Dialogue | Introduction: The State of Sousveillance

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In a landmark essay published in the third issue of *Surveillance & Society* in 2003, Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003: 332) described an inverted form of “veillance” (or watching) by resituating surveillance “technologies of control on individuals, offering panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority.” And, with that aim in mind, the concept of *sousveillance*—an “inverse panopticon” (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003: 332) that, at its simplest, “means ‘watching from below’” (Mann and Ferenbok 2013: 19)—was born. Only a few years later, Ganascia (2010: 491) argued that “sousveillance now plays a dominant role in modern societies.” This, we are told, ushered in “a new regime... in which powerful people were permanently observed by those they are supposed to dominate” (Ganascia 2010: 493). Indeed, “sousveillance is... generally framed in terms of social control, but it flips the tables on the traditionally panoptic framing of state surveillance and power, offering individual citizens (or noncitizens) some ability to watch back and hold the state accountable” (Newell 2019: 63).

Indeed, Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003: 347) described sousveillance as liberating, as a way to confront power and turn it on its head. Others have described it as “the present state of modern technological societies where anybody may take photos or videos of any person or event, and then diffuse the information freely all over the world” (Ganascia 2010: 489–90) and as achieved when “the power of recording people or events is put in the hands of everyday people who can cheaply acquire a small sousveillance device, such as a cell phone camera, and disseminate the recordings and images all over the world via the Internet” (Fan 2016: 406). These developments, of course, have led to a flood of surveillance/sousveillance—a world where many are watched by many, and where many records are kept.

A simple keyword search of *Surveillance & Society*’s past issues, through issue one of volume eighteen, reveals that the term “sousveillance” has appeared in dozens of published pieces (and, of course, the term has also been used in papers published in numerous other venues). Although a plethora of surveillance-related terminology has grown up within the surveillance studies literature over the past few decades, including related terms like inverse surveillance (Brucato 2015), coveillance (Palmås 2015; Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), and reciprocal surveillance (Newell 2014), sousveillance appears to have attracted considerable attention and staying power within surveillance studies research.

Browne (2015: 21) used the term “dark sousveillance” to refer to ways in which black epistemologies had been used to contend with “the tools of social control in plantation surveillance or lantern laws” or other forms of antiblack surveillance—for example, practices that “appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged [these antiblack social control measures] to facilitate survival and escape.” Thus, dark sousveillance is a “way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight... [plotting] imaginaries that are oppositional and are hopeful for another way of being” (Browne 2015: 21). Burke (2020: 75) has recently framed “digital sousveillance” as a research method, involving “the co-optation of

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digital data and the use of computational methods and techniques (e.g., network analysis) to resituate technologies of control and surveillance of individuals to instead observe the observer—as a method for studying surveillance” (Burke 2020: 77). *Sousveillance* practices can be intimate, like when a civilian engages in “incidental *sousveillance*” (Brucato 2015: 456) by recording a police officer with their smartphone in an unplanned moment of witnessing (Newell 2019: 63). But they can also be broadly impersonal, as in cases of “crowdsourced countersurveillance” where many individuals contribute data—such as locational data about police—creating “countersurveillance assemblages [that] attempt to neutralize surveillance measures through mapping their locations in real time” (Wood and Thompson 2018: 34).

Besides cell-phone cameras and other forms of recording by those not in power of those who are, the concept of *sousveillance* has also been applied to forms of state surveillance that serve the purpose of overseeing (underseeing?) powerful state institutions, like the police. For example, police body-worn cameras have been referred to as *sousveillance* devices, at least “in the sense that they are mechanisms of control by the people using transparency to check power holders” (Fan 2016: 407). However, from a different (perhaps more realist) point of view, police body-worn cameras are not examples of *sousveillance*, but rather as “counter-*sousveillance* devices” because the “police are using the wearable cameras as surveillance devices to procure video evidence to use against criminalized civilians” (Brucato 2015: 468). This situation is complex, as “the crossed lenses of police body cameras and bystander cameras... represent a clash between two visibility regimes and, in many ways, a disintegration of the distinction between *sousveillance* and surveillance in practice” (Newell 2019: 72). This clash exemplifies how “the coexistence of surveillance and *sousveillance* leads to a fragile equilibrium that is identified by Steve Mann as a state of ‘*equivoillance*’” (Ganascia 2010: 491; see also, e.g., Kerr and Mann 2006). Kerr and Mann (2006) described the promise of *equivoillance* as “a balance between surveillance and *sousveillance*.” They claimed that:

If achieved, such a balance will result in a better ability to document the world from a diversity of perspectives. From an evidentiary point of view, an *equi-veillant* state would better preserve the contextual integrity of *veillance* data. For example, the decentralized capture of personal experience would provide an enriched evidentiary record which could prevent one-sided (surveillance-only) data from being taken out of context. The search for truth and justice has already experienced glimpses of this potential as more and more controversial episodes of public interest are caught-on-tape. (Kerr and Mann 2006)

Or, as Monahan (2006: 527) has framed it:

When viewed from a distance, surveillance and counter-surveillance appear to be engaged in a complicated dance, with the larger, cumbersome partner pushing and pulling while the smaller, defter dancer negotiates herself or himself—and others—out of harm’s way. The oafish leader is, of course, the state and corporate apparatus surveilling the public, and the partner is the collective of activist adversaries circumventing or destabilizing surveillance systems.

For this Dialogue, we asked contributors to reflect on the current state and future of *sousveillance*. We asked them to look back at the intervening years since 2003 and consider whether *sousveillance*—in theory and on the ground, in practice—has served its liberating purpose or whether it has simply become another surveillance tool (or data source) for governments and/or corporations, maintaining the very structures of power it was designed to overcome. Have the long-touted social, political, and democratic benefits of *sousveillance* been realized in practice? Additionally, contributors were asked to imagine what the future of *sousveillance* might look like. These reflections were guided by reference to Mann, Nolan, and Wellman’s (2003: 347) initial depiction of *sousveillance*’s possible futures:

The social aspect of self-empowerment suggests that *sousveillance* is an act of liberation, of staking our public territory, and a leveling of the surveillance playing field.

Yet, the ubiquitous total surveillance that sousveillance now affords is an ultimate act of acquiescence on the part of the individual. Universal surveillance/sousveillance may, in the end, only serve the ends of the existing dominant power structure. Universal sur/sousveillance may support the power structures by fostering broad accessibility of monitoring and ubiquitous data collection. Or as William Gibson comments in the feature length motion picture film CYBERMAN (“You’re surveilling the surveillance. And if everyone were surveilling the surveillance, the surveillance would be neutralized. It would be unnecessary.”).

This Dialogue encompasses five contributions. The first, penned by Steve Mann, provides an update on Mann’s conceptualization of what sousveillance is and what it has become, as well as a glimpse at efforts to integrate the concept of sousveillance into cross-, multi-, or anti-disciplinary academic discourse. Mann also offers new definitions for, and ways of thinking about, surveillance and sousveillance. Diverging in approach from oft-cited definitions (e.g., Lyon 2007: 14), Mann defines surveillance as “the veillance performed by an entity that has the authority to prohibit other veillances”¹—or as “the veillance that has the capacity to forbid other veillances”—claiming that this (potential) prohibition is evidence of the hypocrisy inherent in surveillance—i.e., when oversight is limited and/or unidirectional. Consequently, then, Mann defines two forms of sousveillance, what he calls “hierarchical sousveillance” (“the veillance that does not have the capacity to forbid or allow itself or other veillances”) and participatory sousveillance (“the recording of an activity by a participant in the activity”). Mann continues by examining a variety of veillances, connections to wearables, and their convergence in healthcare. Building on the ideas of “Quantimetric Self-Sensing” and “Quantified Self,” he presents what he calls “health sousveillance”—or “a bold new engineering, medicine, law, and business initiative aimed at empowering individuals with technologies like wearables that let them access, understand, and use their own health data in new ways.”

In their contribution, Borradaile and Reeves reflect on the relationship between sousveillance and capitalism. Building on Zuboff’s (2017) notion of surveillance capitalism, the authors argue that sousveillance practices, although framed as counter-surveillance moves, feed into the aims of surveillance capitalism. Indeed, as they note, “If the *modus vivendi* of digital capitalism is to continuously develop new sites and methods of data creation, sousveillance—including cop-watching—can allow digital corporations to discover, capture, analyze, and potentially undermine yet another relatively esoteric activity.” They call out for caution, arguing that “while calls for transparency vis-à-vis the police (and other authorities) generally make good political sense, we should be cautious about why, how, and to what ultimate effect sousveillance is carried out.” To situate their arguments, Borradaile and Reeves analyze the American Civil Liberties Union’s Mobile Justice app, an app designed specifically to document police violence and brutality. Although sympathetic to the intended aims of such sousveillance practices, Borradaile and Reeves remind us that these tools often rely closely on surveillance-capitalist infrastructure for their very functionality, such that sousveillant practices may be complicit, to some degree, with digital capitalism and the surveillance structures it supports. In their own words, “sousveillance will fail to live up to its political promise if it relies on the technologies and methods of surveillance capitalism.”

Similarly, Brandim Howson argues that “professionalised forms of sousveillance... partake in the same visual practices as the state that they seek to denounce” and that such “sousveillance has ‘serve[d] the ends of the existing dominant power structure’” (citing Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003: 347). Brandim Howson draws from a case study of visual activism taking place within Brazil’s favelas, and in particular at ways in which these sousveillant practices have become professionalized by the introduction of “written field guides, video manuals, and training courses” produced by NGOs and other organizations that “give detailed guidance on how to actually capture moments of state abuse.” Far from the “spontaneous image capture” (Kreimer 2011: 344; Newell 2019: 62) that characterizes much incidental, unplanned sousveillance, Brandim Howson finds that these professionalized practices have organized “the visual field into something unexpectedly composed.” This results in the collection of *evidence* that is useful to both the activists and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations in this introduction refer to dialogue pieces in this issue.

the organizations that provide the training. However, Brandim Howson argues, “to participate in the police’s visibility also works to maintain the social order that they are active in constructing.”

Harju explores copwatching in Germany, specifically a project called “Cop Map.” The project emerged in 2018 within an established ecosystem of activist organizations and projects, predominantly “driven by activists from marginalized communities,” and “was born out of opposition towards new legislation to increase police powers in Bavaria.” Much like some forms of what Wood and Thompson (2018) call “crowdsourced countersurveillance,” Cop Map utilized an interactive map that members of the community populated by indicating where the police have been seen (although it has now become essentially a map of static CCTV locations, after use decreased). Within the project, sousveillance “subverts police surveillance and disrupts the internalized assumptions on who or what qualifies as ‘dangerous.’” To counter criticism that the project feeds into and perpetuates “the logic of the surveillance state,” collected data is abstracted and not individualized. In the words of one of the activists, this is “to highlight the systemic nature of the problem” rather than “expose individual transgressions.” In conclusion, Harju argues that sousveillance “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.” Drawing analogies to Browne’s (2015: 21) “dark sousveillance” as “an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance,” Harju argues that “projects like *Cop Map* successfully insert counter-narratives into mainstream discourse.”

Returning to the topics of equiveillance and police body-worn cameras, Houwing and Ritsema van Eck examine the introduction of police body-worn cameras in the Netherlands. They argue that more regulation is needed to ensure body cameras meet their stated aims of equiveillance. In contrast to how body cameras were framed in the United States (that is, as tools of police oversight), they explain that Dutch police adopted body cameras “to record and discipline the behaviour of people interacting with the police.” In fact, police body cameras were introduced as a direct response to police concerns about civilians wielding smartphone cameras and recording the police, as such sousveillance “excludes the perspective of the police officer.” In some ways, these cameras act as tools of equiveillance, although they seem to start from the position that the police need more control, and more surveillance, in the face of widespread sousveillance. In the end, Houwing and Ritsema van Eck argue that a police body camera is not “just another neutral observer” and that, “If bodycams are truly to function as ‘objective referees,’ then the Dutch police must consciously assign this role to them” (citing Flight 2019).

The contributions to this Dialogue highlight both the breadth of sousveillance as a concept and the continuing focus within surveillance research on visual forms of sousveillance directed at visualizing state (e.g., police) action. They also offer some concise and illuminating critiques of sousveillant practices, and continue to raise questions about whether sousveillance—in theory and practice—has really lived up to its liberating premise or whether it simply feeds more data into the data-hungry, capitalist surveillance state. Of course, these contributions represent only a small set of viewpoints, and we haven’t space here to reference much of the voluminous sousveillance literature that has grown up in the past couple of decades. There is room for additional research and argument here. Hopefully this Dialogue can serve as provocation for even more discussion, research, and debate within the surveillance studies community focused on the past, present, and future of sousveillance in society.

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