From documenting history-making events to snapping celebrities at their worst, camera-phone technology has changed the way we view the world. Next month it will be five years since a phone could take pictures, but where will it end? JANE HUTCHINSON and SHERYL-LEE KERR report

Above, left: The scene following an explosion on a bus in London's Tavistock Square captured in this mobile phone camera image.
Above: The front page of London's *The Sun* featured a camphone photo of Prince Harry wearing a Nazi shirt at a fancy dress party.

The eye generation

THICK black smoke billowed into the darkened train carriage, obscuring all but the faintest silhouettes of the survivors who were frantically trying to find a way out. Then out of the gloom came a chilling cry: "Help me, help me." It was a compelling piece of footage, a shaky, grainy few seconds of vision and sound that gave millions of viewers around the world a glimpse of the carnage just minutes after terrorist bombs ripped through London's Underground.

But what made the footage extraordinary was that it was taken not by a professional news crew with thousands of dollars of equipment but by one of the survivors – a commuter who happened to have a mobile phone with a rudimentary video function.

He was not the only one. In the hours that followed the July 7 bombings, hundreds of camera-phone images snapped by survivors and passers-by flooded on to internet sites and into newsrooms around the globe.

Within 45 minutes of a suicide bomber blowing to pieces a bus in Tavistock Square, the BBC received the first image of the devastation snapped by a passer-by on a mobile phone seconds after the blast. An hour later, the image was on-air and online. By the end of the day, the station had received close to 1000 phone images revealing the terror first-hand: survivors evacuating through darkened tunnels; blood-spattered buildings; faces marked by soot, blood and fear. At the same time, websites such as moblog.co.uk – a forum for sharing camphone images – were inundated with pictures that were picked up by media all over the world.

The fact that the images were fuzzy and in some cases almost indiscernible mattered little. With news crews unable to access the underground devastation, the commuters' camphone images provided the few pictures of the nightmare.

Welcome to the camphone revolution. Nearly five years after Sharp introduced the first camera-equipped mobile phone to the market in November 2000, the technology has proliferated with breathtaking speed.

The world's largest mobile-phone manufacturer, Nokia, predicts that by the end of 2005 more than half a billion people will own a handset equipped with some sort of camera.

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, 60 per cent will have an in-built camera, many with video capabilities.

"There's something fantastic about being able to capture pictures in situations where you just wouldn't be carrying a camera," says Tama Leaver, a Perth blogger and associate lecturer in Communications Studies at the University of WA.

Indeed, their uses seem endless. Camphones have become so pervasive that what started out as a cute gimmick for sharing spontaneous snaps has become a cultural phenomenon with profound implications for news media, law enforcement, business, schools, 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 camphone images of the carnage direct to Scotland Yard to aid their investigations. Or the robbery victim in Nashville in the US who used his camphone to photograph the thief and his getaway vehicle enabling police 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 bitten him to help doctors to identify the right antivenene.

In Australia, vehicle insurers have advised motorists that taking a few 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 networks, 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?"

At this year's St Kilda Film Festival, more than 120 film-makers entered 90-second shorts shot on camphones for the Siemens MicroMovie Award.

But, as with most new technologies, as fast as new legitimate uses appear, so do new abuses.

"The most famous example was where mobile phones with camera capabilities were banned from gyms because people would walk in with them in their bags but were actually recording everything, and other people in gym change rooms," says Mr Leaver.

"The camera and the mobile phone are not divorceable technologies. Everything's in one piece and you have to rely on the ethics of the person who has the device to not use it in these ways."

Not everyone does act ethically. Earlier this year, a Sydney labourer was convicted of offensive behaviour in a public place for surreptitiously snapping topless women at Coogee beach with his camphone. The court fined him $500 and ordered his phone be destroyed.

In March, a group of students at Melbourne's Balwyn High School used their camphones to record an attack on a Year 11 boy – an apparent imitation of the growing British craze of "happy slapping", where attackers film assaults on strangers and then upload the images on the internet.

Of course, there's nothing particularly new about the mass ownership of photographic devices – affordable, portable, easy-to-use cameras have been a fixture in most suburban homes for decades. But what's extraordinary about the camphone phenomenon is not just the huge number now in circulation, but that we have them with us all the time.

"We find people still mostly take pictures of the big three – their children, their pets and their holidays," says Louise Ingram, communications manager at Nokia. "But the fact our mobile phone is always on hand makes it the ultimate snapshot tool."

Then there's the issue of camphones being used surreptitiously and the ease with which digital images can be beamed phone-to-phone via MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) or posted on the internet – the result is potent technology. Just ask Prince Harry who suffered global condemnation after he was snapped wearing Nazi regalia at a private fancy-dress party by a camphone-wielding guest, who then sold the damning images to *The Sun* for $17,400.

It's probably the most public example of the "snapperazzi" phenomenon, where ordinary people are becoming quasi-paparazzi to meet a growing demand for snaps of celebrities. One Melbourne newspaper promises free movie passes to readers who MMS images of "well-known faces out and about".

"I wouldn't want to be a celebrity in this day and age. There's this constant surveillance," says Andy Polaine, head of the school of media arts at the College of Fine Arts, University of NSW. "But the flip side is people may think twice about behaving badly if they think they're going to get snapped. This technology gives amazing power to ordinary people to watch those who normally control the media, such as politicians and corporations. But, of course, it can also be abused."

A case in New York of a subway flasher having his pictured plastered on the web by his victim and later run in a newspaper raised some serious issues about the power and potential for abuse of camphones. Mr Leaver was among the first bloggers (online diarists) to voice his concerns about the ramifications of that New York case. His documented unease at the potential for public web lynchings without applying the usual burdens of proof were picked up and reported in US newspapers.

"The biggest problem wasn't the fact it went up on the web. Everything up to this point was well within her rights, even though you could see the potential for abuse already," he says.

"The thing that was quite disturbing was that the New York *Daily News* ran the picture and it was one of the front page stories. So it's gone from something minor online – yes the flickr.com site was seen by 100,000 people before she took the photo down, but for something like that it's not inordinately large – to a front page story in a newspaper.

"For the moment at least, people are still wary about what's written online, thinking 'OK, this could be written by anyone, this could be taken by anyone'.

"The problem was that a newspaper, which is something with some journalistic credibility, picked up the story and it's that moment where the entire legal process is circumvented. (The newspaper) by and large tried this guy by posting his photo on the front page.

"And in that moment the whole thing became really quite scary."

A fact made even scarier by how easy it is to do.

"The big catchcry is citizen journalism or citizen media – that with something like a camera phone you've got a digital production studio in your pocket. You can record film, have the whole production facilities at your disposal.

"We saw in the London bombings there were some useful instances where that was used to record some footage that turned out to be very important for the story that was breaking.

"But in the New York case, this is showing the potential downside, this idea of citizen justice – it is very much like a citizen lynch mob if it's done in the worst possible way."

Such fears have not gone unnoticed in Australia. Victorian Privacy Commissioner Paul Chadwick warns such instances flag a disturbing trend. "We need to recognise that using technology to punish and humiliate people is a very serious thing," he says. "It's taking the law into our own hands. Vigilantism isn't healthy in society because we can make mistakes."

Mr Chadwick points out that the camphone phenomenon has shifted the power to mass-broadcast images from a limited number of professional news

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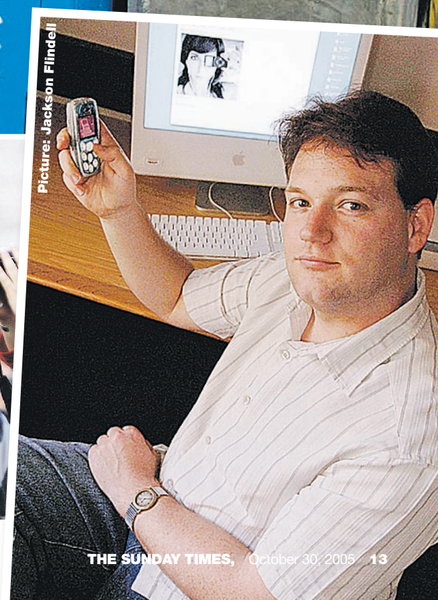
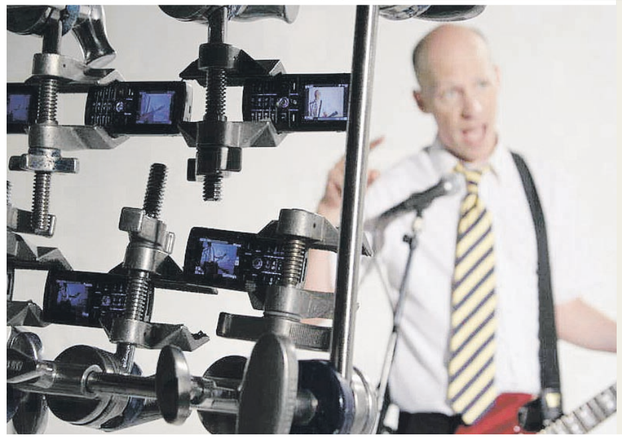
A sign in a public pool's changing room details a ban on the use of mobile phones, because their in-built cameras can be used to photograph unwitting people.

Below left: A woman attempts to photograph Pope John Paul II's body with her mobile.

Below right: Tama Leaver, associate lecturer in Communication Studies at UWA.



Picture: Jackson Flindell



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 Voyeurism 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.

In Australia, Victoria's Attorney-General Rob Hulls has spearheaded a national review of laws covering camphone technology. In August he issued a national discussion paper recommending legislative changes that would outlaw 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 technology," Mr Hulls 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 surveillance devices laws generally prohibit photographing people in a private activity without their consent. But still there are grey areas, such as snapping people in public places, like pool change rooms.

Celebrities and royalty alike are snapped with mobile phones: *Australian Idol*'s Andrew Gee, top left; and Prince William, top right.

Above: A music video clip is created using mobile phone cameras for the band Presidents of the United States of America.

Opposite page: Camphones can capture happy snaps or snare unwitting victims.

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>
> **Victorian Privacy Commissioner Paul Chadwick**

>> organisations to millions of ordinary people. And where professional news gatherers are trained to consider such things as ethics and the public interest before they publish, there's a real danger that the average camphone-wielding punter may not have the experience, the forethought or the time to consider the consequences of uploading an image to the internet.

"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."

Perhaps the most disturbing of these is the proliferation of lewd, peeping Tom images on so-called moblogs, websites where people can upload their camphone images to share with friends – or the world.

While sites such as mobog.com and yafro.com feature thousands of happy snaps of people's pets, holidays and family celebrations, there are many more grubby, voyeuristic images that may or may not have been taken with 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 camphone makers have banned all camera phones on their premises to stave off corporate espionage. Other companies are going even further.

"I went to a preview screening of *Serenity* and they just said 'Anyone who has any electronic device 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. "Those blanket bans will be necessary from a privacy point of view for a while."

The next logical step in protecting our privacy seems to be to introduce more or stronger laws. But privacy watchdog Paul Chadwick says tougher laws are not necessarily the best antidote to camphone abuse.

"It's fairly common for technological developments to outpace the law," he says. "But while it's healthy for law-makers to look at whether legislation needs to be updated, there is a limit to what the law can do.

"Privacy is as much about people's respect for each other and behavioural norms as it is about the 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 them through 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're faced with."

Some believe that we need to update not our laws but our social conventions and manners to keep pace with advancing technologies.

"You don't need stronger privacy laws or mandatory beepers (to alert people a picture is being taken) if you just observe rules of etiquette," says John Lenarcic, lecturer at RMIT University's school of business information technology.

"Rules of etiquette demand that you ask someone's permission before taking their picture. But the old rules are being swept aside because these new devices are so small and unobtrusive, and people think they can get away with it."

If there's been any impediment to the camphone juggernaut, it has been the questionable quality of the images they take. Until recently, the cameras standard on most high-end mobile phones shoot images with a resolution of just 0.31 megapixels, which are grainy when enlarged, especially compared with the three to five megapixel images produced by the average digital camera. But technology is advancing all the time and earlier this year Samsung unveiled a prototype for a startling seven megapixel camphone model.

At the same time, the manufacturers are investigating ways to make it easier to transmit and print images direct from the phone handset.

Such innovations will inevitably see camphones become even more pervasive. Nokia predicts that by 2010 there will be three billion mobile-phone subscribers around the world and most will have camphones.

Rather than an Orwellian future where Big Brother monitors our every move, our destiny seems to be a society where – for better or worse – we scrutinise each other. Beware, Little Brother is watching you.

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> **RMIT's John Lenarcic**