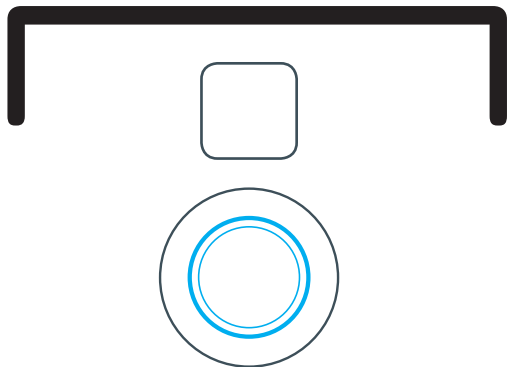
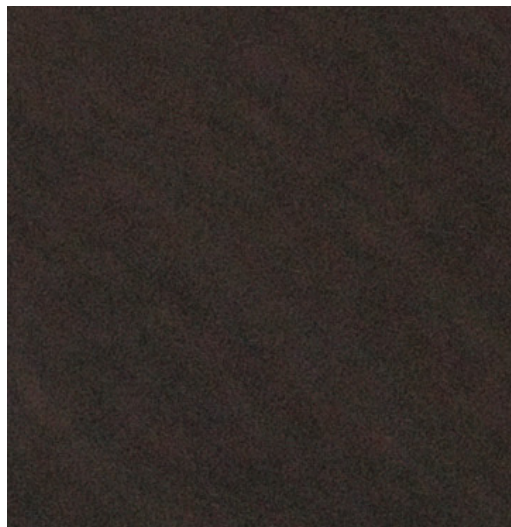


# THE NEW MEDIA VIGILANTES



WHY EVERY CELL-PHONE-TOTING MAN-ON-THE-STREET HAS BIG MEDIA RUNNING SCARED.





BY MATT HENDRICKSON

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HEN HE AWOKE AT NINE ON THAT awful April morning, Jamal Albarghouti's only concern was getting to a ten o'clock meeting with his adviser to discuss his civil-engineering thesis. Albarghouti, 24, drove to the Virginia Tech campus. He had begun walking briskly toward his adviser's office when he heard an older man, maybe a professor,

screaming "Get back! Get back!" And then he watched police officers running toward Norris Hall, about a hundred feet away. As the sound of gunshots pierced the air, he held up his cell phone.

For 76 heart-stopping seconds, Albarghouti recorded video of police with rifles approaching Norris Hall and the sound of gunfire as fellow student Seung-Hui Cho was carrying out a massacre that would end the lives of 33 people, including his own. "Usually, I'm the guy who wishes he had been filming something after the fact," Albarghouti says. "But this was different." After dashing into a lounge and imploring students to stay inside, Albarghouti ran to his car and sped home, where he played his video for his roommates. At 10:23 A.M., he sent the clip to I-Reports, a user-generated-video service on CNN's website. Ten minutes later, the network contacted him and locked him in to an exclusive agreement, and within three hours the clip had racked up 900,000 hits on the site and was playing repeatedly on TV.

Suddenly, Albarghouti had stepped from the line of fire into the glare of the 24-hour media cycle. He'd become a high-profile citizen journalist: a practitioner of the run-and-gun media genre that's revolutionizing how news organizations gather and report information. Until recently, it was rare that amateur footage of a news event could mesmerize the nation, as it did when Abraham Zapruder accidentally filmed the JFK assassination in 1963, and when George Holliday caught four LAPD cops on video clobbering Rodney King in 1991. But Albarghouti's video further blurred any distinction between a seasoned reporter and a guy with a cell phone. Now that anybody can point, click, upload, blog, and publish, passive media consumers are vanishing.

And as young men like Albarghouti put themselves in harm's way to get a good story on video, media organizations seem caught off-guard. "The way that the audience can talk back has everyone in the industry spooked," says Jack Shafer, media columnist and edi-

tor-at-large at *Slate*. "Readers can immediately evaluate the work of journalists, and that's a great force for good."

Citizen journalism is fueled in part by a disaffection with corporate-funded, often risk-averse news. "There's some major shit going on in this world, and mainstream media, time and time again, has failed to deliver," says Shane Smith, cofounder of VBS.TV, a new broadband video channel.

Smith, who has reported for VBS in Colombia and Sudan, may sound like the antithesis of polished anchors like CNN's Anderson Cooper. But Cooper himself was once a citizen journalist: an independent freelancer roaming Africa and Asia with a video camera. Cooper's unscripted, teary excoriation in 2005 of U.S. senator Mary L. Landrieu after Hurricane Katrina recalled his youthful passions. "The reaction to what Anderson did made us more comfortable with the idea of citizen journalism," says Jon Klein, president of CNN U.S. "We're more cognizant of the audience, and it's made us aware that there are so many more sources of information and ways of presenting it."

IF ANDERSON COOPER'S AUTHORITY REPRESENTS THE REWARDS OF citizen journalism, then Brad Will's death last fall in Mexico represents its perils. Will was one of nine journalists killed in that country last year; only Iraq had more fatalities in the field. In the spring of 2006, violent protests against the governor of the southern state of Oaxaca gripped its capital, Ciudad de Oaxaca. Up in New York, Will, a 36-year-old anti-globalization crusader and steel-nerved activist, monitored the clashes via Internet radio.

Last September, Will flew to Oaxaca to cover the conflict for Indy-media, a left-leaning alternative news association, and to help man the barricades against the government. On October 27, he went to Santa Lucia, a poor neighborhood where protesters were defending a barricade outside a radio station. Under a blazing sun, Will conducted interviews and shot his final video. In the footage, his camera pans dusty streets and focuses on gunmen and rock-throwing protesters. Gunshots are audible. The angle shifts several times before he crouches, then stands again and creeps forward for a better angle. Then there's a shot, and a howl.

Protesters carried Will through the streets. A car stopped to take him to the hospital but ran out of gas. Then a truck picked him up. But his chest wound was too severe, and he died four blocks from the hospital.

## FOR 76 HEART-STOPPING SECONDS, ALBARGHOUTI HALL AND THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE AS FELLOW STUDENT



PHOTOGRAPHS: PREVIOUS PAGE, BY MICHAEL NAGEL/REDUX. THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE, COURTESY OF CNN/I-REPORT.

Citizen journalism is predominantly the domain of young men endowed with more wit than wisdom—and strapped news organizations increasingly yield the front lines to unknown, unpaid reporters like Will, who lack their professional peers' funding, security, and political connections.

News organizations like CNN stand to gain the most from this lopsided relationship: The network is content to receive unsolicited news footage of dangerous events from viewers without assuming any responsibility for their conduct—or their safety. (Albarghouti has been loyal to CNN since he was a boy in the United Arab Emirates. “When it came time to upload my footage,” he says, “they were the only people I thought of.”) At the same time, America's largest newspaper publisher, Gannett, is transforming more than 90 newsrooms into “information centers” where readers can send amateur footage to reporters and editors.

Before the Virginia Tech video, I-Reports most often dealt with footage along the lines of turtles chasing cats; since then, CNN has received far more footage of fires and tornadoes. “This isn't *America's Funniest Home Videos* anymore,” one CNN representative says.

One warm night in March, when a gunman in Manhattan's Greenwich Village murdered a pizza-parlor employee and two unarmed auxiliary officers before he was shot to death by police, a neighborhood resident with the apt *nom de blog* Ace Cowboy posted the first images. Soon he was fielding calls from Fox News and MSNBC. “Mainstream media is quick to decry the legitimacy of the blogosphere as child's play—until they need footage or eyewitness accounts,” says Ace (who says he's a freelancer at a major network he won't name). “They think we're a bunch of people holed up in Mom's basement. We're not voyeurs. We're doing real journalism.”

**BUT DOING REAL REPORTING WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF MAJOR NEWS organizations makes every citizen journalist an ace cowboy. After the kidnappings of Daniel Pearl of the *Wall Street Journal* in Pakistan in 2002 and Jill Carroll of the *Christian Science Monitor* in Iraq last year, their bosses feverishly orchestrated media coverage and backroom diplomacy. (Pearl was executed; Carroll was eventually released.) In March, Italy released five captured Taliban fighters in exchange for the release of a newspaper reporter (whose Afghan translator was killed after the handover). And in April, a month after BBC News reporter Alan Johnston was kidnapped in Gaza, his employer cam-**

aigned for his release with coordinated news conferences (covered by the Associated Press), including one in Gaza City, where 200 Palestinian journalists rallied in his support. He was released in July.

There's a yawning gulf between the response to Johnston's abduction, which became an international incident, and Brad Will's death. Volunteer journalists are on their own—they report freely, but without any security. Consider Josh Wolf, a 25-year-old San Francisco blogger who emerged in April from more than seven months behind bars after he refused to hand over his footage of a G8 Summit protest. It's hard to imagine the *San Francisco Chronicle*, say, letting a staff reporter languish in jail for months.

“It's a double-edged sword,” says Tala Dowlatshahi, New York director for the advocacy group Reporters Without Borders. “Independent journalists do have a bit more leeway, but because of that, they're not protected. You want to be able to talk about these human-interest stories that are real, but you're out there alone. Like a Brad Will.”

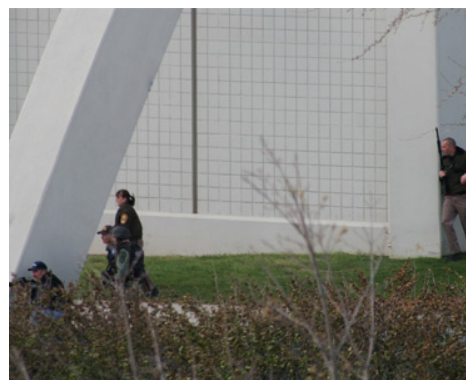
“If Brad wants to go to Oaxaca, Brad's going to Oaxaca,” says Amy Wolf of Indymedia's New York City branch. “We don't provide any guidance. But maybe we should.”

**BRAD WILL WON'T BE THE LAST CITIZEN JOURNALIST TO DIE IN THE LINE of self-appointed duty—not so long as TV networks remain complicit, says Dan Gillmor, director of the Center for Citizen Media, a nonprofit grassroots-media initiative affiliated with Harvard Law School and the University of California, Berkeley. “The traditional media has been encouraging this in ways that I think are irresponsible,” says Gillmor. “When we reward people for the best close-up video of the tornado, what's the message? At the same time, the people who can tell us the most about what's going on are the people who live there, not the people who go parachuting in.”**

Good journalism isn't about strapping on a parachute. “Often, the best reporting comes from talking to people coming away from the scene, rather than at the scene itself,” says Anthony Shadid, a Pulitzer Prize-winning war reporter at the *Washington Post*. “The story is about giving voices to the people you're covering, not about taking crazy risks.”

For Jamal Albarghouti, one crazy risk on the Virginia Tech campus was plenty. “I think citizen journalism is an important component of the future of news coverage,” he says. “But not for me. I'm done.” ■

## RECORDED VIDEO OF POLICE WITH RIFLES APPROACHING NORRIS SEUNG-HUI CHO CARRIED OUT A MASSACRE.



**STUDENT FILM:** The first images of April's Virginia Tech massacre were submitted to CNN's I-Report site by students. Within three hours, one piece of the footage racked up more than 900,000 hits.