From Social Movements to Social Surveillance

How the technology of the Occupy movement became a mobile app for policing.

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The video recording of the Los Angeles Police Department's assault on Rodney King in 1991 was revealing—not only of the LAPD's blue code of silence but of the power of video to bear witness after the fact. Everyone who saw the video gained an opinion, as well as a personal vantage point, as if they were present at the scene as events unfolded. The subsequent acquittal of the officers involved led to another critical event in the history of videography—24-hour news coverage of South Central as it burned to ruins. The attack on Reginald Denny, a truck driver who happened to be driving through the area at the time and was pulled from the cab of his truck and beaten during the 1992 LA “uprising,” was aired live by a news helicopter circling overhead. Both the King and Denny

videos were particularly shocking in their brutality and intensity. While each became the hallmark witness in their respective court cases, they also triggered a technological revolution in policing and mass surveillance that is only now starting to reach its full potential.

Aggrieved by the King case in 1991, the Mayor of Los Angeles assembled the Christopher Commission, an independent investigative body to examine the LAPD's handling of police-brutality claims. The Commission recommended the LAPD install tamper-proof in-car video cameras to provide an objective account of interactions between officers and the public, promote transparency, and ensure accountability. For the Commission, cameras were another way to address the mismanagement of patrol officers; the eye of the camera was a stand-in for the eye of a supervisor.

Nearly 26 years after the assault on King, such in-car camera systems have become widespread in the U.S. The reduced cost and size of recording equipment has even allowed installation of cameras on the bodies of individual officers. Yet Americans continue to debate their usefulness and the reasoning behind their implementation. Proponents argue there is only justice to be gained. Critics dispute the benefits, claiming the cameras are easily manipulated. A study published in 2003 by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) showed that when video evidence from car cameras is present, defendants plead guilty 96% of the time. On the other hand, only 5% of complaints against the police were sustained [1]. The report would indicate that the real value of in-car cameras is as evidence against defendants. In terms of modifying police behavior,

the IACP could not determine if the presence of cameras affected the number of complaints against officers or if the frequency of complaints reduced the amount of money paid out in lawsuits. Moreover, questions remain as to who will have access to the video data, how long it will be stored, and what are the associated costs of storage. A 2016 study by Pang and Pavlou of Temple University [2] reported a 3.64% *increase* in shooting deaths when officers wore body cameras. This research illustrates that there is a higher cost to the widespread adoption of body cameras than was previously predicted.

What happens when citizens are armed with cameras? In recent years, video footage from everyday smartphone cameras has been instrumental in activists' demands that government record, assess, and discipline officers involved in incidents of excessive force.

In the police-related killings of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Walter Scott, and Alton Sterling, it was amateur video evidence that helped mobilize public support, motivate nationwide protests, and lead to federal inquiries into police conduct. However, much to the disappointment of family members and activists, in each case the officers involved were not indicted. One key lesson from these events suggests that amateur videos do not carry sufficient weight to change established police practices. It is one thing to become a journalist, another to be a citizen-investigator. What would it take to transform the legal infrastructure and democratize the power of captured video for social justice?

FOLLOW LEEDIR

Police departments and district attorneys recognize the value of citizen

videos to prosecutions and are actively seeking new sources. In 2014, The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department and Citizen Global, a tech company in Venice, CA, launched a software app called the Large Emergency Event Digital Information Repository, or LEEDIR, that solicits video from the public. Citizen Global describes LEEDIR as "an eyewitness photo and video platform that can be activated for free by law enforcement and relief agencies during a major emergency event. Immediately after activation, the LEEDIR app and website are available to receive uploads from citizens." According to Citizen Global, LEEDIR emerged from the needs of the police during the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. However, tracing the software's history illustrates that when Occupy protesters failed to adopt the video platform provided by the company, it was rebranded to serve the

technological needs of police departments (see the accompanying figure).

In 2009, as broadband connections entered homes, Citizen Global sought to federate high-quality media, especially video, from different sources into a single archive that could be accessed and remixed by a community. Back then, the company described its platform as "high-value, low-cost content monetized through multiple channels and platforms." With an "if we build it, they will post" attitude toward content making, Citizen Global's original business model was selling media infrastructure, where the maker uploads footage and adds a price tag for reuse and other users can view and edit the content using an embedded studio. Unfortunately, the crowd-sourced video model did not produce much content. So, Citizen Global began to offer other services, including

online branding and in-house content creation. Today, Citizen Global is a multi-million-dollar enterprise specializing in brand management and social-media campaigns. From 2009 to 2011, it designed media campaigns for companies like Deepak Chopra, Wikipedia, and Vans Warped tours, as well as charities like Susan G. Komen.

Launched October 2011 during Breast Cancer Awareness month, the “What I Would Have Missed” campaign for Susan G. Komen provided a platform for survivors to tell their personal stories by reflecting on what they would have missed the most had they not been tested early. The videos, labeled “call-outs,” were then published on the Citizen Global and Komen websites and shared through social media to promote the brand and solicit donations. While Citizen Global expanded its client base to include Nextel and Sesame Street, the crowd participation for documenting live events and social-movement campaigns remained limited while continuing to search for a user base that would use the platform to its full potential.

In Fall 2011, a group from the company visited the encampment of Occupy Los Angeles, offering a “free platform” for media production. Dubbed “Studio Occupy,” it consisted of a dedicated archival website for activists to directly upload videos from their mobile phones. Citizen Global extolled its value to citizen journalism; users could remix other people’s footage, draw from a unique catalogue of tags

specific to the movement, and put out calls for group projects. Citizen Global had seized on a real problem facing this networked social movement—lack of a central repository for activists to share, remix, and distribute terabytes of video footage being uploaded daily from Occupy camps worldwide.

Occupiers, myself included, listened to the pitch in the media tent at “Occupied Los Angeles City Hall.” The protesters who downloaded the app and tried to make videos with it experienced glitches. Others uploaded only raw footage from their computers to back up the many gigabytes of material already captured but did not engage further. Some remained skeptical, remarking that the terms of service stipulated that uploading recordings meant losing their copyright. Citizen Global issued a call-out on Thanksgiving for Occupiers to describe “what they are thankful for,” but the call was criticized by Occupiers for ignoring indigenous struggles.

While the video platform was described by Citizen Global as a gift to Occupy protesters, I wondered what the company gained by giving away its technology for free. Citizen Global would be absorbing the infrastructure costs of hosting the website, developing a user base, and maintaining the archive. Some Occupy protesters suggested Citizen Global was a Hollywood front that intended to make a movie from all the free videos. Those who make documentaries for a living

laughed at the thought of hidden profits. As I dug deeper, it became obvious it had repackaged the same technology marketed to Komen, Chopra, and Wikipedia to make Studio Occupy. The company had not even bothered to change the marketing or deployment strategy in its call-outs.

People from Citizen Global continued to hang around the media tent at Occupy LA and earnestly participated in the movement. But as the movement faded, so, too, did the Studio Occupy app. Despite efforts to launch it through several press releases and training sessions, it never gained a significant user base. Activists, for the most part, continued to use YouTube and Vimeo for archiving and sharing footage because the technology worked and the bugs were mostly known. From these cases, though, we saw a shift in how Citizen Global sought out new clients, from crowds to brands and back to crowds. The crowd as archive model failed because Citizen Global misunderstood the media-distribution strategy of Occupy protesters; Occupy media spread quickly because it was not warehoused on a single platform but spread across all of them.

The ubiquity of surveillance cameras in public places, alongside the increased prevalence of smartphones, created a new environment for the generalized documentation of all public events. A key event in citizen witnessing occurred in April 2013 during the Boston Marathon bombing, when thousands of videos from citizens were posted online or sent directly to the police. Reddit and 4chan discussion boards turned into evidence command centers as ordinary citizens provided analysis of their videos and stills. The situation quickly got out of hand, as the *New York Post* reported on the Reddit investigation, which ended up being a case of tragically mistaken identity. Citizen Global took this crowdsourced failure to accurately identify a suspect as a marketing opportunity to rebrand its video platform for an entirely new user base—the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department.

Citizen Global’s history of crowdsourcing video coupled with content creation provided a proof-of-concept that the technology to archive and sort

The various incarnations of Citizen Global’s content-sharing platform.

videos was working and stable. All the hype associated with movements had to be expunged from the marketing of the rebranded platform. Then, in 2014, Citizen Global introduced LEEDIR, calling it a “scalable infrastructure on-demand” that “uniquely addresses strict evidence collection, authentication, security and chain-of-command requirements, while enabling collaborative analysis from any device.” The marketing had changed in favor of the deliberate speech of administration and law enforcement. The software had finally found its user base. Movements do not seek single closed archives; bureaucracies do.

RETHINKING NETWORKED SOCIAL SURVEILLANCE

Given this context, where police departments appreciate the power of video evidence coupled with the rise of Black Lives Matter, Citizen Global recognized that citizen-generated videos as evidence requires a kind of surplus production, curation, and editorial spin. The Occupy movement’s technological praxis of ubiquitous documentation was adopted by police departments far and wide and will continue to bear witness long after the events are over. For example, in 2014, the police deployed LEEDIR during a so-called “pumpkin riot” fueled by rowdy students in Keene, NH. With the footage submitted, the Keene Police Department was able to make 25 arrests. Police in Santa Barbara, CA, deployed LEEDIR during “Deltopia,” an annual student party, making eight arrests. In the cases of retroactive arrests, use of the video justifies the existence of the archive.

The story of LEEDIR illustrates how police departments learn new tactics from movements while also seeking out new techniques of social surveillance. As with the reuse of the Susan G. Komen platform, the LEEDIR app is Studio Occupy stripped of its logo and repurposed for law enforcement. Occupy was a beta test for the software, providing the proof-of-concept needed to show the police that the product could be used to solicit participation from those they seek to monitor. For protesters, the consequences of participating in the LEEDIR project could be

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chilling. The point is not that uploading videos online to create a database for use within a movement could also become a database useful for police. Instead, the politics of participation for the user are entangled with the business ethics of the provider, especially in moments of beta testing and midstream engagement.

It is not just that some business owners might be cunning opportunists but also that policing evolved because of the movements’ experiments with technology. It is not just that Occupy protesters were duped into using a technology that might be used to surveil them (the same could be said of posting event plans on social media), but that participating in the creation and innovation of new broadcast technologies involves multiple consequences and effects for different groups. Incorporating social media and online broadcasting technologies into a movement’s repertoire is an important component of any networked social movement. But the lessons of LEEDIR show a sharp distinction among the politics of participation by companies, police, and protesters when using the same technology.

A scaled-down version of the LEEDIR app—called the Digital Witness—is now publicly available, offering police the ability to solicit photos and video from individuals. The purpose of the app is for citizens to monitor other citizens, including friends, family members, neighbors, co-workers, and strangers, as well as the police. But should citizens expect an app like this to level the field of power? The app’s

slogan—“If you see something, send something”—effectively turns networked social surveillance into a practice of good citizenship.

CONCLUSION

What would happen if the assault on Rodney King had been uploaded to the Digital Witness? Probably nothing. Like the recent cases of police-involved killings, King’s video led to a trial because movement leaders in Los Angeles, aided by the mainstream media, made the video evidence too horrifying to ignore by showing it over and over. It would be an uphill battle to insist that videos captured by police-car or body cameras be made accessible due to civic and public relations issues. However, given that citizens own their own content, and because the Internet provides a mechanism for open distribution, can citizen digital witnessing work differently? The failure of Studio Occupy proves that movements do not aspire to archival practices like LEEDIR, mainly because there is no need for content analysis. While openness was the original intent of the designers of Studio Occupy, building infrastructure is not enough to motivate citizen participation. Instead, activists must push for policies and procedures that ensure justice is carried out no matter who is seen on video. To do so, they must be invested in building technologies that not only store and distribute video evidence but also facilitate legal defense for those who must be protected and issue legal warrants for those who should be held accountable. In short, we must bear witness on our own terms, lest we become prisoners of our own devices.

References

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Biography

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