through darkened tunnels, blood-splattered buildings, faces marked by soot, blood and fear. At the same time, websites such as mobile.volvosafari.com – a forum for sharing camera images – were inundated with pictures that were picked up by media all over the world. The fact that the images were blurry and in some cases almost indiscernible amounted little. With news crews unable to access the underground devastation, the commuters’ camera images provided the few pictures of the nightmarish scene.

Welcome to the camera phone revolution. Nearly five years after Sharp introduced the first camera-equipped mobile phone, the technology has proliferated with breathtaking speed. In Australia, for example, mobile operators Telstra and Optus offer camera phones, and Telstra alone has sold more than a million camera-equipped mobiles. A Wholefoods market in London, whose initial 1,000 customers are expected to sell a further 10,000 phones, will offer a 50% discount on a Nokia phone with a rudimentary video function.

In Australia, 316,000 camphones were sold in one month alone, and the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association predicts that of the seven to eight million new mobile handsets expected to be sold here this year, full-colour phones will have an inbuilt camera, ready to snap and send.

‘There’s something frightening about being able to cap- ture images in an emergency where you wouldn’t otherwise be carrying a camera’, says Tana Leaver, a Perth blogger and associate lecturer in Communications Studies at the University of WA.

Indeed, our new seeming illnesses. Camphones have become so pervasive that what started out as a cure gimmick forsuring spontaneoussnaps has become a cultural phenomenon with profound implications for communications with professional implications for news media, law enforcement, business, interpersonal relationships and our human rights.

Take the plea by British police in the aftermath of the bombings for members of the public to email their camera images of the devastation to Scotland Yard to aid their investigations. Or the mobile victim in Nashville in the US who used his camphone to capture the_NET/ to catch the offender just 10 minutes later. Then there’s the British chef who whipped out his camphone to snap a poisonous spider that had just bit him, to help doctors to identify the right antivenin.

In Australia, vehicle owners have advanced motorters that are taking a look at camphone snaps at the scene of an accident could be useful in their insurance claim. Real estate agents increasingly send images of listed properties to prospective buyers over mobile network, while young fashionistas beam images of potential new outfits from store change rooms to their girlfriends for instant feedback: “Does my bum look big in this?”

‘The camera and the mobile phone are not divorce ties at your disposal. Media – that with something like a camera phone you’ve got a digital production studio in your pocket. Quite scary,”

The power and potential for abuse of camphones is enormous.

The problem was that a newspaper, which is some- thing with some journalistic credibility, picked up the story and that was enough to make the event public which it was in the first place.

The big catchcry is citizen journalism or citizen lynch mobs. The world’s largest mobile-phone manufacturer, Nokia, predicts that by the end of 2005 more than 100 million people will have a mobile with a rudimentary video function.

‘I wouldn’t want to be a celebrity in this day and age. The camera and the mobile phone are not divorce ties at your disposal. Media – that with something like a camera phone you’ve got a digital production studio in your pocket. Quite scary.”

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The world’s largest mobile-phone manufacturer, Nokia, predicts that by the end of 2005 more than 100 million people will have a mobile with a rudimentary video function.
It’s putting the power traditionally held by a limited number of people in the hands of many. It’s putting the power traditionally held by a limited number of people into the hands of many,” Mr Chadwick explains. And that raises a lot of issues.

While rules such as mobile phone cameras feature thousands of happy snaps of pets, weddings and family celebrations, there are many more grimy, voyeuristic images that may or may not have been taken without the subject’s knowledge or consent. It has led to many organisations taking a careful look at what they allow in their workplace.

Two years ago, the YMCA and the Royal Life Saving Society implemented a blanket ban on using mobile phones in change rooms at pools and sporting facilities around the country as a preventative measure. Some camera phones have banned all camera phones on their premises to stay off corporate espionage. Other companies are going even further.

“Instead of a preventive screening of images and they put out, ‘anyone who has any electronic devices has to leave it outside’ – we don’t have the time to check what it can do and it’s just easier for everyone involved,” Mr Leaver says. “There’s a blanket ban that will be necessary from a privacy point of view for a while.”

"Privacy is as much about people’s respect for each other and their behaviour as it is about law. And on the other side of privacy issues, you need to balance the important considerations of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. It’s a delicate balance.”

Mr Leaver also hesitates at the thought of greater legislation to deal with the potential problems.

“It’s (the camphone) definitely more of a good than a bad thing. But the negative consequences could be so dramatic that you want to think through them now,” he says. “We at least need to start the conversation (about laws). I am hesitant to say legislate. But we need to start critically thinking about these issues before it’s something we’ve faced with.

Some businesses still need to update our laws but still need to update our laws but not necessarily the way that they do it. You have to keep pace with advancing technologies.

“The (privacy) laws need strengthening laws or mandatory beeps (to alert people a picture is being taken) if you publish something on the net where you don’t have consent. But still there are grey areas, such as snapping people in public places, like pool change rooms.”

The next logical step in protecting our privacy seems to be to introduce more or stronger laws, but privacy watching Paul Chadwick says tougher laws are not necessarily the answer.

“It’s fairly common for technological developments to surpass the law,” he says. “But while it’s desirable for law-makers to look at whether legislation needs to be updated, it’s crucial that we continue to update our laws to keep up with new and emerging technology.” Mr Huls says. At present, there’s a patchwork of laws in different states to protect us from the worst intrusions.

However, the Federal Privacy Act applies only to the actions of government and corporations; there are some criminal laws that prohibit individuals using phones in a “menacing, harassing or offensive manner” and over 10 years ago, Victorian Privacy Commissioner Paul Chadwick recommended a national review of laws covering camphone technology. In August he issued a national discussion paper recommending legislative changes that would outline taking and posting offensive images on the net where the person photographed had a reasonable expectation of privacy.

The old rules are being swept aside because these new devices are so small and unobtrusive, people think they can get away with it.

The LAW AND CAMPHONES

Overseas governments are starting to tackle the negative fallout from the camera-phone phenomenon. Last year the US Congress passed the Video Interception Prevention Act, prohibiting the photographing of people naked or wearing underwear without their consent. Saudi Arabia has outlawed the sale and importation of camphones. In South Korea, the Government has ordered manufacturers to design phones that make a “beep” when they take a picture so subjects know about it. Australia, Victoria’s Attorney-General Rob Hulls, has issued a national discussion paper recommending legislative changes that would outline taking and posting offensive images on the net where the person photographed had a reasonable expectation of privacy.

“It’s crucial that we continue to update our laws to keep up with new and emerging technologies,” Mr Huls says. At present, there’s a patchwork of laws in different states to protect us from the worst intrusions.

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