

## Amateur video wins prestigious journalism award

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A cell phone video of a young music student's violent death during Iranian election protests in June has received one of the news industry's highest honors, a strong affirmation of how social media is changing the world of journalism.

Yet the person who shot the video won't be joining NBC's Tom Brokaw at an awards dinner in April. This is the first time in the 61-year history of the George Polk Award that an anonymously produced work will be honored.

"We don't know who took it or who uploaded it, but we know it has news value," Polk curator John Darnton said in announcing the award this week. "This award celebrates the fact that, in today's world, a brave bystander with a cell phone camera can use video sharing and social networking sites to deliver the news."

The award, given by Long Island University, acknowledges that the raw, disturbing video showing the last moments of Neda Agha-Soltan's life affected millions of people around the world as the clip spread quickly through online sites like YouTube and Twitter. The video became "the iconic image of the Iranian resistance," Darnton said.

While the award raises more questions about the future of journalism, it also highlights how advances in mobile video and photo technology, coupled with the rising popularity of online sharing sites, has created a culture that makes everyone a potential citizen journalist.

"It's a perfect storm that brings us where we are today," said Derek Petersen, a spokesman for MaYoMo.com, a Web site built to highlight video from amateur journalists. "People just feel more comfortable sharing than they ever were before."

So now, whenever a potential news event such as a bus brawl or a police-involved shooting happens, people automatically whip out their cell phones or cameras and hit the record button. And instead of relying solely on traditional media outlets to broadcast the news, they can reach large audiences by "friend-casting" the stories among themselves with status updates, tweets and links.

### 'Living documentaries'

"Social media has taught them to think of their lives as almost living documentaries," said Steve Grove, head of news and politics for the biggest video-sharing site, the Google-owned YouTube of San Bruno. "It's all part of this 'record my life' instinct that people have.

"The Polk award is a nice recognition that people's work on YouTube doesn't go unnoticed and the risk they take to inform the globe of what's taking place matters," Grove said. "And no longer does a reporter have to be on the scene to capture an event for it to end up being shared by the entire world."

Mainstream media outlets routinely air or post user-created video to report events such as the earthquake in Haiti.

The BBC has told its reporters to use social media as a primary source of material, while French journalists recently experimented with reporting stories only from information gleaned from social networks. And breaking news is disseminated faster than ever on Twitter and other sites.

Online video is particularly powerful because it gives viewers "a real sense for what is taking place," Grove said.

YouTube, with 20 hours of video uploaded every minute, includes a CitizenTube channel. MaYoMo.com and other new sites such as Bideo.com and NowPublic.com specialize in the work of amateur reporters.

Moments after the devastating Haitian quake hit, "really compelling" amateur video began surfacing on MaYoMo.com that was later aired by the NBC, CBS and Al-Jazeera English networks, Petersen said.

MaYoMo, based in the Netherlands, officially launched in October 2009 and now has 60,000 videos from 130 countries. MaYoMo members, who aren't paid, created news channels covering the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Copenhagen climate change conference.

This week, the site had video from someone driving by the smoldering Internal Revenue Service office in Austin, Texas, after it was hit by a small plane piloted by an enraged software engineer. The site also had videos of Winter Olympics protesters in Vancouver, British Columbia, and of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger carrying the Olympic torch.

"There's got to be 5,000 people with a camera phone for every major TV news crew out there," Petersen said.

### Anonymous sources

But Bill Kovach, a veteran journalist and founding chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, said he is "conflicted" by the Polk award going to a video from an anonymous source. Although professional journalists eventually verified the story of Agha-Soltan's death, Kovach worried that people will too easily accept such reports "at face value."

Professional journalists are trained to adhere to values that give their reports credibility, he said. But citizen journalists, especially if they are unnamed, may not have the same drive "to try to help you decide whether or not it's worthy of belief and that's what journalism is designed to do," said Kovach, a former Washington bureau chief for the New York Times. "I worry that the whole process of journalism that you can depend on will begin to erode."

Still, Kovach believes citizen reporters are part of the future of journalism.

"The new technology has created the opportunity for us to have a direct relationship with people in the community and begin to draw them into our process, make them smarter consumers of it and also make them potential producers of it whenever they are where the action is," Kovach said.