



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 7, 2012

“Sousveillance”: When the Watched Become the Watchers

Seems that our coverage of the ever-widening and increasingly sophisticated web of surveillance being spun by state and federal agencies is only scratching the surface — literally.

Recently stories have been published regarding a subtler weapon being developed and deployed by private citizens determined to defend themselves from the government and its widening war against our constitutionally protected civil liberties.



Take for example the following [report published by PetaPixel](#):

Here's something crazy for you to think about: photography is often prevented these days because authorities can see the cameras being used, but what happens if/when [the human eye can be used as a camera](#) or if/when memories can be projected onto a screen? At that point, anything people can see and any location people can visit will be fair game for photographs, and society will simply have to adapt and live with it.

In [an article written for Time magazine](#), author Steve Mann calls this form of wearable monitor “sousveillance.”

Says Mann, “Not only will authorities and shops be watching us and recording our comings and goings (surveillance as we know it today), but we will also be watching and recording them (sousveillance) through small wearable computers like Digital Eye Glass. This affects secrecy, not just privacy.”

He continues:

Whether this is the camera of a Peeping Tom, or a Peeping LEO (law enforcement officer), it elevates a previously inanimate object into something that has the capacity to “see.” This ought to raise far more important privacy concerns than a technology like Digital Eye Glass that merely provides sight to a living being where we already expect there to be sight.

Mann rightly reports that government does not have monopoly control of surveillance. Corporations actively record the video and audio of customers, some secretly, some openly. Although these establishments routinely disregard privacy concerns in pursuit of their surveillance policies — typically attributed to the need to protect safety — they aren't as happy to have customers turn the camera's eye on them.

Writes Mann:

Ironically, the very establishments that oppose wearable cameras are usually the places where lots of surveillance is used. Thus I coined the new word “McVeillance” to denote a highly mass-produced (“McDonaldized”) form of veillance, in the same way that a “McMansion” is a mass-produced mansion. McVeillance also implies a prohibition on individual veillance; for example, a prohibition on what we call “sousveillance”. The term “sousveillance” stems from the contrasting French words sur, meaning “above”, and sous, meaning “below”. So “surveillance” denotes the



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“eye-in-the-sky” watching from above, whereas “sousveillance” denotes bringing the camera or other means of observation down to human level, either physically (mounting cameras on people rather than on buildings), or hierarchically (ordinary people doing the watching, rather than higher authorities, large entities or architectures doing the watching).

Thus, McVeillance, for example, is the installation of a large number of security cameras in a restaurant while at the same time [physically assaulting guests for using their own camera to photograph the menu](#).

There are those encouraging individuals to purposefully don these sousveillance devices in order to watch the watchers, be they corporate or government.

In [a paper he co-authored in 2003](#), Mann suggested a scenario wherein the wearing of the sousveillance glasses could stop the expansion of the surveillance state:

These disparate observers are reacting to the pervasiveness of surveillance in contemporary western society (Stanley and Steinhardt 2003). Such surveillance is everywhere but often little observed. Organizations have tried to make technology mundane and invisible through its disappearance into the fabric of buildings, objects and bodies. The creation of pervasive ubiquitous technologies — such as smart floors, toilets, elevators, and light switches — means that intelligence gathering devices for ubiquitous surveillance are also becoming invisible (Mann and Niedzviecki 2001; Marx 1995; Lefebvre 1991). This re-placement of technologies and data conduits has brought new opportunities for observation, data collection, and sur/sousveillance, making public surveillance of private space increasingly ubiquitous.

All such activity has been surveillance: organizations observing people. One way to challenge and problematize both surveillance and acquiescence to it is to resituate these technologies of control on individuals, offering panoptic technologies to help them observe those in authority. We call this inverse panopticon “sousveillance” from the French words for “sous” (below) and “veiller” to watch.

[An article published by FCW online](#) describes the current state of the sousveillance movement:

As social media and mobile technologies continue to expand, government officials and employees increasingly may be targets of “sousveillance” — a French term for ‘bottom-up’ surveillance — carried out by ordinary citizens in the coming years, according to an Internet trend analyst.

“It is the ordinary watching the powerful,” Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, said in a lecture sponsored by the Federal Web Managers Council interagency group on Dec. 13.

While the term sousveillance is not yet commonly used in the United States, the practice has become fairly prevalent here in recent years as more citizens carry and use video recording devices such as iPhones in public spaces and at public events. While bystander videotapes of law enforcement activities have been controversial on occasion, many forms of citizen videotaping of public officials’ activity are hailed by transparency advocates as a sign of increased engagement and transparency in society.

For agency leaders and other government figures, that means videos of their public speeches and appearances, along with tweets, comments on Facebook, blog posts and other public communications could be collected and displayed on social media websites in near real time, Rainie



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said.

An example is that Occupy Wall Street protesters and their supporters have made it a practice of video-recording police and public officials who interact with them and posting those videos online, Rainie said.

There is an argument to be made that the constant fear of surveillance is converting the United States (and the entire globe) into a wall-less prison. Every individual, regardless of criminal intent or activity, is being monitored by the government using technology not available to the general public, thus making us subjects of a state-run surveillance regime that is itself invisible and impenetrable.

Until now.

Mann and his co-authors explain:

Digital technology can build on personal computing to make individuals feel more self-empowered at home, in the community, at school and at work. Mobile, personal, and wearable computing devices allow people to take the personal computing revolution with them. Sousveilling individuals now can invert an organization's gaze and watch the watchers by collecting data on them.

Perhaps providing personal spying apparatuses to the public is a solution to the scourge of constant government surveillance. Mann and others quoted in this piece believe that if the watched match the watchers in ubiquity of their viewers then maybe the multiplicity will mitigate the harm being done to our privacy and our psyches.

On the other hand, perhaps the invisible electronic walls keeping us as virtual prisoners in a global gulag will fall faster as we consistently demand adherence to constitutional principles of individual liberty on the part of those chosen to lead, particularly when these officials attempt to protect their power by monitoring the population for signs of dissent.



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