Transformations

2013 Issue No. 23 — The Internet as Politicizing Instrument

"Walls of Seeing": Protest Surveillance, Embodied Boundaries, and Counter-Surveillance at Occupy Sydney

By *Frances Shaw*

Introduction

In mid-November in Sydney Australia, after a thousands-strong rally that stretched between Town Hall and Martin Place, several hundred Occupy Sydney protestors attempted to re-Occupy Sydney in a new site in Hyde Park. The previous site of occupation had been Martin Place, Sydney. Like other occupations around the world, Occupy Sydney was concerned with corporate greed, the global financial system, and the corporatisation of public space. However, it also touched on many issues not specific to the City of Sydney, that had relevance to the local political context. In particular housing affordability, unused buildings, indigenous politics, and homelessness were issues that were part of the Occupy Sydney conversation. An earlier Occupation, which lasted eight days, had been broken up in a dawn raid on October the 23rd that involved arrests, some violence, and confiscation of property.

During this "rally to re-Occupy Sydney," police appeared to be highly motivated to prevent protestors from staying overnight and setting up permanent camp once more in the city centre, and engaged in a range of tactics to prevent this from taking place. Large numbers of New South Wales Riot Police formed a perimeter around the protest site, engaging in a number of intimidation tactics, including intrusive surveillance techniques. They gave protestors a number of "deadlines" to leave. At one point, several police with audio-visual recording equipment, including a sound boom which they hung over the protest intrusively, walked around the protestors in circles of narrowing diameters. At another point they advanced in larger numbers, causing the majority of protestors to form a standing huddle which they maintained for several hours while other protestors passed in water and food and gave encouragement and support, as well as forming a physical barrier between police and protestors in the huddle. A street musician sang protest songs to much applause. The huddle eventually broke up later that night. Police continued intimidation tactics, including removal and disposal of "unclaimed" (i.e. unattended) property, advancing on protestors with police horses, walking through the crowd with and without cameras, arresting people who used offensive language, simultaneously donning leather gloves and unhooking their batons, notifying protestors of deadlines to leave that changed throughout the night, implicit and explicit threats of violence, and verbal abuse.

For this exploratory essay into the themes of surveillance and counter-surveillance, I interviewed two participants who were present on the night, as well as drawing on my own experiences. A third source of information about this night is the footage available on YouTube that documents these events. There were many moments from the Occupy movement's most active phase that would have served as an appropriate case study to explore surveillance and counter-surveillance practices in reference to the literature. Police engaged in practices of ostentatious surveillance at each of the major Occupations, and it was part of the action repertoire of Occupy protestors to use

mobile media, particularly streaming video, photographs, audio recordings, and YouTube video to document police brutality and other tactics. I participated in Occupy protests in Seattle, Boston, and New York as well as Sydney, all of which brought up questions that resulted in similar observations, as well as watching hours of streaming video and archived footage from these and other occupations. I have chosen this particular event because it occurred in my hometown. Furthermore, I was physically present and invested in local political issues; I had come to know many of the other participants; and it was a suitable site for research given that it was a finite event that occurred on a single evening.

I describe the tactics and activities of the police in this case, as well as the reactions of protestors to these tactics. However, my focus is on the tactics of counter-surveillance used by protest participants: the ways that protestors creatively and symbolically responded to these acts of intimidation and harassment, and how such tactics have been explored in the literature. I explore the uses of mobile media as a tool for counter-surveillance in this and other events, and the significance of these media within the movement, as well as the uses of play and the affective relationship between police officers and protestors at times like these when both groups co-exist for long periods of time in close quarters. I comment on the embodied and affective aspects of protest experience for participants. However, I emphasise that the playing field here is uneven. Police had the advantage – both in terms of access to audio-visual technology and in terms of freedom of behaviour and movement. In particular, the uses of technology by police was non-transparent whereas for protestors it was transparent. As well, police had the weight of the state and all of its surveilling apparatus. The point of this essay is not to argue that protestors equipped with mobile phones and handheld cameras can take the power back, but rather to explore the creativity and alternative networks of surveillance that they did build. Through creative acts of counter-surveillance, protestors demand against hope that public institutions (including the police) live up to their name and serve the public, including those who are engaged in protest actions.

Surveillance in literature about digital media and protest

I am interested in this event as a case study of surveillance as intimidation, as well as the use of counter-surveillance (or as it is sometimes named, "sousveillance" (Goggin and Clarke 539) among protestors. I draw on a growing literature that looks at mobile media and mobile video technologies during protest, as well as literature that identifies the political uses of the mobile phone. Wilson and Serisier argue that since the protests that surrounded the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, as well as other events in the anti-globalisation protest movement ten years ago, there have been "significant transformations in the organization and deployment of counter-surveillance methods"(166). At the same time, changes in the spaces of internet sociality have created a different environment for the distribution and sharing of counter-surveillance outputs.

There is a body of literature that explores the possibility, whether critically or uncritically, that mobile technologies enable more people to become empowered, and a growing literature that questions these assumptions about mobile media (Breen). Goggin and Clark have explored the way mobile phones were used to extend practices of witnessing and human-rights reporting, particularly in development contexts. They point out that the video camera functionality of many modern mobile phones is particularly important for demonstration reporting (593). Lee discusses the use of surveillance, authoritarian force, and counter-surveillance during candlelit vigils against the importing of US beefin South Korea in the mid-Summer of 2008 . When the police attempted to forcefully break up the protests, "dozens of camera phones were flashed almost simultaneously to document the scenes of such violent suppression" (Lee 168). Wilson and Serisier note that there has been a proliferation of counter-surveillance footage in the last ten years as a direct result of technological changes for protestors to take footage and also to distribute footage to others (166). They draw on a body of literature about counter-surveillance to argue that "[c]lear distinctions between the watcher and watched are therefore increasingly

undermined by the rhizomatic intertwining and intersecting of networks of observation" (167). In this way the tactics and actions of police become more transparent than was previously the case (Wilson & Serisier 167). Monahan discusses how surveillance can be both marginalising and empowering (498), exploring the ways surveillance can express both "care" and "control" (497) This paper explores this interplay between care and control on behalf of both police and protestors in the context of this one event.

A significant shift in research on this topic has resulted from the way police misconduct can be easily captured on mobile media and shared with millions of people. Goldsmith, like Wilson and Serisier (167), describes "policing's new visibility" (914) in this social context. Police officers also have little control over how this captured material is used. For example, images of Lt. Pike (also known as the "Pepper Spray Cop") from the University of California, Davis campus police force became emblematic of the senselessness of police brutality during the Occupy movement. This was partly due to the way his image was exploited as an internet meme and cropped into a variety of other images and cultural reference points. Protestors and sympathetic onlookers are able to use protest images and images of police brutality in creative ways that become an enduring symbol of the movement.

The focus on the actions of the police has been described by participants as a distraction from the main issues of the movement, including inequality and a critique of the global financial system. Certainly while many movement participants described the conversations that occurred at times of non-confrontation as the most important part of the movement, it was the images of conflict with police and clashes that drew the most viewers of streaming video. Nonetheless protestors have some control over the images that become symbolic of the movement, which is enhanced by access to and use of mobile media capture of images, video streaming, and social media.

These events have implications for our understanding of contemporary protest and the relationship between protestors and the state in democracies such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. Through the use of mobile media distribution platforms such as YouTube, UStream and other live streaming services, protestors are able to form networks of mobilisation and representation. As Gerbaudo explains in his work on social media and choreographies of protest, the tools of social media can be used as both a means of representation, drawing attention to police brutality and reasons for political action (such as through interviews with individual protestors), as well as a means for organisation of collective action and mobilisation (3). In the indignados protest in Spain, for example, "Twitter feeds and live-streaming video in particular generated an attraction to the square, facilitating the mobilisation of supporters and sympathisers towards this symbolic centre" (16).

Police practices of surveillance

The motivations of police in the use of practices of surveillance are different from those of protestors. Their goal is not to distribute the surveillance through social media or even the mainstream media. They engage in surveillance for other purposes. Protestors at the Rally to Re-Occupy Sydney and the assembly in Hyde Park afterwards described particular practices of surveillance by police. MR, a public sector worker from Sydney who had been part of Occupy Sydney from the beginning, listed the following tactics on the part of the large numbers of police present at the gathering:

> Filming you in interactions with other police. Shining of bright lights attached to cameras in your face, and using strobing effects. Walking near or close to you without use of camera and then suddenly bringing out a camera. Lining up in file to create "walls of seeing" and walking in formation around the group, circling, blocking people in. Amassing a presence and being aggressive about surveillance, then falling back to limited policing presence and interaction. (MR)

This description shows that police alternated between passive and active observation. MR explained that the tactic changes were "akin to waves of pressure." The police, mainly from the riot squad, stood around the protest loosely at times and formed strict lines or "walls" at other times. In phases of active observation, they moved "through the protest, walking between and breaking up groups of people, [and] inspecting belongings," explained KA. After dark, the police "would form teams of three or four and walk around looking at everyone, shining torches, walking through groups seemingly without paying any particular attention to anything" (KA). Nonetheless, protestors were constantly on guard and unable to relax and have conversations about politics, or set up infrastructure to maintain a long-term camp, because their belongs would be instantly seized upon as "abandoned property."

Photo taken by the author at Occupy Sydney on November 14, 2011. The photo is of a protest sign that shows (in pen and ink illustration) three Police officers forming a barricade in front of a lone protester, who is holding a sign that says "99%." One police officer appears to be holding a baton, and has a threatening grimace. Another carries a riot shield, and the third has a walkie talkie attached to his shoulder. A surveillance camera looms over the shoulder of the officer who appears to be brandishing a baton. Between the illustrated Police Officers and the illustrated protestor the words "JUST WORK NO DISCUSSION" appear in capital letters.

The placard above shows the way that surveillance is seen by protestors as one of the main tools available to police in quashing protest, alongside the use of force as symbolised by the baton. My interviewees expressed their embodied reactions to surveillance in the events on November 5: "I felt disconcerted and presumed of committing a crime. It made me feel nervous and scared. I was worried if I did or said anything it could have been used as evidence," explained MR. KA said that while he did not have concerns about the police videotaping the crowd, "the physical intrusion of personal space was problematic and felt more like intimidation than surveillance". The surveillance was out in the open and had no stated purpose. At best its purposes were non-transparent, at worst it seemed malevolent to the occupiers:

> I didn't know why I was being filmed, for what end or where the film would be
> stored and who would have access to it. I felt "watched" as if I was being leered at for

amusement (MR).

Police maintained their tactics, alternating between relaxed poises and purposeful stances, between looking away and chatting amongst themselves and moving in on the crowd throughout the day. As a consequence, protestors were in a state of constant awareness and watchfulness of the police and their activities. KA explained that "it meant that you had to always be alert and ready for something to happen, [for example] ready to respond to a police request to get up so they could check for camping equipment if they decide that you are too comfortable." In particular protestors took video of interactions between them and police, such as when one participant was asked to remove his property from Hyde Park. He narrates what he has been asked to do and what he is doing in response:

> Participant [walking flanked by three police officers]: I've basically been told that if I don't take my camping gear – occupation gear – or my meditation mat and another meditation mat, they would seize it. So I'm moving on and cooperating in the best way possible, and making sure that they can't seize my property or arrest me for "camping." Committing an offense. [to police officer] Is that the local government act that you guys are enforcing or? ("occupysydneymedia" Nov 6 2011).

A member of the media team explained the importance of this documentation:

> [I saw that] stuff was going on in a circle, so being a member of the media team I feel it's my duty to grab my camera as quickly as possible and go and photograph whatever it is that's happening to the best of my ability. I went in, I photographed, I got as many shots off as possible. ("occupysydneymedia" Nov 5 2011).

The embodied and affective consequences of such long-term hyper-vigilance (from 2pm until 2am when the police removed occupiers from the park) were marked:

> After this particular night, with the actions of police, including prolonged surveillance as well as physical and verbal harassment, I had a panic attack. I had never been exposed to such prolonged surveillance or harassment in my life. (MR)

The surveillance tactics of the police elicited fatigue, fear, despair, anger, and defeat. However, protestors maintained their place until they were told to leave, threatened with mass arrests and violent removal at 2am. As well as the negative responses that surveillance elicited, at times both protestors and police moved between motivations of care and control (Monahan). Protestors engaged in practices of both counter-surveillance and play.

"The whole world is watching": Protection, play, and Counter-surveillance

Counter-surveillance responses are derived from the affective moment of indignation and sense of physical intimidation, vulnerability, and danger in response to police tactics. Protestors also draw on rhetorics of illegitimacy about the power being used against them in these circumstances. Mobile video and in particular streaming video provides a sense of limited protection for protestors because others are watching, and this may have added to a sense of political authority over the expression of power that they felt was illegitimate. Although some participants had a sense of duty to record particular interactions, often the responses to surveillance, and indeed the acts of counter-surveillance and resistance that protestors engaged in were ad hoc and reactive.

As Melucci explains, contemporary "movements are hidden networks of groups, meeting points, and circuits of solidarity which differ profoundly from the image of the politically organized actor" (115). Outside the physical location of protest, there are also the less visible networks of action – those who watch the live streamed footage or YouTube videos from different locations,

those who share and follow, like and comment, even those who disagree with the movement and act discursively against them. Gerbaudo describes the way social media is used as "choreographies of action." (39) Whether they are physically present or not, participants can "act together without being reduced to one identity or one place" (27). However, contemporary protest also reaffirms the importance of place. Indeed the use of mobile and social media, including counter-surveillance, is an act of choreographing, which Gerbaudo defines as "*the mediated 'scene-setting' and 'scripting' of people's physical assembly in public space*" (40). Through YouTube and live-streaming of events, protestors engage in practices of interpretation and narration for those watching at home or around the world. But on the ground in Sydney, participants responded to their own surveillance by police in different ways. Some responded angrily, some responded with humour and a sense of fun, and others responded with counter-surveillance and the careful documenting of police activity. For example, some participants responded to their surveillance by blocking or subverting those acts of surveillance:

> Police filming was responded to by either blocking the camera's view by carrying a giant banner around and holding it up in front of the camera operator or by taking the completely opposite approach by injecting oneself into footage as if it were a camera at a music festival or something. (KA)

Protestors also engaged in a number of practices of counter-surveillance through play, not only in terms of the use of mobile recording devices but also surveillance with the physical gaze. Protestors turned the situation around on the police, letting them know that they were watching them. Protestors mimicked the practices of police through the playful reversal of roles. For example, MR explained that with some other women, she walked:

> [b]etween protestors and police, actively mimicking the police in their form of physical stance, staring at police, watching them, keeping an eye on them as they were surrounding and keeping an eye on us. We did this specifically as women, as most of the police (riot police) were men, and physically threatening. It was a way to take their power away, to let them know we understood the tactics they were using. (MR)

Likewise, KA described moments when, annoyed by the invasion of space by police, protestors invaded the space of police huddles and lines:

> In response to the "inspections" where police would move through and break up groups, protestors conducted inspections of their own, walking through groups of police, standing close to them and pointedly making observations about the police presence, [reporting to each other and] the police that their ranks looked to be behaving themselves, that they should be left alone because they aren't causing trouble. (KA)

Participants in these acts of surveillance drew on ideas of authority and rhetorics of police officers as "public servants:"

> The counter-inspections make a naive gesture towards the idea that police report to the people rather than the other way around. It is an assumption of an authority that is not legislated by the state. [We] have the power / obligation to ensure the police are behaving themselves, we will decide whether they have done their duty. It was a useful way to reject the status of being an observed / passive subject or victim of oppression. It allowed protestors to mentally relax because the performance of authority was sufficient to counter the sense of being subject to authority. (KA)

Throughout the night, police arrested people for minor and constructed offences, confiscated property or demanded that property be removed, and on one occasion moved on a homeless

participant against City of Sydney policy. In these cases:

> Police actions were filmed. Footage was uploaded to the internet and distributed via [social media] within 24hrs. (KA)

When taking footage of police on the night of the rally, protestors used strategies like zooming in on police identity badges in order to hold these officers accountable if they breached the limits of what was acceptable behaviour. However, at certain times police appeared to have removed their identity badges so that they could not be identified. One participant narrated an incident in which a police officer wearing a cardigan "so I couldn't see his badge" physically pushed her and tried to restrain her until another woman informed him that he was acting illegally (occupysydneymedia Nov 5, 2011). The removal of badges occurred at times when police were moving in on the group of protestors. This action was perceived by protestors as a threatening act – by removing their identity badges, police were sending a message that they were prepared to cross the threshold of what was allowable. In these cases filming the police's faces gave protestors a sense of safety and protection. In some ways the protestors also saw this filming as protective of the police, preventing police from going too far or acting against their better judgement:

> [T]he filming thing is strategically important e.g. for any potential court cases etc. In this sense filming "for my protection and yours" isn't just a sarcastic response but a statement of fact. Given that the police are acutely aware of how quickly media can be distributed and the potential for mass consumption it similarly to counter-inspections gives the opportunity for protestors to put police on the spot by performing authority. (KA)

In this way protestors and police engaged in a dance of technology and surveillance with one another. Both had access to technology, but it was uncertainties about the extent both of technology and the proficient use of technology that led to the uncertainties of communication and interaction between protestors and police. In taking film at close quarters of the protest with ostentatious equipment, police engaged in a display of technological might. However participants in the protest saw this simultaneously as a performance or an act of intimidation, and the carrying out of malevolent intent (actual surveillance). Neither side seemed certain of how technology would be used against them:

> The police are gathering footage of us with these cameras that go like right up in the air [laughs] and everybody's covering them. But they've pretty much got footage of all of us. I've got nothing to hide, I don't have a criminal record or anything, so . . . All we're doing is sitting in a public place. So the police are getting footage of us and we're . . . if you can see, they're getting footage of us for who knows what reason. We're sitting in the park. (DavinaFaerie)

It was their lack of knowledge about what would be done with this information that made it so threatening. The discomfort of embodied relations between police and protestors was amplified by the use of surveillance media and the use of mobile media as counter-surveillance. The transparency of Occupy Sydney's methods and use of media also contrasted with the lack of transparency about police use of media and technology to control participants.

Protest and the technologized public sphere

The uses that mobile media and technologies of surveillance have for protestors at protest events is mitigated by the uncertainties about and unevenness of access to these technologies. There is a contrast between the symbolic understanding of data, surveillance, and observation technologies that people have in contemporary life (Breen 196). The embodied practice of shared space between people enacting democracy and people enacting authority is overlaid with the complications of surveillance and the possibilities of control and coercion. While access to mobile

media allows people to, in principle, hold authorities accountable for their uses and abuses of power, it simultaneously constrains and allows for different forms of sharing (Breen 183). Participants' uncertainties about how their images would be used by police meant that their actions holding police accountable through counter-surveillance were also uncertain.

Frances Shaw is a Research Assistant at the University of Sydney in the Department of Media and Communications. She has recently completed her doctoral research at UNSW, which focused on the political significance of feminist discourse in Australian blog networks. She has presented her research in multiple disciplinary contexts, including communication studies, gender studies, Internet studies, and political science. Her research interests include discursive politics and online social movements. She is currently researching memes as political communication, as well as working on a project with Gerard Goggin researching Australia's Internet histories through a case study of Bulletin Board Systems in the late 1980s through to the mid 1990s.

Works Cited

Breen, Marcus. *Uprising: the Internet's Unintended Consequences*. Champaign, Ill.: Common Ground Pub., 2011.

'DavinaFaerie'. "Occupy Sydney. Police go Crazy in Park. 5 November. Hyde Park." YouTube Video. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrTULm6kHL4>

Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. 1. London: Pluto Press, 2012.

Goggin, Gerard, and Jacqueline Clark. "Mobile Phones and Community Development: a Contact Zone Between Media and Citizenship." *Development in Practice* 19.4-5 (2009): 585-597.

Goldsmith, A. J. "Policing's New Visibility." *British Journal of Criminology* 50.5 (2010): 914-934.

Lee, Dong-Hoo. "Mobile Snapshots and Private/Public Boundaries." *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22.3 (2009): 161–171.

Melucci, Alberto. *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Monahan, Torin. "Surveillance and Cultural Practice." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52.4 (2011): 495-508.

"occupysydneymedia." "Occupy Sydney Media: Update on Police Action." YouTube Video. 5 Nov 2011. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBCg6Q4h44I&list=UUMdsMk-u9OC4iZl5bcZY2oA&index=84>

---. "Occupy Sydney: Sleeping Bags Are Illegal." YouTube Video. 6 Nov. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkB20JGdCP0>

Wilson, Dean, and Tanya Serisier. "Video Activism and the Ambiguities of Counter-Surveillance." *Surveillance & Society* 8.2 (2010): n. pag.