

Chapter 16

Recording and Reporting: Camera Phones, User-Generated Images and Surveillance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the changing nature of surveillance by way of user-generated images, especially caught-on-tape style photographs and videos captured on mobile phones. Through a discussion of examples from Turkey (as well as from around the world), this chapter discusses the emergent function of the camera phone as a tool of surveillance used to document the misconduct of other individuals or authority figures. Aligned with the complex, decentralized networks of the synoptic paradigm rather than the more static, closed model of the Panopticon, camera phones intensify the visibility of anyone, anytime, anywhere. They facilitate 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. One could assume that camera phones and these new socio-technological practices they permit are empowering the individuals. However, by engaging in sousveillance, individuals become implicit partners in surveillance society.

INTRODUCTION

On October 17, 2006, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was in his armored limousine riding from his private residence to the Parliament in Ankara. Just as he arrived at the Parliament, he suffered a sudden drop in blood sugar and passed out momentarily. The Prime Minister's chief secu-

rity guard and a member of the Parliament riding with him that morning asked the driver to make a quick turn to the nearest hospital. As they arrived, the security guard and the driver jumped out of the car at the same time, with the panic-stricken driver forgetting the keys in the ignition. The doors of the armored vehicle locked automatically because of the special security system, trapping the unconscious Erdogan inside. As the guard and the driver tried helplessly to unlock the doors,

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the alarm system was activated, making matters worse. After ten long minutes, they were able to open the door and rushed the Prime Minister into the hospital, only by smashing the front window of the vehicle with a sledgehammer they grabbed from a nearby construction site. The Prime Minister was hospitalized for about nine hours and later his condition was stable.¹

The next day the unfortunate event was dubbed a “security scandal” by the Turkish media with reports primarily based on an amateur video of the incident captured by a bystander on his camera phone and photographs taken by a reporter. It was perhaps the raw, unedited nature of the video footage, showing the panic, alarm and incompetence of the security personnel in full view that made the whole incident even more shocking. Were it not for this camera phone footage, perhaps the newspaper columnists and media pundits would not have called the qualifications of the Prime Minister’s security team into question, and more significantly, raised doubts about his health.

A reporter from the *Milliyet* newspaper who happened to be in the vicinity of the hospital and took photographs of the incident claimed that the Prime Minister’s press secretary asked him not to give the photographs to his editors and “keep them to himself.”² Surely, the press secretary did not want the media splashing these unflattering images across the country, but the amateur footage, on the other hand, made its way to local news sites and programs in any case, within hours.

In recent years, Turkish media has been feeding its own and the public’s appetite for such scandalous stories, aided in no small measure by the availability of amateur videos and photographs, most commonly captured on mobile phones. This chapter will take a close look at these caught-on-tape style images, and the new ways of watching they engender—especially ways of watching other individuals and authorities, public figures and those in power positions. In contemporary media landscape, mobile phones and the images captured on them have come to occupy a key position in

the visual matrix of information. In Turkey, for example these images have significantly shaped the public discourse pertaining to certain, highly-charged events such as children physically abused in a public orphanage, police beatings, a school principal harassing female students, and other such raw and shocking data now available in the public sphere in a way never possible before the ubiquity of personal image-capture devices.³

USER-GENERATED IMAGES

Before moving on to a more detailed discussion of how the increasing prevalence of images captured on mobile phones shapes and alters ways of watching and being watched, it is necessary to give a general overview of the uses and implications of user-generated images.

User-generated images captured on digital cameras or mobile phones have been the subject of much conversation in recent years. Wide availability and lower prices for these devices, together with video-sharing websites, as well as advanced broadband and bit torrent technologies, have 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. Some of these now well-known images are of celebrities snorting cocaine, politicians making racist comments, or citizens rallying in political demonstrations. Stealthily captured photographs of Prince Harry’s Nazi costume or Kate Moss’s cocaine sessions provide the entertainment media with “good” visuals and spur sensational news coverage, while images of snowstorms or wildfires feed websites and airwaves with mini-spectacles. In another category, one can find disturbing images such as those of Saddam Hussein’s execution or Al Qaeda’s beheading of American soldiers. There are also photographs or videos of national or personal calamity such as those from the Southeast Asian tsunami in December 2004

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