

# The ethical and real hazards of citizen journalism

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/05/05/the-hazards-of-citizen-journalism/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/05/05/the-hazards-of-citizen-journalism/)

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Who is responsible for the risks taken by citizen journalists who become ‘accidental’ reporters in dangerous situations?

This was the excellent question asked by Slawek Kozdras, a Polish student, who was in the audience when I gave a talk at Cumberland Lodge to LSE Government scholars.

I was doing my usual schtick about how networked journalism could alter the terms of the political communications trade. I put up slides about activists in Burma, G20 protestors and other people using new media technologies to report where professional journalists can’t go.



People powered

Slawek made a good point drawn from a fellow eastern European’s work:

*“I remember a story told in Kundera’s Unbearable Lightness of Being. After the Soviet army stormed into Prague in 1968 the brave Czech people (as opposed to cowardly Czech politicians) were mocking the army, women were teasing with Russian soldiers, laughing at them, taking pictures with them knowing the Russians can’t react. The paradox is that later on these pictures with people mocking Russians turned against the Czechs and served as evidence in trials.”*

And Slawek goes on to raise important issues about the ethics of that for anyone who is thinking of encouraging or benefitting from citizen journalism in dangerous places:

*‘accidental’ journalism ...may have catastrophic consequences exactly because it is ‘accidental’ and anonymous. I wondered what do you think about that? It is easy to imagine a situation when e.g. a protester in Burma is sent to jail because photos taken by random people and posted online served as evidence. How do you see this new type of journalism in illiberal democracies or autocracies? What are the ethical aspects of this type of journalism when the author is unknown?*

These are important questions. People who report ‘accidentally’ or ‘informally’ are often taking a personal risk.

Take the example of the bloggers in China who raised the scandal of poor building standards after the earthquake last year. They broke the story, put pressure on the authorities and appeared to open up Chinese society. Six months later when the world was looking elsewhere, a number of them were arrested and more restrictions were put on Chinese bloggers.

But on balance I don’t have much of a problem with the ethics of the risk involved. If someone chooses to do something like this they generally know the risk and are doing it because they want more freedom. I am glad they now have that option. Journalists have faced exactly that hazard in the past. At least the citizen has a direct stake in the outcome.

## Let The People Speak

I think it is a little patronizing to think that the citizen can't make a judgement about what they want to say in public. I also think that to rely on conventional media is to return us to a more closed world. Mainstream journalists literally can't get to some of these stories.

Likewise, I worry less about anonymity. There is very little evidence that false information is circulated widely for very long. Most bad data gets ignored. Most inauthentic testimony tends to get found out. The Internet is much better at critiquing itself than mainstream media ever was. Especially when it is combined with mainstream news systems through networked journalism. I can't think of many serious examples where 'false' citizen journalism has had any serious impact.



Quake shakeup

### Vast amounts of garbage

Of course, there is vast amounts of garbage out there but it tends not to be so influential as the genuine stuff. There have been far more durable myths, mistakes and untruths promulgated by professional journalists around the world – driven by incompetence, commercialism or censorship of more direct kinds – than by the amateur.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't think hard about the ethics around this. Citizen journalism can distort agendas, too. For example, the intensive reporting of the Asian Boxing Day tsunami by Western tourists gave that disaster much greater prominence

in the world than comparable disasters where western tourists were not there with their camera phones and video cameras.

And anyone who puts their own safety on the line in the name of free expression has my respect. Slawek's example from Kundera reminds us of the price paid in the name of freedom by both professionals and citizens.

[One area where there is a particularly heated debate about the role of new media and truth and lies is conspiracy theories – does the Internet make them worse? David Aaronovitch talks about his new book, Voodoo Histories, an analysis of conspiracy theories at the LSE on Thursday May 7th at 6.30pm]

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