Chapter 20
Before Smart Phones and Social Media:
Exploring Camera Phones and User-Generated Images in the 2000s

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ABSTRACT

Using social media platforms to document excessive police force at times of social unrest has become common practice among protestors around the world, from Cairo, Egypt to Ferguson, USA. Smart phones and social media have become indispensable tools to demonstrators as they organize, communicate, express dissent, and document any police brutality aimed at them. This chapter discusses the function of mobile communication technology as tool of sousveillance through an analysis of camera phones and the user-generated images in the mid-to-late 2000s. It argues that camera phones facilitated lateral surveillance and sousveillance practices, enabling ordinary individuals to watch social peers or those in power positions, albeit in non-systematic, non-continuous and spontaneous ways.

INTRODUCTION

The uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen in 2011, the anti-government protests in Turkey in 2013, the demonstrations in Ferguson, USA in 2014 and several other protest events around the world have one thing in common: citizens' extensive use of smart phones and social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to express political dissent, to organize protest events, to share images from the ground and to document police wrongdoing. This chapter offers a historical background to better understand the role that smart phones and user-generated images play in the contemporary media landscape and in the visual matrix of information. It shows that before smart phones and social media, citizens used camera phones to capture raw images of police beatings, official wrongdoing and the like, and relied on email and text messaging to share them with news outlets. This chapter explores the implications of camera phones on the public sphere in the mid-to-late 2000s, and argues that camera phones and the

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attendant sousveillance practices did not necessarily empower individuals against those in higher positions of power, but rather made them implicit partners in the broader surveillance regime. It should be noted that the aim of this chapter is not to compare camera phones (now an extinct category) with smart phones, but to analyze the former within the technological, social and cultural dynamics of the 2000s. Therefore, the argument of this chapter should not be applied to smart phones in a blanket fashion.

USER-GENERATED IMAGES

User-generated images captured on digital cameras and/or mobile phones were the subject of much conversation in the 2000s. Wide availability and lower prices for these devices, together with video-sharing websites, as well as advanced broadband and bit torrent technologies, had made it possible for users to generate and distribute visual content. User-generated content varies from popular entertainment videos to those of "real" events caught on tape for purposes of documentation. Stealthily captured photographs of Prince Harry's Nazi costume or Kate Moss's cocaine sessions provided the entertainment media with "good" visuals and spurred sensational news coverage, while images of snowstorms or wildfires fed websites and airwaves with mini-spectacles. In another category, one also found disturbing images such as those of Saddam Hussein's execution or Al Qaeda's beheading of American soldiers. There were also photographs or videos of national or personal calamity such as those from the Southeast Asian tsunami in December 2004 or the London subway bombings in July 2005 that provided audiences with eyewitness reports and shaped media coverage in significant ways. To these, we can add user-generated images of political events which circumvent official sources of information, censorship or news blackouts, and make claims to "truth" by way of their unfiltered, unedited nature. For example, when foreign and local journalists were banned from reporting the political protests in Iran in the summer of 2009, citizens on the streets were able to capture photographs and videos on their mobile phones and then disseminate them online, as well as tweet their eyewitness reports.

News media have come to rely on user- generated images to fill web pages and airwaves with free visual content, taking advantage of users' free labor yet labeling it as the power of the user. For example, CNN has a special online section and a weekly TV program, *iReport*, which is devoted to user-generated stories, videos and photographs.[1] On its website, one can also find the *iReport* toolkit, the "handy guide" that instructs users on how to "shoot great videos," "take better photos" and trains them on journalistic elements such as the "ingredients of a story" and the "art of sound."[2] Meanwhile, MSNBC promotes its *First Person* section, which features user stories, photos and videos "both serious and light-hearted."[3] Fox News also encourages users to pitch in via its *U- Report*, "wherever you are," and showcases user videos on its website and on TV that range from catnaps to hotel bombings. [4] The Weather Channel posts *iWitness Weather* videos displaying footage of floods, storms, and hurricanes.[5] Celebrity gossip and entertainment news sites such as TMZ, Gawker, and Radar Online invite audiences to call or email should they have "news" or "hot tips" about celebrities.

Attracting viewers online (sometimes in the millions), user-generated images make their way into the mainstream media, eventually re-doubling as content on television. User-generated visual content is either integrated into existing news or news magazine shows or forms the basis for shows exclusively devoted to user videos. Examples of the latter include CNN's weekly *iReport*, ABC's *i-CAUGHT*, and Headline News' *News to Me*.