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# Cellphones Become the World’s Eyes and Ears on Protests

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For some of the protesters facing Bahrain’s heavily armed security forces in and around Pearl Square in Manama, the most powerful weapon against shotguns and tear gas has been the tiny camera inside their cellphones.

By uploading [images of this week’s violence](#) in Manama, the capital, to Web sites like YouTube and [yFrog](#), and then sharing them on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), the protesters upstaged government accounts and drew worldwide attention to their demands.

A novelty less than a decade ago, the cellphone camera has become a vital tool to document the government response to the unrest that has spread through the Middle East and North Africa.

Recognizing the power of such documentation, human rights groups have published guides and provided training on how to use cellphone cameras effectively.

“You finally have a video technology that can fit into the palm of one person’s hand, and what the person can capture can end up around the world,” said [James E. Katz](#), director of the [Rutgers Center for Mobile Communication Studies](#). “This is the dagger at the throat of the creaky old regimes that, through the manipulation of these old centralized technologies, have been able to smother the public’s voice.”

In [Tunisia](#), cellphones were used to capture [video images of the first protests in Sidi Bouzid](#) in December, which helped spread unrest to other parts of the country. The uploaded images also prompted producers at [Al Jazeera](#), the satellite television network, to begin focusing on the revolt, which toppled the Tunisian government in mid-January and set the stage for the demonstrations in Egypt.

While built-in cameras have been commercially available in cellphones since the late 1990s, it was not until [the tsunami that struck southeast Asia on Dec. 26, 2004](#), and the [London subway bombings](#) the following July that news organizations began to take serious note of the outpouring of images and videos created and posted by nonprofessionals. Memorably, in June 2009, cellphone videos of [the shooting death of a young woman in Tehran known as Nedawere](#) uploaded on YouTube, galvanizing the Iranian opposition and rocketing around the world.

Now, news organizations regularly seek out, sift and publish such images. Authenticating them remains a challenge, since photos can be easily altered by computers and old videos can resurface again, purporting to be new. YouTube is using [Storyful](#), a news aggregation site, to help manage the tens of thousands of videos that have been uploaded from the Middle East in recent weeks and to highlight notable ones on the [CitizenTube channel](#).

But journalists are not the only conduits. Cellphone images are increasingly being shared between users on mobile networks and social networking sites, and they are being broadly consumed on Web sites that aggregate video and images.

The hosting Web sites have reported increases both in submissions from the Middle East and in visitors viewing the content.

Among the sites, [Bambuser](#) has stood out as a way to stream video. Mans Adler, the site’s co-founder, said it had 15,000 registered users in Egypt, most of whom signed up just before last November’s election. He said there were more than 10,000 videos on the site that were produced around the time of the election, focusing on activity at the polls, in what appeared to be an organized effort.

Afterward, the level of activity settled down to 800 to 2,000 videos a day, but then soared back to 10,000 a day again when the mass protests erupted in Egypt last month, he said.

In Bahrain, the government has blocked access to Bambuser.

At training sessions to help activists use their cameras, Bassem Samir, the executive director of the [Egyptian Democratic Academy](#), said that improving the quality of the images and video was a high priority.

“Videos are stories,” said Mr. Samir. “What happened on the 25th and 28th of January, it’s a story. It’s like a story of people who were asking for freedom and democracy, and we had, like, five or three minutes to tell it.”

*Robert Mackey contributed reporting.*