S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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MUMBAI ATTACKS:
A New Wave of Citizen Journalism

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The Mumbai attacks received much coverage in social media, and this represents a paradigm shift in the way citizen journalism and mainstream media interact with each other. The potential ramifications and issues warrant further examination to see how the two could be utilised together as viable news sources.

THE RECENT attacks that unfolded in Mumbai over the course of three days saw a flurry of information being disseminated through mainstream media agencies, but even more so, over social networking sites like Twitter and Flickr. While mainstream media outlets floundered as they tried to grapple with the magnitude of the terrorist attacks across the city, users of social networking sites provided a steady stream of reports and images in real-time.

These events represent a pivotal moment in media coverage, as it demonstrates the potential for citizen journalism as a news source, particularly in emergencies. No longer would journalists be the first to report – and only source – on a sudden event; information would come from regular citizens, both amateurs and professionals who are there in the immediate aftermath of an event. This paradigm shift in the way citizen journalism and mainstream media interact with each other would have long term implications for crisis reporting, as well as the media.

Social networking sites as sources of real-time information

As the first attacks took place in Mumbai, the first reports about the events ostensibly appeared on Twitter even before mainstream media agencies were able to release news stories. Twitter is a micro-blogging site that is designed for users to post personal updates no longer than 140 characters through text messages or over the Internet.

By tagging posts related to the attacks with the hashtag *#mumbai*, users provided first-hand accounts by inundating the social networking service with a constant stream of reports and comments. The information came rapidly in its multitudes, and the availability of the information even gave rise to the

rumour that Indian authorities were asking Twitter users to stop updating the site because of concerns that the terrorists were deriving strategic information from user updates.

At the same time, people were loading images onto Flickr, a photo-sharing website. Even mainstream media outlets were utilising some images from the site for their reports. Photographer Vinukumar Ranganathan became an overnight sensation when his Flickr page attracted hundreds of thousands of hits for the pictures he uploaded of the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

Bloggers were also participating actively in disseminating information. Blogs like *"Mumbai Help"* aggregated the information derived from Twitter and Flickr, and also listed the contact details of embassy and consulate hotlines created for the crisis. It also sought to help individuals get in contact with their friends and family in Mumbai. The blog provided a way for volunteers and interested parties to connect to one another, and was a site where the deluge of information could be consolidated, easily accessed and made comprehensible.

Potential implications and issues

The data uploaded by individuals about the Mumbai attacks played a vital role in propagating real-time information and marks a new epoch of citizen journalism and social media because of its centrality in providing reports of the developments on the ground. The few professional journalists present on site can hardly compete with the masses around the city who were updating Twitter using their mobile phones whenever new developments emerged. However, there are some inherent problems with the use of social networking sites for posting information.

For instance, the amount of raw data generated by individual users of these social networking sites can appear to be overwhelming, particularly without any analysis. The ability of anyone to post reports and claims about any event also raises the issue of verifiability, since anyone can be a user on these social networking sites and claim to be posting an eyewitness account of events. Furthermore, there are concerns that with proximity comes the problem of not being able to perceive the overall picture. People report what they see, potentially without a complete understanding of the event, which could then lead to erroneous reportage.

However, such criticisms are not only levelled at citizen journalists; mainstream media can also make mistakes in reporting events, particularly when there are multiple developments happening at the same time. It is only with hindsight and further analysis that brings to light the inaccuracies that arise during reporting.

An added benefit of the relative transparency of social networking sites such as Twitter also means that if dubious information is uploaded, other users can question or challenge those claims almost instantaneously. However, the ease of uploading information also means that there is often too much 'noise' generated. There were hundreds of updates on Twitter every minute on the Mumbai attacks, and much of it was personal commentary, or re-linking to news stories from mainstream media.

Importance of verifiability

Issues of verifiability are problematic for both social and mainstream media, and there are advantages and drawbacks to different media sources. The best way forward would be to make use of the strongpoints of each to yield the most accurate and prompt information dissemination. There is a place in the future for both social media and mainstream media agencies, and the two need not be mutually exclusive.

The multiplicity of individual views and reports generated by social media represent diverse opinions, some of which could be otherwise overlooked by mainstream media. The latter could then address the

issues raised in social media, assimilate the information, and provide articles and editorials which provide a more holistic view of key events.

There is still room for improvement for social networking sites to become useful as news sources. A real-time update service like Twitter could be modified for the specialised use for news reporting where information uploaded could be verified, or where users can rate one another for their trustworthiness or ability to provide useful information to other users. This system is not necessarily foolproof as it remains a subjective evaluation of individual users. The initial raw data would still ultimately have to be authenticated and corroborated with other sources, a process which could be conducted by the mainstream media.

News agencies could utilise the information uploaded by users as leads which they could follow up on, and provide a more comprehensive analysis of seemingly disparate details from various sources. The Internet offers the ability to link up various sources of information easily. By synthesising these varied sources of information, mainstream media could indeed make the best use of real-time information provided by citizen journalists on which to build their analyses, instead of perceiving new media as adversaries.

The way information is disseminated by news media has irrevocably altered, as exemplified by the Mumbai attacks, but that does not mean the inevitable demise of the traditional media. Both mainstream and social media will have to adapt to each other to come up with a workable model of interaction by which news can be reported in the future – especially in times of crisis.

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