Bystander videos bring good, bad to journalism

Bystander videos and closed-circuit television (CCTV) camera recordings enjoy some of the widest views and shares on social media. As a result, the public is more likely to get a "live" perspective on an event than they used to get in the era of press conferences, where officialdom would put a spin that would be multiplied by legacy media.

Today, thanks to advances in communications technology that have put a smart phone with a camera, and social media interactive platforms, any incident is likely to be recorded as it happens by any of the bystanders or a CCTV camera on a lamppost or adjacent building. This would then be shared instantly on different social media platforms.

So, hours later, when television stations air the evening bulletin with a stiff police spokesperson filling the screen and making a statement about the event, or the next morning when newspapers splash headlines of the incident, most of the public are merely confirming what they saw in viral clips on their phones. And, they have already formed opinions on what happened, so any spin is likely to have limited intake.

In this case, one can say technology has democratised real-time information sharing by bypassing officialdom and media gate-keeping. This is both good and bad for the media and for the public. How?

For the media, bystander videos may have taken away the element of breaking news that for years was at the centre of its value proposition. However, it has also opened big opportunities for its reach and content curation, enabling it to build or take further stories around the video clips.

Verify, verify, verify! The old journalism rules apply when handling any story.

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Public Editor

Take for instance a recent viral video clip in Uganda of a boda boda rider who was hoodwinked by his two passengers who pretended to look for change, only to turn around and beat him, and steal his motorcycle.

Or another clip of a company-branded vehicle driving against the traffic flow on the right side of a dual lane road in Kampala, in total disregard of the regulation that requires motorists to "Keep Left".

Both videos, besides the extensive social media commentary, fed into the mainstream news, giving birth to stories and commentary on insecurity/crime in the country, and lawlessness on the country's roads that claims at least 14 people every day.

Smart journalists can, therefore, mine a lot of stories from bystander videos and give them authenticity and currency.

The downside is that videos can be manipulated, and with advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, faked videos today appear as good as real ones. The possibility for journalists to amplify fake news is, therefore, real. How to overcome this has been the subject of many media support organisations that have invested in research.

"Videos only show viewers a moment in time and can be manipulated or edited. Shorter videos that are commonly seen on social media can also be misleading. We don't know what happened five minutes before or an hour before or three hours before," noted an article by Ava Berger published on NPR website on January 28 titled, "Bystander videos have long shaped public opinion of police violence".

What should journalists do so as not to fall for a fake video and in turn share it with their audiences?

"The first thing any reporter should do when they encounter newsworthy video is save it — immediately and in its original form," notes Alex Mahadevan in an article on the Poynter Institute, USA, website titled, "Bystander video is driving the biggest stories in America. The next era of journalism will be built on verifying it".

Verify, verify, verify! The old journalism rules apply when handling any story. A lot of things need to be verified in any bystander video but foremost is geolocation, says Malachy Browne, enterprise director of the visual investigations team at *The New York Times*.

Quoted in the same article, she said: "Follow a breaking news event where visuals are being shared on social media sites. Learn how to geolocate (determine where something happened) and chronolocate (and when it happened), and learn how to use the tools on Bellingcat's investigative toolkit. Where was this video taken, when, by whom, why, what's happening, and how do you know?" Let's start here! Where/when was that boda boda rider robbed of his motorcycle?

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