The Arab Spring protests have presented interesting examples of the complex power relations between traditional and new methods of social media reporting in times of crisis. Traditionally, global crisis reporting has been mainly controlled by mainstream journalists. Audiences around the world previously received their knowledge of political happenings through dominant media players such as CNN, BBC World and others.

The wave of political unrest in the Arab world has somehow tipped the power balance that such dominant news networks hold and left them struggling to “control” the flow of information. The Arab Spring, therefore, has brought about a shift in power in more than just the political halls of the Arab world.

Alternative “journalists” on the streets have risen to play a prominent role in the coverage of these political events. This shift has been made possible through digital and social media channels. These media have allowed alternative reporters, activists and protesters to disseminate information globally.

Yet to what extent has this power shift been successful?

When the YouTube video of the “blue bra girl” surfaced in December 2011 from the Egyptian protests showing Egyptian police violently kicking a female protester until her blue bra showed, mainstream media latched onto it worldwide.

The video was prominent to the extent that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made reference to it in a speech at Georgetown University. Captured by Egyptian protesters and posted on YouTube, it provided a strong visual expression of the military’s brutality that would shock any audience.

This video was successful in grabbing world media attention because it resonated with global audiences. However, the video was also strategically positioned by protesters. They knew that it would help their plight more than other, more shocking images of soldiers’ burnt corpses, such as those emerging from Libya at the start of the revolution.

Social media have been able to challenge mainstream journalism for many reasons. The inclusion of raw YouTube footage from the Arab streets to television screens around the world, for example, has brought a sense of reality to audiences who are removed from the conflict scene. Social media therefore provide a first-hand experience of events on the ground.

Social media users have even evolved in their journalistic presentation. In Syria, handwritten pieces of paper were held at the bottom of the footage showing the time and place, similar to what we see as captions on screens of 24-hour news channels.

However, concerns about credibility remain a key issue. The verification process can often prove challenging when the quality of footage is poor or when the identity of the players in the footage is not clear.

Despite social media offering an insight into events that are also accessible directly to audiences around the world through social media platforms, mainstream journalists still hold the power of selection - what to include and not include - in mainstream news.

At the same time, activists using social media have their own agenda too. The information or images that are posted on social media platforms serve to further their cause. The selection process is, therefore, practised by both mainstream journalists and social media practitioners.
There were many images of horror in Egypt’s uprising, but only some went viral and captured global attention. EPA

While much of the earlier research in the field suggests that alternative media practice is a threat to mainstream media power, more contemporary research has shifted to thinking about the level of interaction between mainstream and alternative journalism practices.

In a study conducted with my colleague Diana Bossio at Swinburne University, we looked at journalistic practices of news reporting during the uprisings in both Libya and Egypt.

We found that while interaction between mainstream and alternative modes of journalistic practice was mainly co-operative and productive when it came to the investigation and dissemination of news, moments of “tension” were also evident between mainstream and alternative media practitioners. This was especially the case given that social media were often the sole source of information for mainstream journalists during times when there were issues of access.

There is no doubt that traditional journalistic practice has been influenced by the changes brought by digital media technologies. This could be seen as a shift of media power from mainstream media to alternative journalism. It may suggest the possibility of the emergence of a more “democratic” media environment.

Yet the reality of mainstream audience media habits and the dominance of national and international news organisations have meant that the “selection” process of what to report on from social media data remains in the hands of mainstream journalists. That the “blue bra girl” sticks in the memory of viewers more than other influential footage that emerged during the Arab Spring only serves to confirm this.