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The Mobile Phone and the Public Sphere

Mobile Phone Usage in Three Critical Situations

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Abstract / This article seeks to explore the influence of the mobile phone on the public sphere, in particular with regard to its effect on news agendas, gatekeepers and primary definers. Using the examples of the Chinese SARS outbreak (2003), the south-east Asian tsunami (December 2004) and the London bombings (July 2005), the author questions the extent to which the mobile phone is challenging conventional and official sources of information. At times of national and personal calamity, the mobile phone is used to document and report events from eyewitnesses and those closely involved. Using multimedia messages (MMS) or text messages (SMS) to communities of friends and families, as well as audio phone calls, mobile phone users may precede and scoop official sources and thwart censorship and news blackouts. They can also provide valuable evidence of what actually occurred. Users are able to take pictures and short films and transmit these rapidly to others along with reports of what is happening where they are; they are also able to access other media broadcasts and the internet. They are what have become known as 'citizen journalists'.

The evidence suggests that mobile phone usage is contributing to the public sphere and in some instances is circumventing official repression or inadequate information. There is also an indication that the 'mobcam' is capturing images that would otherwise be lost. However, the mainstream media has been quick to take advantage of this citizen journalism and mediate it within its own parameters.

Key Words / cell phone / citizen journalism / public sphere

The use of the mobile phone as a communications device in day-to-day situations is accepted as its natural function. But in times of national and personal calamity, the mobile phone may become an important tool, to document and report events from eyewitnesses and those closely involved. Using multimedia messages (MMS) or text messages (SMS), as well as audio phone calls, mobile phone users can precede and scoop official sources, contribute to the media's coverage and circumvent censorship and news blackouts. The mobile phone can also provide valuable evidence of what actually occurred from an eyewitness perspective rather than an official or mediated source. Users are able to take

pictures and short films and transmit these rapidly to others along with reports of what is happening where they are, as well as access other media broadcasts and the internet. These participant reporters have been popularly called citizen journalists and via their mobile phones and by using other technologies such as the internet they may make vivid contributions to the public sphere.¹

This article uses three critical situations as case studies and seeks to explore the influence of the mobile phone on these events. Using the examples of the Chinese Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak (2003), the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami (December 2004) and the London bombings (July 2005), the article examines the extent to which the mobile phone is challenging conventional and official sources of information. Can the mobile phone be used as a tool of communication in the public sphere and enhance available information or discourse? What is the effect on conventional sources of news and information with regard to news agendas, gatekeepers and primary definers?

What the research found was that, although there was some evidence of the course of events being changed by mobile phones with their ability to be in rapid communication both aurally and visually with those inside and outside the crisis area, the effects were less than predicted. The various authorities involved still gave the primary definitions of events, in one case via the mobile phone network. However, witnesses to the south-east Asia tsunami and London bombings did record visual images on mobile phones that would otherwise not have been available. Mainstream media encouraged mobile phone users to give them material and then submitted it to the usual editorial processes; in other words, they acted as gatekeepers. In the case of SARS, mobile users did exchange information but the Chinese government very effectively manipulated the news agenda to their own ends.

Methodology and Literature

A number of commentators from differing schools of research have examined how mobile phones are used in domestic settings and these have been a useful background and foil to the ways used during the case studies presented here. Of particular interest are the anthropological studies of Fox (2004: 84–7), who also draws on the work of Dunbar (1996, 2004). These writers link the use of the mobile phone to our need to ‘gossip’ with each other, which as Dunbar believes is part of a deeper need, as primates, to maintain our social contacts. Horst and Miller’s ethnographic study of mobile phone usage in Jamaica demonstrates the way that the mobile phone has generally enriched the lives of the people on that island and changed some of Jamaicans’ work patterns and daily organization (Horst and Miller, 2006). Their methodology illustrates the validity of using individual experiences and accounts to show how mobile phones are used. Acknowledgment should also be made of Gow and Smith’s clear description of the technologies involved and their thoughtful comments (Gow and Smith, 2006). However, this article examines the use of mobile phones in critical situations; for definitions of what makes a situation ‘critical’, the work of Robinson and Robison (2006: 85–103) and Ringo Ma (2005: 241–6) is very helpful.

This study was conducted using searches of academic and non-academic sources. Online material was particularly valuable. Official, credible reports were used to document

each event and these were fleshed out using other reports and more anecdotal material. Where possible, anecdotal material was confirmed via two or more sources. It was discovered that some material was deliberately inaccurate, misleading or had been removed. This was particularly true of the reporting of SARS. The material regarding the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami was not felt to be deliberately misleading but was at times inconsistent, for example in regard to timings. It was felt that this was due to the chaotic nature of communications following the event and the fact that the event took place in a number of countries and several time zones. The reports of the London bombings seem to be straightforward and plausible narratives. Inevitably, some details are omitted from the report from the security forces (Murphy, 2006) and there have been debates since 7 July 2005 as to what was known prior to that day, but the account of events is not disputed.

The three events have similarities in their critical nature, but they took place over very different geographical areas and time periods. The SARS outbreak was a natural occurrence that would have been serious but became critical due to human intervention, when the Chinese authorities sought to prevent public awareness or discussion of the disease. The Sumatra-Andaman tsunami was an entirely natural disaster, which could have been alleviated by intervention but could not be prevented. The London bombings were entirely man-made criminal acts which took place in a small area of central London over a short time period, just an hour, although the disruption to Londoners was longer.

The three case studies all have international implications and have been discussed in a number of languages other than English. This study is limited in that it relies on material that was accessible to the author.

SARS

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the first identified case of SARS was recorded in the Guangdong province of The People's Republic of China on 16 November 2002 (WHO, 23 September 2003). However, in retrospect it seemed probable that there had been cases of 'atypical pneumonia' that are likely to have been SARS before this date. On 21 February, a doctor who had been treating patients in the Guangdong province visited Hong Kong and stayed in the Hotel Metropole. It was from this point that the virus spread rapidly to Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Toronto and other parts of the globe. Medical staff were particularly prone to infection, as the nature and seriousness of the 'atypical pneumonia' was not recognized until a number of people had succumbed to SARS. This included Dr Carlo Urbani, a WHO official who had been working in Hanoi and is credited with being the first doctor to identify SARS. He died on 21 March 2003 (WHO, 29 March 2003).

WHO officials were not allowed into the Guangdong Province to investigate the disease, its cause or spread until April 2003. The Chinese government endeavoured to understate the problem and closely maintained reporting restrictions. At the beginning of April, an elderly Chinese doctor, Jiang Yanyong, was so incensed that the official statistics were at odds with his own experiences that he wrote to the Chinese media and gave a statement to *Time* magazine (Jakes, 2003a). It emerged that the Chinese government was under-reporting SARS cases by about 90 percent and there was some evidence that concealment was deliberate. In one report, SARS patients were driven around Beijing on a bus while WHO officials visited their hospital (Jakes, 2003b). On 20 April a number

of Chinese officials were replaced and the Chinese government’s official count of SARS patients rose from 37 to 407 in Beijing and 1959 in China (WHO, 21 and 22 April 2003). Officially, the total number of cases by July 2003 was 8096, of which just over 7000 were in China and Hong Kong. The mortality rate was about 10 percent. Anecdotally, Chinese people still do not trust this figure.²

The people of Guangdong province were aware of a problem before the outside world were allowed information about it and passed this information around, in particular by mobile phone text messaging. According to the Guangdong Mobile Telecom, on 8, 9 and 10 February 2003, SMS use was three times higher than the previous year for the same period (see Table 1).³

Even assuming an increase in phone ownership during the year, these figures still show a significant increase in activity. However, it seems noteworthy that the first report by the Chinese government to the WHO was on 11 February 2003. According to Min Dahong (2003), the local media and internet news sites were carrying stories and photographs concerning the ‘Atypical pneumonia’ outbreak in Guangdong from 9 to 14 February, which acted as a relatively authentic and reliable source of information. However, after 14 February, the Chinese media, including internet sites, removed SARS-related content and did not report anything more about SARS or that SARS even existed until early April when inaccurate figures were provided at a press conference. It was following the release of these figures that Dr Yanyong contacted the foreign press to describe what he was witnessing.

During February and March, the people of Guangdong exchanged information via their mobile phones about the location of outbreaks of SARS and possible ways of alleviating the symptoms, in particular by folk remedies, such as teas, herbs and vinegar. Those who received information passed it on to other family and friends, thus dispersing the information widely, arguably as citizen journalists. Unfortunately, the information was not necessarily accurate, true or helpful. It was easier to spread frightening rumours than accurate figures, since there were none available. People stocked up on household commodities and some left towns that were thought to be at risk (Min Dahong, 2003).

In addition to advice, information and rumours, there were a number of irreverent and humorous texts in circulation, such as:

Urgent reminder: the newest channel of SARS transmission is by mobile phone. For your own health, whenever you receive an SMS please leave your phone for one hour in disinfectant before reusing it. (Haiqing Yu, 2004: 30)

TABLE 1
Increase of SMS Use on 8, 9 and 10 February 2003 compared to 2002

Date	SMS use	
	2002	2003
8 February	15 million	40 million
9 February	14.4 million	41 million
10 February	13.2million	45 million

Source: Min Dahong (2003).

Other messages satirized politicians or parodied the national anthem. One popular message was a poignant reminder of the fear caused by the SARS outbreak and the lack of plausible information that was available about it.

*We realize the value of breathing freely when facing SARS;
We realize the value of true faces when separated by masks;
We show the value of our friendship in thinking of each other at times of extremity. (Haiqing Yu, 2004: 36)*

As Haiqing Yu points out, by resending these SMS messages ordinary Chinese citizens were able to comment on their situation even if they were denied public information or debate. He points to a difference in the SMS messages in circulation before 20 April 2003, when the government were uncommunicative about SARS and afterwards when it became clear that the government had been concealing the extent of the SARS outbreak (p. 34). The SMS message came to have a value in providing an outlet for discontent and concern, and ironically became a method for ordinary people armed with a mobile phone to give each other more details than the official lines of communication and express their dismay and disapproval of their government. This seems a clear example of the use of the mobile phone enhancing a discourse taking place within the public sphere.

Hong Kong is a part of the People's Republic of China, but retains considerable autonomy. It has one of the highest global mobile phone penetrations at around 86 percent of the population, with many people owning more than one phone ('Hong Kong Pursues Affair with the Mobile', 2004). The authorities may ask or require the service providers to carry an SMS, which goes out to all their local users. On the 1 April, the Hong Kong authorities sent out a blanket SMS message to all mobile phone users in an attempt to allay people's fears following an internet posting by a teenager, which mocked-up a newspaper website and apparently reported that Hong Kong was to be declared an infected area.⁴

Director of Health announced at 3 pm (HKT, 05.00 UTC) today there is no plan to declare Hong Kong as an infected area. (Perrone, 2003)

The boy was arrested, despite a WHO press conference also on 1 April at 2.15pm CEST (12.15 UTC, i.e. 7 hours later) in Geneva in which it was clarified that Hong Kong was an 'affected' area, but which, following discussion, drew short of saying that it was an 'infected' area (WHO, 1 April 2003).

Given the subsequent spread of SARS, it must be suggested that the incidence was likely to be higher than was reported. It seems probable that documentation by the Chinese government concerning SARS after 20 April 2003 is generally accurate and before that date the information is questionable. Despite the high use of mobile phones and internet amongst the Chinese population, the government was at first successful in concealing and understating news of SARS to the outside world and many of their own citizens. However, the population of China makes up about one third of the global population. How did information about SARS stay outside the international public sphere for so long?

The Chinese government has a censorship policy known as the Golden Shield. Since 2003, efforts have been made to increase their control on personal communications

under this policy. Internet sites deemed to be unpatriotic or threatening to the government are removed within about one hour of being placed. There are also over 2800 centres to monitor the content of SMS messages across China. Personal communications concerning topics deemed antisocial in some way are not allowed to proceed (Erping Zhang, 2003). Amnesty International has documented a number of cases where Chinese citizens have been imprisoned for placing material on the internet or using their SMS to pass on information (Amnesty International, 2004). Rather than the mobile phone opening the public sphere in China and acting as a liberating force for the Chinese people, their government has restricted modern communications for their people and, in the case of Hong Kong, which used the mobile phone to state an official view, it has endeavoured to use the SMS to give a primary definition of a situation.

The Sumatra-Andaman Tsunami

On 26 December 2004, at 00.58.53.4 UTC, seismologists around the world recorded a massive earthquake of magnitude 9. The epicentre was close to the Indonesian island of Sumatra along the fault of the Eurasian and Australasian ocean plates. It was caused by the Eurasian plate being forced under the Australasian plate and lasted about 8 minutes. The plate suffered an upward thrust of approximately 10 metres, which caused a large surge of sea water to travel at around 500 miles an hour outwards from the epicentre.⁵ The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre, PTWC, issued a bulletin at 01.14 UTC noting the earthquake and stating that there was no tsunami threat to coastlines in the Pacific Rim. This message was sent by SMS text message to members of the Tsunami Warning System, which included Indonesia and Thailand.⁶ But at 02.04 UTC, the PTWC revised its bulletin and warned that there may be tsunami near to the epicentre. The PTWC in Hawaii did not have tsunami warning buoys in the Indian Ocean so were only able to offer conjecture (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [NOAA], 2004). In fact, at 01.15 UTC the waves had already started to hit the coasts of the islands of Sumatra (part of Indonesia) and Nicobar (part of India). The waves spread to Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, the Maldives and east Africa, reaching heights of nearly 35 metres. The fatalities are now numbered at 297,248; more people died than in any other tsunami in recorded history (NOAA, 2007).

The Sumatra-Andaman tsunami has been described as a communications disaster. Those who understood what was happening had no method to alert relevant authorities, they literally did not have their phone numbers. It might also be speculated that since it was a public holiday in many parts of the world and that the communication took place over several time zones (Christmas Day afternoon in Hawaii and the early hours of Boxing Day in the south-east Asian holiday resorts) notification of the imminent disaster was possibly at its weakest.

Earthquakes occur weekly in the Indian Ocean and tsunami several times a year. In 2004, Indonesia had already had 12 earthquakes over magnitude 5 and two earlier tsunami (NOAA, 2007). Within the affected countries and those close by, there were systems for alerting officials. Indian government officials in the disaster management division were sent SMS texts to alert them to the earthquake approximately 30 minutes afterwards (01.30 UTC) ('SMS & Scurry for Ministers', 2004). In Singapore, the broadcast media covered the earthquake in its morning programmes, and in at least one case an

individual phoned his home village in south-eastern India and alerted the inhabitants (Gopu et al., 2004).

Ironically, although modern communications may have been poor, a geological event may never have been so well documented. Mobile phones were utilized in a number of ways: for photography, phoning or texting home and also locating survivors. Robinson and Robison suggest that this is a dramatic instance of citizen journalism and we have an extraordinary account of a natural event, particularly the visual images of the tsunami itself.⁷ News may be spread via mobile phone audio reports and pictures without the gatekeeping or editorship of corporate news media, in particular if the reports and images are downloaded onto an internet 'blog' (Robinson and Robison, 2006: 85–103), although many of the first pictures in the media were from 'mobicams' and other amateur sources.

What is interesting about the use of mobile phones in this case is what did not happen. There were alerts, but they were not orchestrated. Individuals may have told others what was happening, but this relied on them knowing a person to contact in a threatened area. This could be deemed evidence of them setting the news agenda, but there are few substantiated cases. There was almost two hours between the earthquake at 00.59 UTC and the tsunami reaching Sri Lanka, India and Thailand at around 02.45 UTC; there was six hours between the earthquake and the tsunami reaching east Africa at about 07.00 UTC. By then, at 05.12 UTC, the press agency Reuters had the story on their internet wire service and at 06.52 UTC the BBC were carrying a report filed by Roland Buerk, who was on holiday in Sri Lanka (Buerk, 2004).

Subsequently, mobile phones were used extensively to make contact with survivors and try and discover who had not survived. In Sri Lanka, mobile phone service carriers used their records of 10,252 roaming mobile phones in their transmitters' guest books. SMS messages were sent to all the handsets with a number to contact for help. Following the tsunami, only 4269 handsets of those registered made one or more calls ('Asian Carriers Mobilize after Quake, Tsunami Disaster', 2004).

Other service providers from Ireland, Italy and Sweden sent SMS messages to their nationals urging them to get in touch with embassies or giving details of how they could arrange evacuation. Many countries' providers waived charges to allow their nationals in the affected areas to contact their families and receive calls and messages.

It was found that text messaging was more effective than landlines or voice calls. In some areas, landline communications were out of service and voice calls use more bandwidth than texts. This means that at a congested time, a short text message may get through when a voice call cannot be connected. However, another problem that was recognized was that some of the third-world countries involved had leapfrogged the wired technology and this also posed risks. Hardwired systems are generally more reliable during a critical time (Rash, 2004).

Whereas the SARS outbreak developed and became apparent to the global population over several months, the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami was a disaster that was quickly apparent to those involved and the outside world. It was also predictable; the scale was unusual but not the event. However, there was inadequate communication with those who were most at risk once the tsunami had started its journey across the Indian Ocean. There were only about eight minutes between the end of the earthquake and the first waves hitting northern Sumatra and the Nicobar Islands. The more distant areas, such as Thailand, India and Sri Lanka had over an hour to prepare. For countries even further

afield, such as the Maldives and east Africa, which did not receive any waves for 3–6 hours, it seems inexplicable why so few official or unofficial warnings were given. There is evidence of family members phoning and warning their relatives and friends. Where the warning came from the east, for example from Singapore to India, it is clear how the information was received and passed on. But warnings from the west were more unexpected. In one case, a mother in the UK phoned her son's mobile on a dive boat in Thailand (i.e. west to east) to check he was safe and tell him what was going on. Following her call, the boat returned to find its home port destroyed.⁸

London Bombings

At 07.21 (BST, 06.21UTC) on 7 July 2005, four young men set off from Luton railway station in the UK, to cause death and harm to others in a premeditated attack on fellow citizens of their own country. At 08.50 BST, three of them detonated bombs on London underground trains and at 09.47 BST, the fourth detonated a bomb on a double-decker bus. The four bombers all died in the attack along with 52 others. Around 700 more people were injured.

The London Metropolitan police later confirmed that this was a terrorist attack by suicide bombers. The men responsible had left identification and the police were easily able to find the house where the bombs were made in Leeds and their hire car, and, via CCTV, they tracked the final movements of the bombers (The Stationery Office [TSO], 2006).

The London bombings on the underground and bus took place over approximately a one-hour period in the centre of London during the morning rush hour, and news media were able to arrive on the scene very rapidly. However, those involved or nearby were already giving dynamic and direct accounts from their mobile phones. They also called or texted family, friends and work places to reassure them. Photographs were taken within seconds of the events; for example, one photograph of the bus shows the surviving passengers still standing on the upper deck. Other dramatic images taken by survivors include finding an exit along a dark underground tunnel. What the pictures lack in photographic expertise they make up for in immediacy and poignancy. They are a potent documentation of the few critical hours of that morning. The media and press asked for eyewitnesses to come forward and used images taken on mobile phones to supplement – and in their terms ‘enhance’ – their coverage of the event. Thus many more images came into public awareness than might otherwise have been the case.

However, these images and videos sent to media organizations were then subject to the editorial process. For example, research has easily found images of the bombed bus from the left, right and the front. Images of the back of the bus in the seconds following the explosion were not found, although anecdotal research indicates that these images exist. The bomber was sitting on the top deck of the London double-decker bus at the rear. Reason suggests they are more distressful and disturbing than what the media wishes to display. The police and security services also asked members of the public to contribute images to the investigation that followed, and many did so.

Like the south-east Asian tsunami, many people were able to use mobile phones to communicate with their family and friends and reassure them that they were safe. Voice calls rose by 67 percent and there was a 20 percent increase in text messages across

the country (Sutton, 2005) although, as with other major incidents, this meant that the mobile networks became jammed. In the Aldgate area of the city, the police took the decision to ask to close the O2 network to the public via the system of Access Overload Control or ACCOLC. This is a system whereby mobile telephone service providers can limit access to their respective networks in a cell and permit emergency services, local authorities and other users with specially enabled telephones to have exclusive access to available channels. This was because their own communications were failing and in particular those of the ambulance service and senior personnel who were reliant on their own mobile phones to communicate with each other. Once the networks were congested, these lines of communications became unworkable (Barnes, 2006: 142). The London Assembly Report strongly indicates the need for improved communications between the emergency services with each other and the transport authorities with their crews and passengers (pp. 55–7).⁹

In both the other case studies, there was a reluctance or inability for the authorities who had any knowledge of what was happening to inform the public. Mobile phones were relied on to exchange information as there was little in the public domain. In London, there was a much greater amount of information released, partly in an attempt to maintain order and also in an attempt to enlist the help and support of the media and, through the media, the general population. The Metropolitan Police have a policy of third-party management and this includes the establishment of a media area into the organization of an incident. In this case, the police gave a primary definition and the news agenda was being dictated by the event. The mainstream media used images and reports gleaned from eyewitnesses using their mobile phones, but these were then subject to the usual editorial processes (or gate-keeping). However, later some 'citizen journalists', who had captured the images, put reports in the public sphere via personal blogs.

Conclusion

In investigating the three case studies, it became clear that some of the conduct of the institutions and authorities was to the detriment of those involved: repression in China, inadequate communications in the countries hit by the tsunami and, to a certain degree, a lack of coordinated communications in London. Mobile phone technology amongst the general population may have helped ameliorate the effects of these situations by being able to provide contact via voice or SMS, or later to provide visual evidence. But to what extent did citizen journalists using their mobile phones influence the information and discourse within the public sphere? Would the public perception of these events have been different without the use of mobile phones?

The information, poetry and jokes that were spread by SMS and mobile calls during the SARS outbreak may have contributed to discourse within the public sphere and given a feeling of empowerment to the population. But the Chinese were also susceptible to inaccurate information as there was no credible official information to use as a comparison. The Chinese authorities were successful in setting the news agenda by stemming information about SARS for some months. They may also have felt threatened by the new technologies. Since the SARS outbreak, the Chinese Golden Shield has been further refined into an extensive, modern and sophisticated system of electronic surveillance and

ensorship (Human Rights Watch, 2006). Those caught attempting or succeeding in finding a way around it are treated brutally. Consequently, it is unlikely that the Chinese people can contribute much to their public sphere by citizen journalism, via mobile phone or other new technologies, except at great personal risk.

Following the 2005 tsunami, warning buoys have been placed in the Indian Ocean and systems such as alarms, broadcasts and SMS messages have supposedly been put in place to alert those living in the areas predicted to be at risk. However, on 17 July 2006, a tsunami followed an earthquake by 45 minutes, the Indonesian authorities gave no warnings and 339 Indonesians were killed (NOAA, 2007). This was despite being sent alerts by the PTWC and the Japanese Meteorological Agency. It appears that the authorities are wary of giving tsunami alerts as they feel it is bad for tourism and they do not want to give false alarms. There have been instances in Japan where, following a tsunami warning, people will go down to the beach to watch it rather than stay away. Several mobile phone companies have set up tsunami SMS alerts for their customers so that individuals can decide themselves whether to vacate the area or get out their mobcams!

The use of mobile phones following the tsunami and London bombings to call or text family and friends and reassure them of the caller's safety is an obvious use. A more unusual use was texting instructions to those travelling in the southern Asian area, registered by their mobile provider as 'roaming'. This helped to track survivors and identified possible fatalities. The dramatic pictures of both the tsunami and the immediate aftermath of the bombs taken on mobile phones were extraordinary images of situations not previously documented in such a way. These images helped to set the news agenda but once given to conventional media outlets were subject to editorial processes. The images of the tsunami in particular may also have helped to heighten awareness of the victims' plight and prompted the monetary aid that came in to the affected areas, much of it via mobile phone SMS numbers.

However, some of the pictures taken of both the tsunami and the London bombings may be considered voyeuristic and distasteful. A few such images are on various internet 'blogs' and could be termed citizen journalism. On 7 July 2004, the public's mobile phone pictures gave almost instant visual documentation and added to the public awareness and discussion surrounding the London bombs. Less well documented is the suspension of the mobile network in order for the emergency services to take over the network for their own use as happened at Aldgate. This was the first time ACCOLC was used in the UK and it is an indication of the weight that the authorities can have with a commercial company such as O2. What is possibly more surprising is that the system used by the Hong Kong authorities to send a blanket SMS in a given cell to clear the area or provide an evacuation route was not also used (Murphy, 2006).

The original hypothesis of this article was that the mobile phone may be challenging conventional and official sources of information, that the use of mobile phone technology in critical situations would be beneficial to the public sphere and that mobile phone usage might influence the primary definitions of news, news agendas and news gatekeepers. There was some indication of this but less than might be expected. Mobile users in Guangdong province did use their phones to enhance their local public sphere. During the period of the tsunami, the use of mobiles was limited but subsequently they became part of the rescue efforts. Users caught up in both the Sumatra-Andaman

tsunami and London bombings provided compelling images and accounts and these were taken advantage of by official media and news sources and incorporated into the mediated accounts, as well as personal blogs. Further study might compare news coverage of a critical event that predates mobile phone usage to examine the degree that news now relies on mobile phone technology.

Notes

- 1 I must give credit for the inspiration of this paper and some of the initial research to my Masters students. I would have liked to have credited them but, ironically, by the end of my research, I felt that to do so would endanger them.
- 2 According to the WHO, Hong Kong, with a population of 7 million, suffered from 1755 cases of SARS between 15 February and 31 May 2003, of which 299 were fatal (17%). According to Chinese sources, Beijing, another crowded city with a population of 13 million, had 2521 cases, of which 193 were fatal (7.6%) (*The China Daily*, 2007).
- 3 For the Chinese language sources, I am indebted to my Chinese students
- 4 I have attempted to trace reports and websites that are referred to in other reports and articles. However, the Chinese authorities removed or censored internet sites which they deemed harmful, so I have had to rely on verification by reporting on several differing sites.
- 5 There are a number of excellent descriptions of the principles of tsunamis generally and the Sumatra-Andaman tsunami of 26 December 2004. For a particularly good one, see Cummins and Leonard (2005).
- 6 Member States of the International Coordination Group for the Tsunami Warning System: Australia, Canada, Chile, China, Columbia, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Ecuador, El Salvador, Fiji, France, Guatemala, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Samoa, Singapore, Thailand, United States of America. URL (accessed 5 January 2007): http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/brochures/twsp_brochure_jan05.pdf
- 7 The images taken by mobile phone users of the tsunami and the London bombings are available on the internet on personal blog pages and also on media organization websites such as the BBC.
- 8 A diver who had been on the boat personally recounted this story to me.
- 9 At the time of the bombings, the 'Airwaves' system of communication was not operational in the north London area. This is a digital service that will allow all the emergency services to contact each other. It is not reliant on the public frequencies and is encrypted. It is currently being implemented.

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