first time mobile phone images have been used in such large numbers to cover an event like this,” *Evening Standard* production editor Richard Oliver declared. It shows “how

this technology can transform the news-gathering process. It provides access to eyewitness images at the touch of a button, speeding up our reaction time to major breaking stories.” Local news organisations, in his view, “are bound to tap into this resource more and more in future” (cited in *National Geographic News*, July 11 2005). Such was certainly the case with national news organisations. One particularly shocking image of the No 30 bus at Tavistock Square for example, which had been received at the website within 45 minutes of the explosion, was used on the front page of both *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* newspapers the next day. Some images were quickly put to one side however. “We didn’t publish some of the graphic stuff from the bus explosion,” stated Vicky Taylor of the BBC. “It was just too harrowing to put up.” Even so, she said, the use of this type of imagery signalled a “turning point” with respect to how major news organisations report breaking news (cited in *The Australian*, July 14 2005). “What you’re doing,” Taylor observed, “is gathering material you never could have possibly got unless your reporter happened by chance to be caught up in this” (cited in AP, July 7 2005). For *Sky News* Associate Editor, Simon Bucks, it represented “a democratisation of news coverage, which in the past we would have only got to later” (cited in *Agence France Presse*, July 8 2005). Above question in any case, was the fact that many of the ‘amateur photos’ taken were superior to those provided by various professional photographic agencies.

Still, there were certain risks for news organisations intent on drawing upon so-called ‘amateur’ or ‘user-generated’ digital imagery. One such risk concerned the need to attest to the accuracy of the image in question, given the potential of hoaxes being perpetrated. Steps had to be taken to ensure that the image had not been digitally manipulated or ‘doctored’ so as to enhance its news value, and to attest to its source in a straightforward manner. For example, with regard to the image taken by Adam Stacey mentioned above, *Sky News* picked it up, crediting it as ‘a passenger’s camera photo’, while the BBC added a caveat when they used it: “This photo by Adam Stacey is available on the Internet and claims to show people trapped on the underground system” (cited on *Poynteronline*, July 8 2005). A further risk is that rights to the image may be owned by someone else, raising potential problems with respect to the legality of permission to use it. While citizens turned photojournalists provided the BBC with their images free of charge, the photographers retained the copyright, enabling them to sell the rights to other news organisations (*Sky TV*, for example, reportedly offered £250 for exclusive rights to an image). Peter Horrocks, current head of BBC television news, believes that trust is the central issue where gathering material from citizen journalists is

concerned. For individuals to send their work to the BBC, as opposed to rival news organisations (especially when the latter will offer financial payment), individuals have to share something of the Corporation's commitment to public service. It is important to bear in mind, he suggests, that some of the individuals involved had taken the photos "because they thought they were going to be late for work and wanted something to show the boss. Very few of them thought of themselves as journalists, and no-one that we've interviewed thought about the commercial potential," he stated. "The idea for most of them that there was any commercial motivation is anathema. They trusted the BBC to treat the information respectfully and, where appropriate, to pass it on to the police" (cited in *The Independent*, 26 September 2005).

Cross-cutting concerns raised about the logistics involved when using this kind of imagery are certain ethical considerations. A number of the individuals involved did have pause for thought, some expressing regret, others moved to explain their actions. Tim Bradshaw hesitated before sending his images to *flickr.com*. "It seemed kind of wrong," he commented, "[but] the BBC and news Web sites were so overwhelmed it was almost like an alternative source of news" (cited in *New York Times*, 8 July 2005). London blogger Justin Howard, cited above, posted this angry comment on the day:

I was led out of the station and expected to see emergency services. There were none; things were so bad that they couldn't make it. The victims were being triaged at the station entrance by Tube staff and as I could see little more I could do so I got out of the way and left. As I stepped out people with camera phones vied to try and take pictures of the worst victims. In crisis some people are cruel (*Pfff*, July 7 2005).

Pointing to this type of evidence, some critics contend that using the phrase 'citizen journalist' to describe what so many ordinary people were doing on the day is too lofty, preferring the derisive 'snaparazzi' to characterise their actions. In the eyes of others, serious questions need to be posed regarding why such people are moved to share their experiences in the first place. John Naughton, writing in the *Observer* newspaper, expressed his deep misgivings: "I find it astonishing – not to say macabre – that virtually the first thing a lay person would do after escaping injury in an explosion in which dozens of other human beings are killed or maimed, is to film or photograph the scene and then relay it to a broadcasting organisation," he wrote. Naughton refuses to accept the view that such imagery is justifiable on the grounds that it vividly captures the horrors of the event, contending that "such arguments are merely a retrospective attempt to dignify the kind of ghoulish voyeurism that is



enabled by modern communications technology.” Broadcasting organisations, he maintains, should refuse to use this type of ‘amateur’ material. In recognising that “enthusiastic cameraphone ghouls on 7 July” were offered “the chance of 15 minutes of fame” by picture-messaging to broadcasters, he questions how many of them avoided attending to the pain of others as a result. “[I]f I had to decide between the girl who chose to stay and help the victims and the fiends who vied to take their pictures,” he declared, “then I have no doubt as to where true humanity lies” (*The Observer*, July 17 2005).

For many of citizen journalism’s advocates however, the reporting that ordinary individuals engaged in on July 7 was one of the few bright spots on an otherwise tragic day. Its intrinsic value was underscored by Mark Cardwell, AP’s director of online newspapers, who stated: “The more access we have to that type of material, the better we can tell stories and convey what has happened” (cited in *Newsday.com*, July 8 2005). Still, others emphasised the importance of exercising caution, believing that its advantages should not obscure the ways in which the role of the journalist can be distinguished from individuals performing acts of journalism. “The detached journalistic professional is still necessary,” insisted Roy Greenslade in the *Guardian* newspaper, “whether to add all-important context to explain the blogs and the thousands of images, or simply to edit the material so that readers and viewers can speedily absorb what has happened” (*The Guardian*, August 8 2005). At the *Times Online*, news editor Mark Sellman pointed out that several of the tips received in the aftermath of the attacks turned out to be false. “You’re in a very hot point, stuff was coming in but it’s not necessarily reliable, and you have to check it out,” he stated. “Someone said a suicide bomber was shot dead in Canary Wharf, and that was an urban myth.” Professional journalists, in his view, necessarily play a crucial role as editors. “To create an open stream that’s not edited is not to offer readers what we’re here for. We’re editors, and you’ve got to keep that in mind” (cited in *The Globe and Mail*, July 9 2005). Simon Waldman, director of digital publishing at *Guardian Unlimited*, makes the pertinent observation that “[e]verything on the internet is about acquired trust, and news sites earn their spurs with each news story” (cited in *journalism.co.uk*, July 13 2005). Reflecting on the site’s use of readers’ material on the day, his colleague Emily Bell similarly underscored the importance of relationship between news organisations and citizen reporters. “It might take only one faked film, one bogus report, to weaken the bond of trust,” she contended, “and conversely, one misedited report or misused image to make individuals wary once again of trusting their material to television or newspapers” (*The Guardian*, July 11 2005). The role of the trained, experienced

journalist was being transformed, most seemed to agree, but remained as vitally important as ever.

### **Looking Ahead**

There appears to be little doubt – in the eyes of both advocates and critics alike – that citizen reporting is having a profound impact on the forms, practices and epistemologies of mainstream journalism, from the international level through to the local. “In a summer marked by London bombings, rising gas prices and record hurricanes, the world is turning to the fastest growing news team – citizen journalists – to get a human perspective through the eyes of those who lived or experienced the news as it unfolds,” observed Lewis D’Vorkin, editor-in-chief of *AOL News*. Reflecting on the ways in which *AOL News* had drawn together source material from ordinary people caught-up in the aftermath of Katrina, he described the site as “the people’s platform.” The interactive nature of the online news experience, he believes, meant that it could offer ‘real-time dialogue’ between users joining in to shape the news. In D’Vorkin’s words:

While citizen journalism has existed in forms through letters to the editor, ‘man on the street’ interviews and call-in radio or television shows, the widespread penetration of the Web has promoted the citizen journalist to a new stature. With new technology tools in hand, individuals are blogging, sharing photos, uploading videos and podcasting to tell their firsthand accounts of breaking news so that others can better understand. What we did is the future of news, except it’s happening now (cited in *WebProNews*, September 6 2005).

The significance of participatory journalism, where ‘everyday people’ are able to ‘take charge of their stories’, is only now being properly acknowledged, in his view. “Can’t do it in TV, can’t do it in newspapers. That personal involvement is what the whole online news space is all about” (cited in *Los Angeles Times*, September 10 2005).

“It is a gear change,” pointed out the BBC’s Helen Boaden, especially with respect to the public’s contribution to the Corporation’s news coverage of the London attacks. “People are very media-savvy,” she argued and as they “get used to creating pictures and video on their phones in normal life, they increasingly think of sending it to us when major incidents occur.” Accentuating the positive, she added that it “shows there is a terrific level of trust between the audience and us, creating a more intimate relationship than in the past. It shows a

new closeness forming between BBC news and the public” (cited by Day and Johnston in *The Guardian*, July 8 2005). Complementary perspectives similarly regarded the coverage of the bombings to be the harbinger of a reportorial breakthrough. “Today is a great example of how news reporting is changing,” proclaimed Tom Regan of the *Online News Association*, when offering his praise for the vivid eyewitness accounts provided by blog entries sent from cell phones or computers (cited in *Newsday.com*, 8 July 2005). Rob O’Neill, writing in *The Age*, declared that “one of the most amazing developments in the history of media” was the way in which “victims and witnesses were taking pictures, posting them, sending texts, emailing and phoning in eyewitness accounts to mainstream media organisations and to friends and bloggers around the world.” While this had happened before, he acknowledged, it had never done so “on the scale or with the effectiveness achieved in London last week. Until then, ‘citizen journalism’ was an idea. It was the future, some people said. After London, it had arrived” (*The Age*, July 11 2005).

Precisely how, and to what extent, the emergent principles and priorities held to be indicative of citizen journalism are reconfiguring the geometry of informational power in the ‘network society’, opens up intriguing questions. Even those who are dismissive of the rhetorical claims being made about its potential – ‘we are all reporters now’ – should recognise that it is here to stay. In the emerging realm of ‘mass self-communication,’ to employ Castells’ (2007) term, the transfer of communicative power from news organisation to citizen is being consolidated. Online news is an increasingly collaborative endeavour, engendering a heightened sense of locality, yet one that is relayed around the globe in a near-instant. Consequently, as the boundaries between ‘local’ communities and ‘virtual’ ones are increasingly blurred, the implications of this emergent social phenomenon for journalism’s social responsibilities become all the more deserving of our close attention.

### **Acknowledgement**

Portions of this article formed part of my presentation to the OurMedia 06 conference held at University of Technology, Sydney (9-13 April, 2007). I wish to express my gratitude to the conference organisers for their kind invitation to speak, as well as to the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney for the funding support which made my participation possible. This article also draws upon Allan (2006), where the citizen reporting

of the London bombings is compared and contrasted with similar efforts to cover Hurricane Katrina and its immediate aftermath.

## References

Allan, S. (2006). *Online news: journalism and the Internet*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press.

Allan, S. and Matheson, D. (2004). Online journalism in the information age. *Knowledge, Work & Society*, 2(3), 73-94.

Castells, M. (2000). *The rise of the network society*, Second Edition. Oxford: Blackwell.

Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*. 1(1), 238-266.

Livingstone, K. (2005). Mayor of London's statement, 7 July. Transcript available at: [http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/mayor\\_statement\\_070705.jsp](http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/mayor_statement_070705.jsp)

Williams, R. (1963). *Culture and society, 1780-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

## Bio

Stuart Allan is Professor of Journalism at Bournemouth University. He is currently co-writing, with Donald Matheson, *Digital War: Technologies of War Reporting*, for Polity.