

Sousveillance, Emergent Participatory Media & Strategic Political Communication: Iraq, UK & USA

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What is sousveillance?

Sousveillance is a concept developed by Steve Mann, a Canadian inventor and academic, to explore the philosophical and techno-social issues arising from human-centered capture, processing and transmission of sensory information. It was developed in conjunction with his pioneering research on wearable computing and wearable cameras that he conceived from the 1980s, before hand-held computers and digital cameras were commonplace. E.g, from 1994 to 1996, while a student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mann continuously transmitted every waking moment of his life in real-time to his web site for others to experience and respond to (Mann, 2001, 2003). His CyborgLogs ('glogs) were an early predecessor of blogs: Japan's Joi Ito puts Mann's 'glog of February 1995' as the first example of moblogging – blogging using camera or video phones (Ito, 2004). Mann's aim in developing such technologies, usable for sousveillance, is to promote personal empowerment in human-technology interactions by restoring complete control to individuals over the technologies that they use, as well as taking a stance against the surveillance society (Mann, 1997, 2001, 2005; Mann et al., 2003, 2006).

Sousveillance comes from the French words for 'sous' (below) and 'veiller' to watch (Mann et al., 2003 p.332), as opposed to 'surveillance' - 'to watch from above' by a higher authority (Mann, 2004, p.620), or 'to watch over' (Lyon, 2001, p.3). Mann (2004) describes two forms of sousveillance. Firstly, hierarchical sousveillance, which refers to politically or legally motivated sousveillance. This is an activity undertaken by those who are generally the subject of surveillance and involves the recording of surveillance systems, proponents of surveillance, authority figures and their actions, e.g. citizens photographing police and shoppers photographing shopkeepers. Secondly, he describes personal sousveillance. This typically involves community-based recording from first-person perspectives without necessarily involving a political agenda, e.g. bringing cameras from the lamp posts and ceilings, down to eye-level, for human-centered recording of personal experience. This allows people to be creators of data and to be lifelong photographic artists rather than merely subjects.

What does sousveillance have to do with emergent participatory media?

The participatory media I'm talking about is web-based participatory media (Web 2.0 for short), which emerged as a mass medium across the first decade of the 21st century. Web 2.0 is about the enrichment of online social interaction and communication through more easily produced user-generated content and users' collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997). As such, Web 2.0 has attracted the moniker 'the Social Web'.

I posit that sousveillance helps explain why people participate in the social practices that constitute Web 2.0, focusing on their pleasure and personal empowerment derived from sharing their lives with others, and in taking a stance against the surveillant state.

It is the widespread, everyday nature of sousveillance that distinguishes it from other more established practices of observing and challenging power structures - such as investigative journalism - the hallmarks of which are, as Goddard (2006) notes, long camera lenses, hidden recording devices and concealed identities to access material outside the public domain, and painstaking research of not easily-accessible evidence within the public domain. While Lyon (2001) was sceptical that placing camcorders in the hands of bystanders in the street can ever amount to anything more than brief moments of resistant activity in a surveillance society, Web 2.0 generates an intensification of sousveillance and the rise of 'sousveillance cultures.'

How does sousveillance impact on strategic political communication?

Strategic political communication is prevalent. It engages in: ‘sophisticated knowledge about human behavior to mold information to accomplish very specific, and often very short-term, objectives. Their emphasis is very much on controlling the messages that are sent, the circumstances of their transmission, and the roster of recipients’ (Manheim, 1991, p.7). Normally strategic political communications are developed in media environments where the chosen medium of communication is well-established, and therefore understood, by those seeking to manipulate it.

However, two big changes occurred across the 1st decade of the 21st century: the emergence of Web 2.0 combined with the consolidation of convergence cultures (Jenkins, 2004, 2006), as media companies embraced convergence/multiple-platform publishing as a tool for increased productivity and marketing, to capture the increasingly volatile audience (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2005; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006, 2008; Quinn, 2005). The emergence of Web 2.0 combined with convergence cultures created a media environment that, for a while, was poorly understood, allowing challenges to strategic political communication from lay-people going about their everyday lives. As the democratisation of media production has become more actualised in Web 2.0, and as convergence causes more ‘linking up’ between web-based participatory media and mainstream media, we enter a media environment of complexity, chaos and populism – what McNair (2006, p.3) describes as a shift from a ‘control paradigm’ to a ‘chaos paradigm,’ and what others refer to as the ‘YouTube effect’ (Naim, 2007, p.103; Christensen, 2008, p.157). Media agenda-building now seems to be a more open field - taxing the control exercised by strategic political communicators.

I explain this further in Bakir (2010). I show, through case studies, that from 2002-06, organisations used to supreme control over strategic political communications were caught out by the mass adoption of Web 2.0 technologies, and confounded by key moments of sousveillance – including Abu Ghraib digital photographs in 2004 (explored further below). I posit that it is during these emergent periods that official attempts at strategic political communication suffer from lack of understanding of the digital cultures they are seeking to control, emulate, or infiltrate. It is therefore at these moments that web-based participatory media can be at its most resistive and impactful.

Case study: Abu Ghraib

Torture photographs from Abu Ghraib, Iraq, in 2004 illustrate the loss of control over strategic political communication through sousveillance. Under the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority, Abu Ghraib became the prison for criminal and security detaineesⁱⁱ and facilitated interrogations after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 (Taguba Report, 2004, p.15). Unknown to the public, across July 2003 to February 2004, these interrogations involved physical and psychological attacks on detainees by US Military Police (MP) and Military Intelligence (MI) personnel, violating the Geneva Conventions governing the treatment of prisoners of war and of civilian noncombatants (Taguba, 2004; Ricks, 2006). A large number of these incidents involved photography, the first time-stamped on 17 October 2003. For instance:

- b. (S) Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees;
- c. (S) Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing; ...
- m. (S) Taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees. (Taguba, 2004 pp.16-17)

Exploring how the Abu Ghraib photographs came into being uncovers both personal sousveillance (apolitical life-sharing) and hierarchical sousveillance (politically or legally motivated) impulses.

Soldiers involved in prisoner ‘abuse’ captured the activities on their own digital cameras, often posing to be included in the shot (CID Report and Statements, 2004). This suggests that the soldiers were taking

trophy shots and mementos of their time in Iraq (Sontag, 2004; Beier, 2007). Atrocity photographs are not new. For instance, German soldiers in WWII photographed atrocities they committed in Poland and Russia (Sontag, 2004) and Saddam Hussein regularly filmed torture and killings of Iraqis as proof of orders being carried out (Engel, 2004). However, snapshots in which the executioners placed themselves among their victims are, historically, exceedingly rare (Hersh, 2004b; Sontag, 2004), but this was a feature of the published Abu Ghraib photos.

Personal sousveillance is not just about taking pictures that document one's life, but sharing these with interested others. These digital pictures from Abu Ghraib had been circulating among specific in-groups - military friends and family members. Staci Morris, the ex-wife of Charles Graner (the ring leader), reports how Graner proudly e-mailed his children photos of 'these beat up prisoners and blood and talk about how cool it was - look what daddy gets to do,' (Tanner, 2005). Given the volume of pictures taken by military personnel in Iraq, no one reviewed the photos before they were transmitted across the internet (Kewney, 2004). MP Joe Darby (the whistleblower) had been at Abu Ghraib for several months when he was first handed the 'abuse' photographs on 2 computer CDs (CID Report and Statements, 2004). In one account, Darby says that they were lent to him by Graner, in response to Darby's questions about what had happened in a shooting incident at Abu Ghraib while he had been on leave (Bryan, 2007). In a later interview, Darby said that the desert heat had warped his own snapshots, so he asked Graner for some pictures, hoping for images of camels and tanks (Sharrock, 2008): 'To this day, I'm not sure why he gave me that CD. He probably just forgot which pictures were on it, or he might have assumed that I wouldn't care' (Darby, n.d.). Most of the discs contained general shots around the city of Hilla, the Green Zoneⁱⁱⁱ and palaces in Iraq, but also the now infamous photos of 'abuse' (Bryan, 2007).

These acts of personal sousveillance generated an instance of hierarchical sousveillance. Three weeks after initially being lent the CDs, Joe Darby anonymously handed in a copy to CID on 13 January 2004 (CID Report and Statements, 2004). This prompted CID to seize other computers and disks from members of the unit within hours, recovering hundreds of photos, CDs and videotapes (Beaumont et al., 2004). Six days later, on 19 January 2004, Lieutenant General Sanchez ordered a secret military investigation into Abu Ghraib (Hersh, 2004b, 2004d).

The issue of prisoner torture by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq came to public attention three months later in April 2004 through the publication in mainstream US news of these sousveillant photographs (CBS News, 2004; Hersh, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Who leaked the photos is unclear - it may have been family of the abusers concerned that they were about to be made scapegoats, or it may have been high-up disgruntled military officers, unhappy with the conduct of the War on Terror and the War in Iraq. At this point, normal media agenda-building battles then ensued - including a massive damage limitation exercise by the US government as it framed Abu Ghraib as the outcome of isolated abuse within the military rather than a covert policy of torture to extract intelligence for the War on Terror. Certainly, the Abu Ghraib images resonated across the Middle East, fuelling the mounting insurgency in Iraq (Bakir, 2010).

The Bush administration's strategic political communication successfully manipulated mainstream US media for over a year, but began to slowly unravel in 2005 as powerful people started to champion deeper public investigation into the War on Terror (Bennett et al, 2007). The question that remained unanswered for five years after Abu Ghraib was publicised in April 2004 was whether they were merely criminal abuses, conducted by a few bad apples, as the Bush administration maintained, or whether they were part of a covert interrogation and torture policy to elicit intelligence for the War on Terror. The answer, emerging definitively in public in 2009, was the latter (US Senate Armed Services Committee, 2008). This answer was a long time coming. Since 2002 there had been continuing protests by human rights groups about prisoner abuse of terror suspects at Guantánamo, Cuba, and at the US military's main interrogation centre at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan; and since 2003 about US military treatment of Iraqi prisoners. However, in the absence of photographs, the complaints had little traction (Hersh, 2004d).

Sousveillance matters.

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ⁱ <http://wearcam.org/eastcampusfire.htm>

ⁱⁱ Security detainees meet the requirements based on UN Security Council Resolution 1546 and its extensions. They are classified as individuals that may be held for imperative reasons of security because they are suspected of insurgent activity.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is the protected enclave in central Baghdad housing the new Iraqi Government and western military and administrative headquarters.