“This is Citizen Journalism at its Finest!”:
YouTube and the Public Sphere in the Oscar Grant Shooting Incident

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The Incident

2:00 a.m., 01 January, 2009: Oscar Grant and friends are pulled from a subway train in Oakland, CA, by Bay Area Rapid Transit police officers.

Grant is pressed facedown on the platform. Officer Johannes Mehserle stands over him and fires a bullet into Grant’s lower back, it ricochets off the platform and punctures Grant’s lung, resulting in his death.

The shooting is recorded by other passengers on their cellphones. Although BART officers try to confiscate all footage, some passengers hide their phones and multiple videos are uploaded on YouTube within days. Eventually, local news channels also broadcast the videos.

The event sparks widespread protests and rioting in Oakland, eliciting comparisons to the 1991 Rodney King incident.

15 Jan: Officer Mehserle is charged with murder. He resigns and pleads not guilty.

06 Feb: Mehserle is released on bail. The trial is postponed twice (currently scheduled for 07 June, 2010). The cellphone videos have played a significant role in investigations and will be used as evidence at the trial.

Theoretical Framework

• **Guard-dog media** (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995):
  Mainstream news media function like a “guard-dog” to protect influential groups. Crisis and conflict are seldom addressed, especially when powerful social sectors are directly threatened.

• **Agenda-setting theory** (McCombs & Shaw, 1977):
  Mainstream news media may not tell us what to think, but do tell us what issues and events to think about.
  Through selection & coverage, news media incorrectly define which issues are newsworthy and deserving of public attention.

• **The Public Sphere** (Habermas, 1996):
  A public space where public debate issues of political legitimacy and common concern.
  Goal of discussion = appreciation of divergent perspectives

But...

- New media technologies are transforming how news gets defined and broadcast.
- Viewers are simultaneously users and producers of media content. Through blogs, video-sharing, etc., citizens can set the news agenda themselves.

ABSTRACT

On 1 January 2009, Oscar Grant’s death at the hands of Rail Transit officers was recorded by passengers on their cellphones and later uploaded to YouTube. The videos generated significant protests among online and offline communities, and were eventually used as evidence in the ensuing trial.

We conducted a critical thematic analysis to examine audience responses to this act of citizen journalism on YouTube. Results indicated that although some viewers critiqued the video quality and passivity to murder, several supportive comments praised the cameraperson’s presence of mind and courage. Some viewers called for resistance and retaliation, while others advocated prudent protest.

We argue that our findings necessitate a reconceptualization of traditional notions of the guard-dog media (Donohue et al., 1995) and the public sphere (Habermas, 1996) to accommodate new media technologies.

Research Agenda

RQ: How do audiences respond to the citizen-journalism aspect of the Oscar Grant shooting? What dominant themes characterize these responses?

Method

Data:
Online comments posted to cellphone videos of Grant’s death on YouTube.

Total no. of comments analyzed: **82**

Analysis:
Critical thematic analysis (Otte and Kinsechi, 2008) using:
Repetition
Recurrence
Forcefulness

Recurrence

Results

I. Pro-Citizen Journalism

a) Praise for cameraperson’s vigilance

“Thank God for cell phone cameras’

‘thank you for posting. this is citizen journalism at its finest’

b) Retaliation and rebellion

‘we have to organize our resistance now...it could be too late tomorrow’

‘I say eye for an eye...may justice be upon you’

They do their dirt on camera and STILL nothing is done but start sniping these cops and their families and I bet this bullsh*t will stop. STOP TALKING AND START SHOOTING!!!

c) Prudent protest

‘Remember everyone makes copies of this video and send it to people over the phone cause it’s going to be removed from YOUTUBE. This is huge news and it’s not being show on TV’

‘It’s just a shame that this happened to the kid. The thing is stay away from cops. If they are doing something bad take video from a distance.’

‘sometimes observing and taking badge numbers is the smartest thing you can do...play the game the same way and make a paper trail for dirty officers so you can weed them out the system’

II. Anti-Citizen Journalism

a) Quality of video footage

‘Gee...I mean ignorant clowns. learn how to focus and shoot a camera’

‘Innocent until proven guilty. You shouldn’t make judgements based on a shaky video shot with a cell phone’

b) Passivity of bystanders

‘He’s dead and this girl is happy that she got it on video. where’s the compassion for a fellow human being?’

Can someone tell me why a hundred civilians didn’t think to take justice? They should have gone after those cops instead of just filming like it was some tourist attraction

Implications

• New media technologies increase inter-public engagement and are potential sources of social change.

• Proactive user-generated citizen journalism can influence public opinion & challenge repressive authoritative institutions

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