



Dialogue | Sousveillance Capitalism

Glencora Borradaile

Oregon State University, USA
glencora@eeecs.oregonstate.edu

Joshua Reeves

Oregon State University, USA
reevejos@oregonstate.edu

Abstract

The striking commercial success of Shoshana Zuboff's 2019 book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, provides us with an excellent opportunity to reflect on how the present convergence of surveillance/capitalism coincides with popular critical and theoretical themes in surveillance studies, particularly that of sousveillance. Accordingly, this piece will first analyze how surveillance capitalism has molded the political behaviors and imaginations of activists. After acknowledging the theoretically and politically fraught implications of fighting surveillance with even more surveillance—especially given the complexities of digital capitalism's endless desire to produce data—we conclude by exploring some of the political possibilities that lie at the margins of sousveillance capitalism (in particular, the extra-epistemological political value of sousveillance).

Introduction

The relationship between surveillance and capitalism hardly needs any introduction. Since the birth of *Surveillance & Society* in 2002, that relationship has been one of the most common topics explored in this journal. Yet the striking commercial success of Shoshana Zuboff's 2019 book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, has provided us with further opportunities to reflect on how the present convergence of surveillance/capitalism coincides with popular critical and theoretical themes in surveillance studies,¹ particularly that of sousveillance. Sousveillance, of course, has provided an important point of reflection for scholars since the publication of Mann, Nolan, and Wellman's landmark 2003 essay. Its uptake as "inverse surveillance," in particular, has been especially generative: a number of scholars have given historical and theoretical breadth to this kind of sousveillance and, in doing so, they have often offered it as a potential political response to problems like discrimination and police brutality (see, e.g., Mann and Ferenbok 2013; Reeves 2017; Wood and Thompson 2018). Indeed, several of the pieces in this dialogue focus on sousveillance as a response to police interventions (Brandim Howson in this issue; Harju in this issue; Houwing and van Eck in this issue). To explore how and where the themes of sousveillance and surveillance capitalism converge, this short piece will first analyze how surveillance capitalism has molded the political behaviors and imaginations of activists. While acknowledging the theoretically and politically fraught implications of fighting surveillance with even more surveillance (see Monahan 2018)—especially given the complexities of digital capitalism's endless desire to produce data—we conclude by exploring some of the political possibilities that lie at the margins of sousveillance capitalism (in particular, the extra-epistemological political value of sousveillance).

¹ See Ball (2017) as well as the rest of the *Surveillance & Society* review forum published in 2019.

Sousveillance and Capitalism: Some Complications

At one point, Zuboff (2019: 15) echoes the work of earlier surveillance scholars by averring that what we now call “social connection” is more or less a side effect of surveillance capitalism: “Digital connection is now a means to others’ commercial ends.... [S]urveillance capitalism feeds on every aspect of every human’s experience.” For Zuboff (2019: 460), the cute, addictive social practices we’ve all come to know and love are simply the by-products of a particular economic arrangement: “[Google’s] Page and [Facebook’s] Zuckerberg understand the transformation of society as a means to their commercial ends.” The tastes and habits of consumers, therefore, have been (and will continue to be) transformed in accord with the commercial ends of Google, Facebook, and other companies that thrive on software, clicks, and cookies.

Key to this transformational project, of course, is developing technologies and methods to monitor and influence as many social, financial, and biological processes as possible. Naturally, this also includes the “transformation” of those activities that we currently classify as *political*—even those political activities commonly regarded as essential ingredients in the fight against injustice and state violence. Sousveillance, particularly under the guise of cop-watching, has become one of the latest arenas of political activism slated for this kind of “transformative” makeover. While activists still encounter various methods of “strategic incapacitation” and other police-driven strategies for squelching citizen-to-police sousveillance (Wilson and Serisier 2010: 69), there is now a competing impulse that ostensibly pits police interests against surveillance/capitalist interests. Surveillance capitalism—like capitalism in general—thrives by cultivating and stimulating any kind of activity on which it can capitalize, including activities that in some ways might be disadvantageous or ideologically opposed to capitalism itself. This development is most interesting, perhaps, when viewed vis-à-vis police strategies to avoid scrutiny. As Torin Monahan (2006) points out, many sousveillance technologies and practices designed to create police accountability—cop-watching, for example, or police uniform cameras—have motivated officers to retreat into privileged spaces of privacy and illegibility. In Monahan’s (2006: 527) words this creates something of a “complicated dance,” with police constantly developing compensatory practices for countering this inverse surveillance. In some cases, this can create a skewed view of a situation from the perspective of the abuser (see Houwing and van Eck in this issue). Moreover, it can have the effect of amplifying brutality, as in the case of otherwise monitored officers retreating to police bathrooms or other private spaces to mete out especially horrific abuse to arrestees.

This retreat into illegibility is not only politically alarming; it also defies surveillance capitalism’s peculiar constructions of privacy. 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. The very nature of the digital enclosure—which, now that it is released from any geographical grounding, refuses to recognize even conceptual limits—is to expand and permeate (see Andrejevic 2007). Hence, 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.

Sousveillance and the Value of Political Compromise

The ACLU’s Mobile Justice app offers a good case in point. Mobile Justice follows in a long line of technologies usable or re-purposable as inverse surveillance technologies—including hand-held camcorders, wearable cameras, and related innovations. What is potentially unique about Mobile Justice and related apps is that they are designed specifically for responding to police brutality. According to Mobile Justice’s California affiliate, the app has a few basic purposes: to “record, report, and witness” interactions between citizens and the police, as well as to inform nearby activists when these interactions are occurring (Mobile Justice CA 2019). The app does this by allowing users to capture live video footage that is then sent automatically to the ACLU, a method which ostensibly prevents cops from confiscating the user’s

phone and deleting its contents. It also allows users to broadcast their locations to other app users in that geographic vicinity, allowing them to dispatch to the area and provide supervision and support.

While there are many theoretical and political critiques of cop-watching, it is easy to sympathize with the goals that motivate this kind of sousveillance. Using mobile technology to foster accountability is, in many ways, an appealing method of fighting police brutality and other injustices. Yet these apps also beg for another level of analysis. While it bears mentioning that Mobile Justice was developed by a Google.org grant, there is little point in singling out Mobile Justice. The more interesting matter, for us, centers on the escalating convergence of digital capitalism and media-centric political activism. As David Lyon (2019: 72) puts it, “Surveillance culture has an intimate and mutually-informing relationship with surveillance capitalism.” Even protest-focused surveillance cultures are highly reliant on the bread-and-butter tools of digital capitalism: like many similar apps, Mobile Justice is only available to iOS (Apple) or Android (Google) users; and, with its use of GPS networking and data capture/production/dissemination, Mobile Justice relies for its very functionality on corporations whose signature technologies utilize surveillance-capitalist methods. When Mobile Justice users organize protests, gather with their comrades, discuss political strategy, and record the behaviors of cops (and, at the same time, the behaviors of themselves and their peers), they are now in the somewhat strange position of doing so in the ultimate service of a financial system that cultivates networked activity for its own enrichment. All this is to say, Mobile Justice illustrates how active complicity with digital capitalism has become a necessary condition of political participation (and really, of course, a necessary condition of contemporary social, political, and professional life).

Hence the “spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance” (see Ullrich and Knopp 2018) imbricates Mobile Justice and similar sousveillance apps (or apps repurposed for sousveillance) into the fabric of surveillance capitalism’s ongoing reconstruction of the activist political sphere—a reconstruction that finds politics increasingly articulated via the peculiar affordances of digital technology. And just as surveillance technology provides the beating heart of our emergent financial system, it has also burrowed itself into the resistance strategies and political imaginations of activists. Cop-watching and other sousveillance activities have been granted considerable momentum by mobile media technology, especially the now ubiquitous smartphone (with its cameras, microphones, GPS, social networking apps, and sensors). On one hand, it is impossible to separate this hardware and software from the digital corporations that rely on surveillance data to make money, decode human action, and carry out live behavioral experimentation on the rest of us; on the other hand, it is likewise impossible to separate the impulse to carry out sousveillance from these devices that now sketch the contours of the politically possible (Ingraham and Reeves 2016).

Conclusion

That being said, we should be careful not to discount sousveillance projects that thoughtfully aim to circumvent surveillance-capitalist methods, such as Cop Map. Instead of relying on mobile media for sousveillance of police, Cop Map has users anonymously post text reports to a website. Although not user friendly and “easily... manipulated with fake reports,” Cop Map was “successful as a discursive intervention” and may help imagine ways in which sousveillance could be designed to skirt the problems we point out above (Harju in this issue). Indeed, 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” (Harju in this issue). This is a reminder of the different goals and political potential that sousveillance can have—from verifiable video evidence that can “lead to formal sanctions against perpetrators of abuse” (Howson in this issue) to activist pieces such as Cop Map to the many other ways in which sousveillance can both assist and counteract the state, corrupt authorities, and capital. Keeping these complexities in mind, while many scholars have pointed out the political ambiguities of cop-watching and other forms of sousveillance, we have joined this chorus of critique by claiming that sousveillance will fail to live up to its political promise if it relies on the technologies and methods of surveillance capitalism. This problem provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the non-epistemological, non-intelligence-based political significance of collective sousveillance. Instead of choosing to view cop-watching as participating in a spiral of surveillance and counter-surveillance, we could view it instead as an

opportunity to participate in the synergy of real-world collective political activity. This insistence on on-the-ground collective action could, in the end, be considerably more valuable than whatever surveillance/intelligence is produced by activists' phones (which echoes Harju's assertions in this issue about sousveillance serving as a "subversive practice of re-imagining dominant narratives and hierarchies"). Abiding by the increasingly popular mantra of "turn off all media" (see Packer 2013; Reeves 2016) could not only block the infiltration of surveillance capitalism into the contours of our political resistance—it could also foreground the more general political value of physical-space assembly (either coordinated or spontaneous), which can foster new relationships based in common activity, create stronger ties within social movements and organizations, and generate the intangible (yet potentially immense) value of collective physical synergy.

That being said, in closing we should return to one of this piece's recurrent themes: the political ambivalence of sousveillance practices like cop-watching. When reflecting on these issues, we are reminded of Jodi Dean's (2009: 47) wise insight into how we might approach the fact that digital and mobile technology have completely reconfigured our notions of political participation: "Valued as the key to political inclusion and democratic participation, new media technologies strengthen the hold of neoliberalism and the privilege of the top one percent of people on the planet. At the same time, globally networked communications remain the very tools and terrains of struggle, making political change more difficult—and more necessary—than ever before." Dean assures us that despite the obnoxious encroachments of surveillance capitalism, those tools will be necessary in the struggle for political change. And perhaps she's right. It's in this spirit that we offer our critique of sousveillance capitalism: so that we can continue to discuss how to ethically (and effectively) navigate the strange, compromising times that so clearly lie ahead.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Joy Jensen, Christopher McKnight Nichols, and the Oregon State University Center for the Humanities for supporting this research.

References

- Andrejevic, Mark. 2007. Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure. *The Communication Review* 10 (2): 295–317.
- Ball, Kirstie. 2017. Review of Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. *Surveillance & Society* 17 (1/2): 252–56.
- Dean, Jodi. 2009. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ingraham, Chris, and Joshua Reeves. 2016. New Media, New Panics. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33 (5): 455–67.
- Lyon, David. 2019. Surveillance Capitalism, Surveillance Culture, and Data Politics. In *Data Politics: Worlds, Subjects, Rights*, edited by Didier Bigo, Engin Isin, and Evelyn Ruppert. 64–77. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mann, Steve, and Joseph Ferenbok. 2013. New Media and the Power Politics of Sousveillance in a Surveillance-Dominated World. *Surveillance & Society* 11 (1/2): 18–34.
- Mann, Steve, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman. 2003. Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments. *Surveillance & Society* 1 (3): 331–35.
- Mobile Justice CA. 2019. How It Works. *Mobile Justice CA*. <https://www.mobilejusticeca.org/how-it-works/> [accessed November 20, 2019].
- Monahan, Torin. 2018. Algorithmic Fetishism. *Surveillance & Society* 16 (1): 1–5.
- . 2006. Counter-surveillance as Political Intervention? *Social Semiotics* 16 (4): 515–534.
- Packer, Jeremy. 2013. Epistemology Not Ideology OR Why We Need New Germans. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10 (2/3): 295–300.
- Reeves, Joshua. 2016. Automatic for the People: The Automation of Communicative Labor. *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 13 (2): 150–65.
- . 2017. *Citizen Spies: The Long Rise of America's Surveillance Society*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Ullrich, Peter, and Philipp Knopp. 2018. Protesters' Reactions to Video Surveillance of Demonstrations: Counter-Moves, Security Cultures, and the Spiral of Surveillance and Counter-Surveillance. *Surveillance & Society* 16 (2): 183–202.
- Wilson, Dean, and Tanya Serisier. 2010. Video Activism and the Ambiguities of Counter-Surveillance. *Surveillance & Society* 8 (2): 166–180.
- Wood, Mark Andrew, and Chrissy Thompson. 2018. Crowdsourced Countersurveillance: A Countersurveillance Assemblage? *Surveillance & Society* 16 (1): 20–38.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York, NY: Public Affairs Books.