Dialogue | “Stay Vigilant”: Copwatching in Germany

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Abstract

In the US, forms of sousveillance have been part of the repertoire of black liberation movements since the times of slavery. Opposing racialized surveillance by inverting the gaze of the oppressor can be an empowering practice for marginalized populations, yet it also raises important questions: Could sousveillance inadvertently support the ideology of surveillance? When does “dark sousveillance” (Browne 2015: 21) succeed in criticizing and subverting the status quo of racialized surveillance? How do activists negotiate the risk of providing even more data that can be de-contextualized, misinterpreted, and, ultimately, even used against practitioners of sousveillance? I will address these questions with regard to current copwatching practices in Germany. Using the project Cop Map as a case study, I will examine both the potentially liberating power and ambiguities of sousveillance as well as critical factors for success. Cop Map (<https://www.cop-map.com>), a German copwatching website designed by two activist collectives, allows citizens to report police presence and racial profiling while ensuring data protection for users of the app. Cop Map is directed against increased state surveillance and police powers, but also reaches out to organizations that mainly address racial profiling. Building on intersectional alliances and networks of solidarity, sousveillance can create spaces to counter racist police practices and raise awareness—especially if embedded in broader efforts and organizational structures to combat (police) surveillance and protect data privacy. The subversive potential of forms of “surveillance from below” is complex, culturally and historically contingent, and predicated on their contextualization within broader movements.

In the US, forms of sousveillance have been part of the repertoire of black liberation movements from the times of slavery (cf. Browne 2015) to the Black Panthers’ practice of “policing the police” to today, with activists using cell phone videos, live-streaming tools, and copwatch programs as powerful technologies to reveal racist practices. Undeniably, the mass circulation of videos that expose racial profiling and police violence has fueled social justice movements. Opposing racialized surveillance by inverting the gaze of the oppressor can be an empowering practice for marginalized groups, yet it also raises important questions: Could sousveillance inadvertently support the ideology of surveillance? When does “dark sousveillance” (Browne 2015: 21) succeed in criticizing and subverting the status quo of racialized surveillance? How do activists negotiate the risk of providing even more data that can be de-contextualized, misinterpreted, and, ultimately, even used against practitioners of sousveillance? I will address these questions with regard to current copwatching practices in Germany. Using the project Cop Map as a case study, I will examine both the potentially liberating power and ambiguities of sousveillance as well as critical factors for success.

Social justice movements around the world increasingly embrace forms of sousveillance, often influenced by US practices. In recent years, copwatching and other technologies of sousveillance have been gaining traction in Germany. People targeted by racialized surveillance in Germany increasingly take to social media to share their experiences, organize against racial profiling, and build resistance (Thompson 2018: 211). Current practices of copwatching in Germany are driven by activists from marginalized communities. Groups like Copwatch FFM and KOP (campaign for victims of police violence), projects like Ban! Racial Profiling, based in Berlin, and the national campaign Stop Racial Profiling, initiated by KOP and ISD (an organization of black people in Germany), successfully join forces with various organizations and

institutions to fight racist criminalization and surveillance. Organizations that employ and encourage tactics of sousveillance follow a diverse set of objectives. Apart from the important documentation of incidents of police violence, creating "statistics from below" (Thompson 2018: 211), they also often support victims of police violence through legal counsel. Another important goal involves fostering solidarity, especially through raising awareness among the white majority of society who is less aware of structural and internalized racism in present-day Germany.

Vigilance is a key aspect of the solidarity between victims and onlookers of excessive policing. Campaigns like Ban! Racial Profiling call on citizens to be alert and to critically observe police action. Solidarity and intervention can thrive only "when we are vigilant in public spaces, look out for each other, and document experiences with racial profiling" (Authors' Collective of the Berlin Campaign Ban! Racial Profiling 2018: 194; my translation). As activist Em Ge points out: "When you see someone being stopped by the police, don't just walk on. Stay and watch. If you have something on you that looks like a camera, pull it out.... The police should never feel comfortable when they check people in our neighborhood" (qtd. in Authors' Collective of the Berlin Campaign Ban! Racial Profiling 2018: 194–195; my translation). Calls for vigilance towards policing in Germany also come from anti-surveillance organizations often associated with white male activism, for example the hacker network Chaos Computer Club (CCC). Examining copwatching in the German context brings to light culturally specific suspicions about state surveillance. With their not-too-distant memories of the ubiquitous spying of the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic's secret police, many Germans are wary of creating a police state and display a somewhat greater sensitivity towards excessive policing, surveillance, and data privacy than do US citizens (Devins 2017). At the same time, especially when compared to the US, there is still much less awareness of issues like racism and white privilege in German mainstream society. Intersectional alliances between anti-surveillance and anti-racist activism, I argue, benefit from the theoretical underpinnings and discursive frameworks of both anti-racist and anti-surveillance activism. Sousveillance projects that draw from the valuable insights generated by oppressed communities *and* tech-savvy anti-surveillance organizations can serve to empower both groups, especially when embedded in larger coalitional social justice movements.

A case in point is Cop Map, a German copwatching website launched in 2018 by two German activist groups, *Polizeiklasse München* and Peng! Collective. Cop Map inverts the authorities' rhetoric of "imminent danger" meant to justify enhanced police powers and posits the police itself as the danger to individuals and democracy. The project was born out of opposition towards new legislation to increase police powers in Bavaria. Quickly, raising awareness for racial profiling was identified as another main objective of the project in order to stand with those marginalized communities who have always been victims of unjust monitoring by the police: "It's time to show solidarity!" (Polizeiklasse and Peng! Collective 2018). Cop Map allows citizens to report police presence live on an interactive map while ensuring strict data protection for its users. The cooperation with Surveillance under Surveillance, a global online project documenting CCTV surveillance, allows users to detect surveillance cameras in their vicinity. Copwatching activism in the United States, such as resistance to stop and frisk practices in New York City or sousveillance tactics employed as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, served as models and were discussed during the conceptualization of Cop Map (Pikazo 2019). While designing the platform, the collectives reached out to groups like ISD and organizations like CCC to include the voices and opinions of both anti-racist and anti-surveillance activists. The goal was to go beyond mere documentation to design a tool that might be of practical use for people seeking to evade policing and that would raise awareness of the detrimental impact of racial profiling and excessive policing on democracy.

The direction of individual citizens' vigilance and alertness is a cornerstone of Cop Map. Watching from below subverts police surveillance and disrupts internalized assumptions about who or what qualifies as "dangerous." In the face of increasingly problematic efforts of so-called securitization, Cop Map is an intervention that explicitly seeks to "de-securitize" the public. Cop Map aims to direct individuals' attention away from "pseudo-dangers like people of color and migrants" to "the real danger: the police" (Pikazo 2019). By asking individuals to be vigilant and alert in public, not despite but because of the police, the project creates a space for counter-imaginaries and subverts dominant hierarchies of attention.

Importantly, Cop Map is not just an interactive website and sousveillance tool. It is embedded in a larger campaign to raise awareness. Directly underneath the map, a video in the style of a public service announcement contains testimonies by several individuals who view the police not as "friend" and "helper," but as an "imminent threat." The video testifies to the project's attempt to build a broad social alliance around its cause. The six speakers—a student, a journalist, a filmmaker, a programmer, an activist, and a Holocaust survivor—reflect the diversity of those vulnerable to police powers with regard to gender, race, occupation, and age, implying that *all* members of society—and democracy at large—are threatened by excessive policing. The voices of marginalized people are amplified by contextualizing them alongside the voices of people who benefit from white privilege and are more readily heard in German society, particularly the words of Holocaust survivor Ernst Grube who warns that increased power almost always leads to abuse: "Haven't we learned from history?"

The designers of the platform are aware that sousveillance practices are highly ambiguous and run the risk of perpetuating the logic of the surveillance state. Peng! Collective member Ronny Sommer (2019) states that criticism from left-leaning anti-surveillance groups was anticipated since "[more sousveillance] in an urban space means more surveillance—and more surveillance is always a problem." Data privacy, he underlines, was front and center during the development of Cop Map. Earlier ideas for a campaign involving video sousveillance were dismissed. Pikazo (2019) seconds this: "There is no tracking, no data surveillance, no names—neither of our users nor of individual police officers. Our goal is not to expose individual transgressions and thereby perpetuate the 'bad-apple' theory of police misconduct, but to highlight the systemic nature of the problem."

Despite some lingering criticism of the potentially negative effects of sousveillance voiced by CCC, the project's originators contend that, in the case of Cop Map, the method of watching back is valid and effective. Cop Map's radical reframing of the police as a threat to democracy didn't miss the mark. The highly provocative and media-savvy publication of Cop Map elicited a nationwide storm of responses by media outlets, politicians, and police unions that ranged from amused and astounded to hysterical and vehement opposition. Much to the creators' delight, even critical newspaper reports oftentimes repeated the campaign's arguments word-for-word, thus exposing a wide audience to their ideas for the first time: the lack of democratic oversight of police practices, the problem of racial profiling, and the dangers to the German Constitution posited by new legislation designed to increase police powers. Cop Map inserts itself into existing analyses and critiques of the police by providing a list of links to websites by allies, thus establishing a connection with and amplifying grassroots organizations' long-standing efforts in the fight against racial profiling.

After six to eight weeks of intense public debate in 2018, both media attention and usage of the website decreased. Today, the website shows only stationary CCTV cameras. With more than one hundred newspaper reports including all major German dailies, Cop Map was mainly successful as a discursive intervention. The project generated attention for the main goals of both anti-racist and anti-surveillance movements even though the website didn't succeed in becoming a lasting sousveillance tool to report police presence. The facts that the website was not very user-friendly and could easily be manipulated with fake reports were cited as reasons for its failure to generate lasting activity (Pikazo 2019), and the question remains whether people affected by racial profiling should have been included more and earlier in the conceptualization of the project, as Sommer (2019) self-critically deliberates. Vanessa E. Thompson, scholar and Copwatch FFM co-founder, appreciates that Peng! reached out for feedback while designing the website, but adds that the media attention garnered by projects like Cop Map raises the question of whose expertise is taken seriously and how the media deals—or fails to deal—with the knowledge of marginalized communities (Thompson 2019).

The case of Cop Map illustrates the strengths and challenges of sousveillance projects. Building a platform for testimonies by victims of racialized surveillance makes their concerns visible in a society in which awareness of racism and police brutality is much less present than in the US. As Glencora Borradaile and Joshua Reeves (in this issue) point out in their contribution to this volume, the dependence of political

activism on tools of digital capitalism might diminish the chance of agency and political change unless these methods are embedded in collective political activity beyond the digital realm. Building on intersectional alliances and networks of solidarity, sousveillance can create spaces to counter racist police practices and raise awareness—especially if embedded in broader efforts and organizational structures to combat (police) surveillance and protect data privacy. Following Simone Browne’s conceptualization of “dark sousveillance” as “an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance” (Browne 2015: 21), projects like Cop Map successfully insert counter-narratives into mainstream discourse. Sousveillance, thus, can be understood as more than actual practices of technology-enhanced counter-surveillance, and becomes a subversive practice of re-imagining dominant narratives and hierarchies. In this sense, sousveillance actually does have a democratic impetus, “enhancing the ability of people to access... data about their surveillance” and, if not fully “neutralize surveillance” (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003: 333), at least work towards creating opportunities for “freedom practices” (Browne 2015: 21) that build platforms for nuanced critique. The subversive potential of copwatching is both complex and culturally contingent. When situated within broader social justice movements that employ careful, intersectional analysis of both the police and surveillance technologies, tactics of sousveillance can facilitate a “plurality of veillances,” as Mann argues (in this issue), and live up to their political potential.

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