



Associated Press cameraman Eyad Mughrabi (right) uses one of the smaller Sony cameras to report from a camp for Libyan refugees at the Tunisia-Libyan border in Ras Ajdir, Tunisia.

## First, Live, Global

Significant newsgathering advances spring from coverage of this year's breaking international news

**I**N WHAT HAS BEEN ONE of the busiest years for coverage of international news stories—from changes in governments to war efforts to the death of Osama Bin Laden—global news organizations have been battling a host of technologies that have both improved their stories and laid the groundwork for further advances.

“International news coverage is a place where—perhaps more than any other area—technology meets the news,” notes Stuart Karle, COO at Thomson Reuters. “Our future lies in taking advantage of technology and deploying it to get the story as efficiently as possible to our clients.”

One very notable development has been the improvement in delivery of video over satellite and cell phone networks that have allowed news organizations to stream much more live video.

Reuters, for example, began offering live video from the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square and quickly found that demand was so high, they developed a regular “Live Stream” service, notes John Clarke, global editor for TV at Thomson Reuters.

Meanwhile, earlier this month, the Associated Press launched a digital version of its live service APTN Direct to capitalize on the growing demand for live content from portals and online sites, notes Sandy MacIntyre, vice president and director of video news for AP.

Better systems for streaming video over smaller, lighter satellite gear or over cell phone networks have also allowed news channels such as CNN and the BBC to offer much more live coverage.

During BBC's Libya coverage, for example, commentator Ben Brown anchored newscasts from the front lines, feeding live video back to London using a BGAN satellite terminal, notes Martin Turner, head of operation and newsgathering at BBC News.

“It took viewers to the front line in a way that I don't think people have seen before,” Turner says. “[Brown] was not only describing what was happening where he was, but flipping to other BBC reporters.”

Such technologies are only likely to improve in the future. Wider availability of 4G networks will increasingly offer users faster data speeds over cell networks, and satellite service providers are also making significant advances.

Last year, Inmarsat's Stratos division significantly increased its data rates with the launch of BGAN X-Stream service, which was widely used by the BBC and

CNN during their Arab Spring coverage. And the company is looking to increase speeds even more dramatically with deployment of a new generation of satellite in 2013, notes Gerbrand Schalkwijk, VP of global enterprise sales at Stratos.

That system, which will have global coverage in 2014, will offer 50 Mbps rates for larger dishes and speeds that are comparable to current ADSL speeds with smaller laptop-size units, he explains.

Ultimately, those improved speeds will



Jonathan Head reports for the BBC from Libya, where the network has been using BGAN mobile satellite units.

allow news organizations to produce more HD reports from the field.

Perhaps more importantly, these improvements in cellular and satellite transmission services have provided news organizations with more flexibility in difficult environments. “The key is being prepared so you have options to get a connection, and having people trained so they know what options are available when they hit the ground,” says Parisa Khosravi, senior VP of international newsgathering at CNN Worldwide, who adds that CNN uses a wide array of transmission technologies.

Flexibility has been particularly important in covering the Middle East, where governments have taken down cell phone networks to restrict communications, and where reporters are sometimes forced to work from places with poor cell service.

“There is no such thing as the best technology for the story,” notes Clarke. “In Egypt, we started with bundled cell technology and then had to switch to satellite when the government shut down those networks.”

“For me, 2011 was the year of one giant step for-

ward in terms of the coming of age of live-streaming video equipment” from suppliers like LiveU, adds AP's MacIntyre. “But that's also one giant step back when governments cut off the 3G services, so we had to go back to more conventional satellite technology.”

Having smaller equipment is also important for safety in many of these international stories.

“In the past when your only option was big clunky cameras, you were just an obvious target in dangerous surroundings,” explains Khosravi. “With the smaller equipment, we can now be much more discreet depending on where we are and what the crowd is like.”

Khosravi adds that a newer satellite service allows journalists to transmit with small antennas while they are driving, which speeds up transmissions and improves their safety because they don't have to stop and set up bulky equipment.

All of the different technologies, however, make training and preparation much more important. “In the past, you had very limited choices for sending video,” Turner says. “If you compare that to the multiplicity of technologies and devices people now have, it means that things have become hugely more complicated for people on the ground. The biggest challenge is making sure that people know how to use those devices.”

Production and editing systems also need to be much more flexible so they can handle receiving video from many devices. “There was one report that [CNN's] Nic [Robertson] did in Egypt in Alexandria that had eight different sources of video,” notes Khosravi.

As user-generated content continues to grow more important in international coverage, “one of the biggest technical challenges is to bring in all this citizen-generated content and quickly turn it around so that you can maintain some technical consistency,” adds MacIntyre at AP.

Another logistical challenge is verifying the content and putting it into context. While that has opened up the reporting on a wider range of opinion—and in the case of the Arab Spring, provided an outlet for more democratic voices—MacIntyre also cautions that “this content needs to be treated as one side of the issue and conversation and shouldn't be treated as fact. You have to still ask the right questions and supplement it with other material.”

The availability of this material also puts greater pressure on news organizations to speed up their operations.

“The reality is that we are competing with individual members of the public who don't have to worry about dealing with a production system when they want to upload things directly to YouTube or stick up something on Twitter,” Turner says.

He also notes that they will soon deploy a file transfer system developed in-house at the BBC that will help them move files more quickly. They are also upgrading their production system to better handle material sent in from iPhones and other mobile devices.

With news organizations being more successful in delivering higher-quality live feeds, they face new pressures to increase their production. “As an agency with many broadcast customers around the world, when you do something clever and are able to provide live signals in a way you couldn't before, all of a sudden the bar is raised,” says Reuters' Clarke. “All of a sudden everyone expects that and more for every story in the future.”

Better technology is also important in allowing news organizations to do more in a period of tight budgets.

“The BBC and everyone else face pressures of limited income,” says Turner, who adds that flat license fees have forced cutbacks at the BBC's news division. “Being able to produce content and get it out quickly is absolutely crucial [when] dealing with a world where we have fewer people [that are] trying to meet the demands...and the deadline is right now.”