

CITIZEN JOURNALISTS: PROPANE BLAST

Everything's on fire, run for your cameras!

SARAH BOESVELD

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At 3:40 a.m. last Sunday, Carmine Riossi Jr. was asleep in his North York home when a tremendous rumble blew open the attic door from the ceiling in his room. He ran downstairs and felt another rumble ripple through his body.

"That's when I was in my mood already, 'I have to take some video of what's going on,' " the 19-year-old said from his home on Sunray Crescent, two blocks away from the Sunrise Propane plant at Keele Street and Wilson Avenue.

With no time to fish around for his camcorder, Mr. Riossi grabbed his Sony Ericsson cellphone and ran out with his father, Carmine Riossi Sr.

He got so close he could feel the heat, he said, eyes wide as he recounted details of the explosion he carefully documented on his phone and posted on YouTube within the hour.

The second that Sunrise Propane exploded into a mushroom cloud, a million thoughts ran through the minds of people like Mr. Riossi. An earthquake. A plane crash. A terrorist's bomb. Followed by: A YouTube moment.

Many grabbed cameras and cells, hustling to post within minutes of the blast. By the end of the day Sunday, at least 31 YouTube videos were searchable under the terms "Toronto propane explosion."

The same search Thursday morning yielded 372. Call it simultaneous combustion.

The epic event is possibly one of the first times Torontonians whipped out personal recording technology en masse to document history in the making. Since footage of the crumbling World Trade Center buildings, Rodney King and the London and Madrid train bombings appeared online, more and more citizen journalists are capturing images of breaking news and posting swiftly, sometimes before media arrives on scene.

News of the blast ripped through the online world and became an international story, mostly thanks to the first few YouTube posts, says media expert Greg Elmer.

When the Bell Globemedia research chair at Ryerson University learned about the explosion on CNN.com in his Amsterdam hotel room, then couldn't find coverage on Canadian media websites, he went straight to YouTube, where he found raw video clips.

"In the absence of mainstream media representations of the stories, I think an online 'conversation' of sorts occurred with various people in the neighbourhood doing as I did," Mr. Elmer wrote in an e-mail to The Globe and Mail. "Then a viral effect occurred where other 'YouTubers' started to respond to other videos with their own video coverage from increasingly closer and interestingly more higher resolution."

Never before has there been such an immediate online-video response to an event in Toronto, he says, not even in 2005 when Air France Flight 358 went down at Pearson Airport.

For Mr. Riossi Jr., it was about the exclusivity of being, as he says, first to film the fiery blast. "I was there before any of the camera crews and before the cops arrived," he said, beaming in his Juventus soccer jersey, his dark curly hair gelled back.

"It was like an accomplishment, that I was there taking video, making people see it."

Though his YouTube video, titled 80 METERS AWAY FROM HUGE EXPLOSION AT KEELE AND WILSON, wasn't the first posted, the pixelated, blurry orange plumes tell the story well. The alarming proximity of the belching flames makes the video dramatic and compelling.

It was a turning point for citizen journalism in Toronto, says Bob McLaughlin, vice-president of breaking news channel CP24. Sunday was the busiest day ever for the station and coverage wouldn't have been as intensive if not for Torontonians' submissions, he says.

"The very best video shots of the explosions and subsequent fires came from viewers," Mr. McLaughlin says. "They didn't come from the camera people at news organizations."

By the end of the day Sunday, CP24 had received about 800 e-mails and hundreds of phone calls. Just after the explosions, the news station got four or five e-mails a minute. More than 200 viewers offered photos or video. Many stopped by the station in person to offer their footage or approached camera operators on scene.

"We never said 'send us.' It just started to happen, the floodgate opened," Mr. McLaughlin said. The contributions fit with the station's marketed image as an interactive breaking-news channel.

"You have two million people out there providing you input and providing you feedback. Obviously your coverage is going to be that much better," he said.

Some of the appeal for posters is the instant cyber micro-celebrity status. Doug Powless, 50 - a systems analyst for the federal government - was channel surfing at 3:40 a.m. Sunday with his 15-year-old cat Muffin purring on his lap, when he saw a burst of flame through the window of his 14th-floor apartment at Bathurst Street and Sheppard Avenue West. He grabbed his digital handheld Casio camera and shot footage of the mushroom cloud that he raced to post online.

He tried submitting footage to CP24. After the too-large video file failed to load, he posted it on YouTube instead. He says he's never filmed any newsworthy events before. On Wednesday, he was excited to see his video had been viewed thousands of times.

"Last time I checked there were, like, 23,000 views," he said with a smile.

Others thought shooting a video might land them a bit of cash. Dennis Tesic felt the explosion from his home at Keele Street and Sheppard Avenue and immediately grabbed his Sony Cybershot DSC5 - though he doesn't remember doing so. He headed off on his bike in the direction of the flames.

"My initial idea was to go and possibly help. Also, I had the idea I could do a video and make a little money," the 40-year-old computer-systems analyst said.

CP24 supervising web producer Perry St. Germain said only one person asked to be paid. "These people have a really great need to share their videos, their photos and their stories, and they picked us. They could've shared them on YouTube and they don't get paid for that," he said.

Ultimately, in the race to post first, Saejin Oh came out on top, with a six-minute video on

YouTube - just a clip out of the 15 to 20 minutes he captured.

The 24-year-old web artist was surfing the Internet at his Sentinel and Finch area apartment. "It sounded like a anti-air cannon discharging from a distance, like one you hear in those war zone reports," he wrote in an e-mail.

It was the first time he'd used the Canon Digital IXUS 65 he bought in Korea to capture any newsworthy events. By Thursday morning, Mr. Oh's explosion footage had been viewed 451,149 times. "I was beginning to think I wasted my money on this camera."