Sousveillance and Social Media

This entry explores how social media platforms can be used to create and share acts of sousveillance, a form of 'inverse surveillance' that empowers citizens through their use of technology to "access and collect data about their surveillance" (Mann et al, 2003: 333). The two primary forms of sousveillance, hierarchical and personal, will be critically evaluated with reference to a number of prominent examples. These will include the #BlackLivesMatter campaign to focus attention on violent police attacks on African-Americans since 2014 (Freelon et al, 2016a), as well as the use of YouTube by eyewitnesses to highlight alleged police brutality during the so-called 'Battle of Stokes Croft' that occurred in Bristol, England in April 2011. In particular, the entry will consider how audience responses to acts of police brutality shared on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are influenced by news media coverage of these incidents. Previous research has indicated that the sharing of sousveillance footage online may raise as many questions about the behaviour of the alleged victims as it does the police (Reilly, 2015). It concludes by considering whether sousveillant practices facilitated via social media constitute a shift in informational power from elites to marginalised groups and individuals.

Sousveillance as response to 'surveillance society'

The ubiquity of smart phones, providing high-speed connectivity to the internet via 3G and 4G broadband cellular networks, has provided unprecedented opportunities for recording eyewitness perspectives that focus attention on the conduct of authority figures. This entry focuses on how the connective affordances of social media empower citizens to engage in sousveillance (translated into English as 'to watch from below'). It can be broadly defined as 'inverse surveillance' that empowers citizens through their use of technology to "access and collect data about their surveillance" (Mann et al., 2003: 333). This conceptual framework emerged from the critique of surveillance practices, which posits that pervasive organisational surveillance threatens the autonomy of individuals (Stanley and Steinhardt, 2003). The 'surveillance society' in which the few watched the many through cameras mounted on or in buildings was said to be disrupted by people's use of body-worn cameras for sousveillance, which was conceptualised as "the many watching the few" (Mann, 2013: 1). The rationale for this 'undersight' was that data generated by the surveillance of private citizens by entities in positions of power lacked 'integrity' and provided evidence that was "less than the full truth" (Mann, 2017: 3). There were two forms of sousveillance originally identified by the self-styled 'father of wearable computing' Steve Mann; *personal* referred to the use of cameras at "eye-level for human-centred recording of personal experiences" while *hierarchical* was a more purposive, political activity that focused on documenting the actions of authority figures such as the police (Mann, 2004:1). The former revolved around the documenting of personal experiences that brought communities together, "without necessarily involving a political agenda" (Bakir, 2010:21). The latter shares the 'injunction to care' that is an integral component of 'media witnessing'. the term used to capture the ways in which digital media technologies transform people's capacity to bear witness to events and encourage others to engage with these perspectives (Allan, 2013). Moreover, there is a significant overlap between the conceptual framework of hierarchical sousveillance and citizen journalism, the process whereby citizens play an active role in the "process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003:9). Citizens themselves are more likely to use the latter to describe their use of technology to 'watch the watchers' due to its prominence in the lexicon of journalism and the frequency with which it is invoked to describe such activity.

Yet, irrespective of intentionality, the recording of personal experiences in public spaces can contribute to 'equiveillance, defined as an "equilibrium (balance) between surveillance and

sousveillance" (Mann, 2004: 627). Mann criticised the 'one-sided' surveillance in public spaces where citizens were prohibited from recording their own experiences (dubbed 'McVeillance'); he argued that a 'Veillance' society was inevitable due to the growth in 'participatory veillance' courtesy of citizens' use of smartphones for sousveillance (Mann, 2017). However, there were two caveats in relation to this sur/sousveillance distinction that should be noted. First, sousveillance was not always considered a countervailing force to the oversight of the architecture-centred surveillance of authority figures. It was not primarily conceived as a mechanism to document the incidents of police brutality it has become synonymous with in the social media era. Indeed, the feedback loops created by citizen sousveillance were said to be equally capable of capturing evidence of police officers "doing acts of good", as demonstrated by the footage of New York Police Department (NYPD) officer Larry DePrimo purchasing a pair of shoes and giving them to a homeless man in November 2012 (Mann, 2013: 4). Second, there was no simplistic dichotomy between the two and it was anticipated that surveillance would persist and possibly increase in a 'Veillance' society. This was illustrated by Mann's Veillance Plane, an 'eight-point compass' showing how the amount of surveillance and sousveillance in a physical space could be added or subtracted in response to changes, such as an increase in the number people recording footage on smartphones. There were eight directions in the compass, ranging from the aforementioned McVeillance to the use of technology to prevent surveillance of citizen activity (anti-surveillance). Both sousveillance and surveillance were conceptualised as orthogonal vectors in this model, which suggested that increases in one might not be at the expense of the other. For example, he envisaged a scenario in which the oversight provided by the installation of three extra surveillance cameras within a tavern would, at least temporarily, be counteracted by the undersight of six customers, who were recording their experiences using wearable cameras (Mann, 2013: 6). Therefore, reductive analyses that frame sousveillance as a panacea to surveillance should be replaced by more contextualised approaches that recognise their co-existence within contemporary societies.

The efficacy of sousveillance in focussing public attention upon the actions of authority figures may ultimately depend upon the size of the network through which it is distributed, although smaller communities of 'sousveillance officers' can help facilitate dialogue about the power asymmetries it exposes (Mann and Ferenbok, 2013). This was certainly the case in the two most prominent examples of sousveillance in the pre-social media era, the Rodney King assault and the Abu Grahib abuse scandal. The former revolved around video footage of four Los Angeles police officers assaulting Rodney King on March 4 1991. Eyewitness George Holliday covertly captured the assault on the African-American taxi driver using his Sony Handycam and shared the video with local television station KTLA, which was later used as evidence in the trial of the LAPD officers charged with attacking King (Mann et al, 2003).The footage raised broader questions about police brutality towards African-Americans and was repeatedly shown by US networks during the trial and subsequent acquittal of the four defendants, which resulted in five nights of rioting in Los Angeles that left 50 people dead and 2,000 injured. Holliday later sued five US news networks for copyright infringement in a landmark case which was rejected by Judge Irving Hill on the grounds that the only way the news media could "tell the complete story" of the King assault was through the broadcast of the video (Reis, 1995:285). A similar theme emerged in relation to the leaking of photographs depicting the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US military personnel in Abu Grahib prison in 2003. Bakir (2010) explores how both personal and hierarchical sousveillance 'impulses' played a role in the production and dissemination of these torture photographs. The former was evident in the 'trophy shots', taken on digital cameras as mementos of the prison guards' time in Iraq, that were brought to the attention of the US Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID) when they received two Computer CDs containing the photographs from by a whistleblower in January 2004 (Beier, 2007). Three months passed before the torture photographs were leaked and published by CBS News and other mainstream media outlets in the United States. Their publication in news media were said to have fuelled the Iraqi insurgency in Iraq by providing irrefutable evidence of the

hitherto covert US policy of torture in the war-torn country, despite the efforts of the US government to frame Abu Grahib as an isolated incident (Bakir, 2010). Like the Holliday video, the sousveillant potential of the Abu Grahib images appeared to be determined by viewer perceptions of the events and issues depicted therein.

Social media and the intensification of sousveillance

The advent of social media and internet-enabled smart phones has been linked to an "intensification of sousveillance and the rise of sousveillance cultures" over the past decade (Bakir, 2010: 23). These participatory media form part of a sousveillant assemblage that is comparable, to a certain extent, to the 'surveillant assemblage' developed in the 2000s, which has deployed increasingly sophisticated technological systems to monitor and collect data on citizens (Bakir, 2010; Mann, 2017). Whereas George Holliday had to rely on his cumbersome Sony Handycam to record the Rodney King assault and local television networks to broadcast this footage, internet-enabled smart phones enable eyewitnesses to record and share this footage almost instantly with a potential global audience via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In doing so, citizens inadvertently provide yet more personal data for social media companies that engage in the mass surveillance of its users for the purposes of targeted advertising (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). While many social justice campaigners are cognisant of these privacy concerns, they have continued to leverage the connective affordances of social media to focus attention on hierarchical sousveillance on numerous occasions since 2010. Probably the most prominent examples of 'social media sousveillance' have been deployed by Black Lives Matter (BLM), the campaign set up by activists Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tomet to highlight police killings of unarmed African-American citizens in July 2013 (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). Emerging first as a hashtag and then transitioning into a much larger social justice movement that combined 'hashtag activism' with more traditional modes of protests such as public demonstrations, it shared distressing footage showing several of these controversial killings (Fischer and Mohrman, 2016). Most notably, one video showed Staten Island resident Eric Garner being held in a chokehold by several NYPD officers, despite him being heard repeating the phrase "I can't breathe" eleven times. The subsequent coroner's report confirmed that the cause of death was the compressions on his neck and chest from NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo, who faced no indictment from the Staten Island grand jury for his actions. The eponymous hashtag was used to focus attention on this video, and to highlight the NYPD's disregard for 'Black Lives' (Freelon et al, 2016a). Twitter debates surrounding such footage facilitated "large-scale informal learning" about the tensions between the police and Black communities, particularly amongst conservatives who acknowledged for the first time that these killings were 'unjust' (Freelon et al, 2016b:79). In this sense, the integration of hierarchical sousveillance into a social justice campaign appeared to have enabled non-elites to shape public discourse around race and law enforcement in the United States.

Audiences often use heuristics and pre-existing political views to a decide whether 'eye level perspectives' constitute hierarchical sousveillance. This has implications for eyewitnesses who use social media to share sousveillance; viewers may not necessarily agree that this footage is prima facie evidence of misconduct by authority figures such as the police. Take, for example, how YouTubers responded to footage of alleged police brutality during the so-called 'Battle of Stokes Croft'. There were violent clashes between the police and members of the public in the Stokes Croft district of Bristol, England on 21st April 2011 in the aftermath of a controversial police raid on a local squat ('Telepathic Heights'). Both local and national media were quick to frame the violence as a manifestation of the No Tesco in Stokes Croft campaign, which opposed the opening of a new Tesco supermarket in the area on the grounds that it threatened the future of a number of local independent traders in the district and would destroy "its unique character" (People's Republic of

Stokes Croft, 2012). Its activists turned to social media to refute these allegations and to highlight the 'brutal' police dispersal of a peaceful protest against the squat eviction that they blamed for the violence (Hall, 2011). A key component of this strategy was the sharing of hierarchical sousveillance on YouTube, which appeared to provide support for the claims by local residents that the police tactics were 'heavy-handed'. For example, one video showed a man being shoved out of the way by a police officer without any warning, while another captured footage of the helicopter that had been the subject of many complaints from local residents. Analysis of comments posted under these videos provided little evidence to suggest that this footage had successfully focussed attention on police brutality and countered the media framing of the 'anti-Tesco' riot (Reilly, 2014). Some commentators agreed that the police tactics appeared to be 'unfathomable' and some claimed they had been brutalised during the events captured on camera. However, the majority did not perceive these videos as evidence of police brutality, with officers often criticised for not adopting more aggressive crowd control measures to disperse onlookers. Conversely, the anti-social behaviour of the crowd was often subject to more criticism than the actions of the riot police, with many commentators conflating the violence with the anti-Tesco campaign. Indeed, the results of the study suggested that there was little rational debate about who was responsible for the violence and the views of many commentators appeared to be influenced by the news media coverage of the riot (Reilly 2015).

Conclusion: sousveillance as a shift informational power?

Although by no means a social media inspired phenomenon, sousveillance have become increasingly prevalent in the era of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Citizens are now able to record and share their personal experiences online using a combination of internet-enabled smart phones and social media, with the resultant visual evidence providing the 'full truth' in contrast to the one-sided surveillance of public spaces by elites. That is not to say that the growth in participatory veillance envisaged by Mann will necessarily nullify this oversight. Rather, equiveillance is likely to remain more elusive while state and non-state entities continue to invest in more sophisticated technological approaches for the mass surveillance of citizens. A more pertinent question is whether the use of social media for sousveillance constitutes a shift in informational power from elites to marginalised, peripheral actors. Certainly, BLM illustrated how the integration of hierarchical sousveillance into advocacy campaigns can raise questions about the conduct of elites while also facilitating informal learning about broader issues of social injustice. There are now unprecedented opportunities for citizens to use such footage to intervene in a political information cycle that hybridises older and newer media logics (Chadwick, 2013). In this sense, the empowerment of citizens to use social media to engage in sousveillance does appear to have the power to disrupt established hierarchies within journalism and politics. Nevertheless, it is perhaps too early to tell whether sousveillance will significantly alter power relations in contemporary societies. The use of commercial social media to create and share sousveillance contributes to the surveillant assemblage by providing these companies with personal data that can be used to monitor the actions and behaviour of citizens. The 'black box' algorithms operated by platforms such as Facebook are also likely to mirror the editorial functions of professional news media insofar as they may limit the visibility and discoverability of such content. It is therefore perhaps ironic that eyewitnesses who share their experiences online may still need to capture the attention of mainstream media in order to amplify hierarchical sousveillance in such a way as to influence public attitudes towards authority figures such as the police. However, focussing attention upon their alleged misconduct does not in and of itself change attitudes towards elite actors. Even in those cases where visual evidence is widely shared online, there is still a strong likelihood that media depictions of the events captured on camera will shape viewer perceptions of the alleged police brutality or elite wrongdoing it highlights. Furthermore, the incorporation of these digital acts into professional media coverage of such events may not necessarily provoke the emotional reaction in

the audience sought by the witness. The formulaic 'mediation of suffering' by professional journalists in news packages that incorporate such user-generated content may "numb rather than mobilise moral sensibilities," as has been the case with coverage of disasters (Chouliaraki, 2013:35). Therefore, the potential of sousveillance to focus attention on the actions of authority figures, both good and bad, depends on how well it is integrated into broader social justice campaigns, the salience of its narrative and its circulation is via both traditional and social media.

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