'WATCH THE BORDER 24/7, ON YOUR COUCH' : *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program* and the politics of informing

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Abstract

This paper will focus on a website called Texas Virtual Border Watch Program. On this open access site, anyone can participate in controlling the USA–Mexico border via a network of webcams. The program is evaluated in the light of some recent changes in surveillance theory. Surveillance has seized being centralised and people increasingly participate in surveillance previously conducted by the authorities. People are also encouraged to observe and inform. Many are eager to participate and take active roles in surveillance. The role of the citizens is to verify and to gather evidence. Issues relating to security – either one's own or the nation's – provide people reasons for being vigilant. The voyeuristic nature of surveillance is justified by its protective nature. Surveillance is used in order to cope with the fears about different or deviant population: Mexican, undocumented or illegal. There is also symbolic value in the program: apart from giving the public new agency, it promotes the border sheriff. The program is an example on how the differentiation of the watchers and the watched, previously forming the basis of surveillance theory, has disappeared. The Texas Virtual Border Watch Program proofs to be an example of the politics of informing.
Keywords: amateur surveillance, Internet, fear/insecurity, borders, Mexico, USA.

INTRODUCTION

In 2006 the USA launched a temporary on-line website called *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program*. It was opened as a permanent site in October 2008. The idea of the site is simple: anyone who wishes to participate in the US border control can register and have access to a network of webcams and sensors that feed live streaming video observing the border between USA and Mexico. When visitors spot something suspicious, they can send an immediate alert to the border sheriff. Arguably, the border watch rides on the culture of fear which US

citizens face when trying to protect their country from a threat coming from South. It is also a perfect example of the politics in which people are encouraged to be committed in surveillance previously conducted by the authorities.

DESCRIBES SOME OF THE LATEST THEORIES AND TRENDS IN SURVEILLANCE AND AMATEUR PARTICIPATION

Surveillance technologies are developing rapidly, becoming more powerful and easy to use and access. The difference between 'a traditional surveillance camera' and various other equipment is blurring. Further, citizens are encouraged to participate in surveillance in various ways. The politics of responsibilization work in many environments, from local shops to international borders. The theory in the background of this paper comes largely from my recent article 'Hijacking surveillance? The new moral landscapes of amateur photographing' (KOSKELA, 2009) and my aim is to apply this to *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program.*

Recently, there has been a lot of reasoning about the *everydayness* of surveillance (HAGGERTY; ERICSON, 2000; STAPLES, 2000; LYON, 2001; BALL; WEBSTER, 2003). The everydayness, however, does not merely mean that people are increasingly controlled *by* sophisticated devices, or that they leave traces and are increasingly traceable. The other side of this development is that people increasingly *have access to* what can be described as surveillance technologies. The 'embeddedness' of surveillance in the everyday thus realises in people's lives in two ways: both as intensified control (by others) and as active agency in producing control (by themselves). This dual change leads to more images which can be used for multiple purposes. Surveillance has fundamentally changed from the 'centralized political apparatus' to a practise to which anyone can contribute. The old fashioned traditional surveillance systems are still in use but they are accompanied by multiple voluntary surveillance practices.

In the end of 1990's Whitaker (1999, p. 134) stated that 'the one-way transparency sought by the Orwellian state has been realized much more effectively in the private than in the public sector'. From there on, the use of surveillance technologies has slide from private *sector* to private *individuals*. Changes have taken place step by step, but the direction has been clear: technology is used in ever smaller 'units' and its distribution has become ever freer. The practices of social monitoring have become dispersed and overlapping (BALL; WEBSTER, 2003; HUEY, 2006).

In 1990's surveillance was still mainly described as something conducted by the authorities. From that moment to present days, there has been a fundamental change. People are increasingly *participating* in the production of surveillance in their everyday lives. This change has been enabled by proliferation of information and communication technologies, especially by two lines of development: new equipment – for example interactive webcams – and new arena – global communities in virtual space of the Internet (KOSKELA, 2006).

One crucial change in traditional surveillance came along with the *'digital turn'*. Computerisation meant that surveillance became more subtle and intense, and that the computer integrated surveillance systems linked visual surveillance to the other forms of technological control (e.g. WHITAKER, 1999; LYON, 2001). Digitalisation enabled 'social sorting' and intensified 'the ability to store, sort, classify, retrieve and match which is all important' (NORRIS; ARMSTRONG, 1999, p. 219). The 'politics of location' become ever more complex, since it became technically possible to place the surveillance monitors into another floor, building, city – or country (KOSKELA, 2002). Surveillance appeared to 'transcend both spatial and temporal barriers' (MCCAHILL, 1998, p. 41). Images from the system could be circulated easily and effectively both locally and globally turning 'everyday life into a theatrical spectacle' (HILLIER, 1996, p. 102). The global arena of the Internet moved surveillance integration to a new level. While old surveillance watched over an anonymous crowd, the new technology, at its best, could recognise individuals and combine faces to data bases of criminals, activists, etc. New technologies as Whitaker (1999, p. 140) points out, 'render individuals "visible" in ways that Bentham could not even conceive, but they are visible to multiple gazes coming from many different directions looking for different things'.

'On participation'

As Huey, Walby and Doyle (2006, p. 149) have argued, surveillance

> '[…] is usually conceptualized as an activity engaged in by elites for purposes of controlling subordinate social classes. Indeed, the usual understanding of the term **surveillance** is of an omnipresent, omnipotent, and centralized political apparatus keeping tabs on citizens.'

Little by little, this definition has been challenged. Currently, post-Foucauldian theory is in a process of changing the paradigm of surveillance studies. Surveillance has seized being

centralised and spread around to directions which only ten years ago were yet to be imagined. Previously, it was argued that the mass of surveillance data would be so huge it is 'impossible to handle' (LYON, 2001, p. 52), and hence 'useless', and that '[w]hile more may be seen, less may be known' (NORRIS, 2002, p. 256). New ways of using visual material require re-definition of usefulness or uselessness because the potential 'uses' have been multiplied. Several changes have undermined the Foucauldian panopticon metaphor. Since Mathiesen (1997) wrote about 'synopticism', it has become clear that more and more people are constituted as viewers. Surveillance is omnipresent.

People 'participate in formerly centralized forms of surveillance and verification' (ANDREJEVIC, 2007, p. 222). While some of the new forms of control are increasingly involuntary, it is also evident that many people are eager to participate in new technologies which involve various forms of control (WEIBEL, 2002). People are not just passively adjusting to surveillance but take active roles in it (TINIC, 2006). The differences between the authorities and the public, outsiders and insiders, the controlled and the controllers, have become less clear.

People are, more and more, in various ways, encouraged to observe and inform, to take part in crime prevention and control, to be committed. This development is parallel to what has been happening in the field of traditional surveillance: increasingly, monitors are turned towards the audience, hence, almost forcing people to play roles in maintaining control. There is a 'rising culture of informing' (DOYLE, 2006, p. 202), in both of official and unofficial fields of observing.

'On security'

An important side of the new surveillance is its connection to security. Surveillance is used in order to avoid perceived risks and increase security, ranging from 'watching over' to 'moral panics'. People increasingly employ 'monitoring strategies as a means of taking responsibility of one's own security' (ANDREJEVIC, 2007, p. 218). As Weibel (2002, p. 207) argues, 'absolute visibility is legitimated with the claim and guarantee of absolute security'. At the moment, the insecurities people face, are more difficult to grasp than ever before. Bauman (2006, p. 130) talks about 'security obsession'. Caution, mistrust and tense social relations form a new condition: the 'culture of fear' (FUREDI, 2002), which is characterised by 'the continuous reformulation of ordinary experience as dangerous' (ibid, p. 113).

In the age of global terrorism, international borders are a central arena of the security obsession. Fear of terrorism has lead to global insecurity. *Securitization* of immigration (BIGO, 2002) means that immigration is increasingly perceived as a security problem. This does not necessarily relate to concrete threat (of terrorism) but to perceived unease which is channelled against 'the Other'. States, the USA in lead, have applied a reinforced control over foreigners, which Bigo (2006) calls 'unease management'. This is realised in the proactive and pre-emptive border control strategies: centralised transnational databases of foreigners, profiling of potentially threatening nationalities, biometric control on the borders etc.
As Bigo (2006, p. 63) states:

> The surveillance and monitoring of the movement of each individual is growing, but effective controls and coercive restrictions of freedom are connected to specific targets. These targets are constructed as 'invisible and powerful enemies in networks' and the narratives concerning these threats predate September 11 and even the end of bipolarity.

Furthermore, fear as a situated experience and fear as a transformation of visual culture are increasingly connected**.** In urban space, the new importance of security has come along with a neo-liberal rule which has efficiently defined 'dangerous' spaces, activities, groups or individuals. Social integration has been replaced by zero tolerance and inclusion by exclusion. Consequently, fear seems to provide people a justification for protecting themselves and being *vigilant*. To capture images (of almost anything/anybody) can easily be explained within the rhetoric of security. The security-oriented vigilant audience is also able to make use of the new technologies.

Surveillance mirrors fears about population regarded as different and ensures exclusion of delinquency and deviance. Surveillance can be regarded as a 'powerful tool in managing and enforcing exclusion' (NORRIS, 2002, p. 267). New visualities easily contribute to 'the social construction of suspicion' (NORRIS; ARMSTRONG, 1999, p. 117), creating new forms of social control. As McGrath (2004, p. 22) remarks 'every camera functions within a field of power and prejudice structured by visual markers'. Gathering knowledge is a form of maintaining control. A look equates with a 'judgmental gaze' (BURGIN, 2002, p. 235). Power works through new moralities.

'To verify'

It must be acknowledged that surveillance 'does not find knowledge, but creates it' (ALLEN, 1994, p. 144). All visual images have an inherent political potential. As Balshaw and Kennedy (2000, p. 8) emphasise, 'the operations of the eye are not only biological and formal, but also cultural and psychological'. Not a single everyday 'text' is interpreted in a universally coherent way, but different audiences provide different readings of it. There are no 'innocent' illustrations of material world but all interpretations have both deliberate and unintended consequences. Nevertheless, the role of the citizens – what they are asked for as well as one of their spontaneous motivations – still is to *verify* and to gather *evidence*. The political nature of images means that there is need to re-think not only surveillance material produced by the authorities but also the multiple new forms of amateur surveillance. Andrejevic (2007, p. 212) describes this development as 'digital enclosure'.

> 'Within the digital enclosure, the movements and activities of individuals equipped with interactive devices become increasingly transparent – and this makes monitoring technologies easier to obtain and use. The result is increasing public access to the means of surveillance – not just by corporations and the state, but by individuals.'

This is not without consequences to social relations, morals and acts. The differentiation of the watchers and the watched, which previously formed the basis of surveillance theory, has disappeared. This ostensibly trivial change is, if closely looked at, quite fundamental. The historical structure of the political positions of 'the authorities' and 'the public' is fading. When there is no difference between the controllers and the controlled, all politics and ethics need to be rethought. The democratic idea of representational authority is breaking.

'The voyeur'

Visual representation 'mediates scopophilic and voyeuristic desires (to look, to be seen)' and 'technologies the act of seeing (the fusion of the eye and the camera lens)' (BALSHAW; KENNEDY, 2000, p. 7). In post-modern societies surveillance can become spectacle and the people can enjoy surveillance as a spectacle because seeing is entangled with power (WEIBEL, 2002, p. 219). People are involved in 'getting pleasure from viewing the forbidden, or in viewing without being viewed' (DOYLE, 2006, p. 212). The voyeuristic nature of surveillance is justified by its protective nature.

Voluntary vigilance can be extremely powerful – sometimes more powerful than traditional surveillance. Yet, it needs to be conceptually structured. The mess of multiple everyday technologies and multiple individual motivations is challenging surveillance theory. It has been pointed out that 'the all-seeing' power which was essential to old surveillance theory, has roots in Christian religion: '[t]he overpowering and ubiquitous eye of God can be considered as prototype of this hegemonic vision' (BURKHARDT, 2002, p. 18). The nature of the potential overseer is 'God-like', someone who is there, and simultaneously, is not: '[h]is presence, which is also an absence, is in his gaze alone' (WHITAKER, 1999, p. 34).

To have more observers, does not lead to having ethically just observations. The political motivations of some applications of amateur surveillance – such as revealing police brutality – are fairly easy to accept, but the practice itself doesn't tell anything about the motivations of the ones who are conducting it. As Haggerty (2006, p. 33) argues, 'it matters enormously who is actually conducting surveillance'. The hype about interactivity has been accompanied by critical notions. Andrejevic (2007, p. 213) accurately points out that 'interactivity is becoming synonymous with asymmetrical forms of monitoring, information gathering, and surveillance'.

DESCRIBES THE TEXAS VIRTUAL BORDER WATCH PROGRAM IN THE LIGHT OF THE PREVIOUS THEORIES

Surveillance is often used in order to monitor global flows, leading to a situation where globally powerful countries have ever more higher hegemony of power. The *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program* is a perfect example of this. It was first run as an experiment, and proved – according to the authorities responsible of it – to be extremely popular. It took two years to get funding for the watch scheme, resulting in a public-private partnership with an until now unheard of company called BlueServo and a $2million donation from the Governor of Texas, Rick Perry. As a permanent site it was opened in last October. Twelve cameras with sensors that feed live streaming video have been placed to four 'strategic crossing points'. To be able to access images from the cameras – from anywhere (also from Mexico!) with an online computer – anyone can sign up to the campaign's website. As soon as one has logged in, it is possible to alert the authorities to any activity perceived as 'suspicious'. The alert is then sent to The Texas Border Sheriff Coalition (TBSC), who decides whether to take action. The TBSC claims that the scheme is in place to fight drug trafficking and crime on the border, not to control illegal immigration.

The statement by Donald L. Reay, the executive director of the program,[1] tells accurately how the program has been justified (bolds added):

> *'When someone reports **suspicious activity**, the message goes to a server, and is then passed on to designated locations, which decide if a response is certified. Designated locations are the sheriffs. **In the first 48 hours** of the project we had **200,000 alerts**. I didn't see all of them but there was one case, for example, of **movement in an isolated area**. It was certainly **out of the ordinary**. This time it turned out that we didn't find any **wrongdoing** there. [...]*
> *If we encounter a person we **suspect** is **undocumented**, then we pass them on to the federal authorities. It's misinformation by our own media to say that we targeting immigration. The reason we've set up the system is **to sustain our decreased crime rate** due to increased patrol numbers.*
> *Of course there are people who will talk about the Big Brother thing, others who will talk about **immigration**, and others who will say it's **voyeuristic**. We know we'll get criticism. But we know we're doing this **for the safety of the nation**. We have a **pretty open border** with our neighbours to the south and **bad people** could take advantage of that. I'm sure there'll be vandalism attempts once they find out where the cameras are. That's why we're **not telling** them where they are! And that's not infringing on **privacy** - we're not looking in people's windows. These cameras are in wide open spaces where **citizens asked for them**.'*

'On participation II'

The program is literally an example of participatory surveillance. *Anyone* can watch, observe and report. The authorities have the power to decide whether or not to 'take action' but the public is an essential part of the program. Surveillance has, indeed, seized being centralised in this case. The amount of the 'hints' seems to be huge, and must be difficult to handle. Nevertheless, the authorities have estimated that it is possible. Placing the cameras to 'strategic crossing points' helps them to separate disinformation from knowledge that counts. This, however, contradicts with the claims that the cameras are *not* there to control immigration. The program is a perfect example of synopticism: many watching few instead of few watching many (as in the Panopticon, for example).

It also appears to be true – if we believe in the statements of the authorities – that many people are, indeed, *eager* to participate in surveillance and take active roles in it. The positions of the authorities and the public are structured in a new way. The public does the work of actual watching and the authorities sort out the incoming information. Furthermore, it is claimed indirectly, that this is what people (the American nation) 'wanted'. The program

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[1] 'Watch the Mexican border 24/7 from home', 25/11/2008 / UNITED STATES,
http://observers.france24.com/en/content/20081125-watch-mexican-border-home-security-cctv

proves that people are encouraged to observe and inform and to take part in (border) control. It fits well to the agenda of the culture of informing.

'On security II'

The program has a clear connection to security. People have employed a monitoring strategy as a means of taking responsibility of security, in this case not that much of one's own personal security but, rather of *national security*. The launch of the program tells about caution, mistrust and tense (international) social relations. The talk about 'a pretty open border' sounds weird when the phrasing is presented in relation to one of the world's most tightly controlled borders. Fear really does provide people a justification for being vigilant. In the executive director's statement, dangerous groups and individuals – the Others – are not formulated as Mexican but as 'undocumented persons' or 'bad people'.

Although the program does not directly deal with antiterrorist policies, security obsession and the management of unease clearly play roles here. Surveillance is used in order to cope with the fears about population regarded as different or deviant: the Southern, the Mexican, the undocumented, the illegal, the unwanted, the poor. Surveillance is, indeed, used for managing and enforcing exclusion. All the twelve cameras function within a field of power and prejudice. In the culture of fear, 'the safety of the nation' is a powerful argument. Critical voices easily drown in it.

'To verify II'

Individual Americans are placed in the program to a role in which they are asked to gather evidence (of 'suspicious activity'). The authorities are then to verify whether this suspicious activity is illegal or not. The activities with these interactive devices, indeed, have become increasingly transparent. There is no way to predict how many people are watching the website at a particular moment. Furthermore, the authorities who were worried about possible vandalism, have hidden the actual *cameras* despite of the fact that the *images* are circulated openly world wide.

If we take seriously the claims that visual images are political, and that the person using surveillance equipment – in this case, watching the website on her/his computer – does not find knowledge but creates it, we can ask what kind of knowledge an American who is committed enough to do the observation is likely to create? If different audiences provide

different readings of same images, what kind of readings are the patriotic Americans likely to give? If the interpretations have both deliberate and unintended consequences, what might these consequences be in the case of the *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program*?

'The voyeur II'

The nature of surveillance is voyeuristic, especially what it comes to voluntarily conducted observing, to people who are not (just) 'doing their job' but are for other reasons committed to watching. The protective nature of surveillance does work as a justification here. To *protect the country* against criminality and intrusion must be the strongest motivation for the people who are watching the site. The country, the nation, the values, the wealth.

The symbolic value of the program should not be ignored. Apart from giving the public a feeling that they can do something, it also polishes the image of the border sheriff. The sophisticated Internet site gives an impression of authorities who are strong, reliable, down to earth, with the American people, and technologically advanced. Hence, at least partly, the program is about 'marketing the sheriff'.

Surveillance can be a spectacle, but in the case of *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program* this is highly unlikely. If we imagine what the images are like – the long deserted borderline, the four sites with the cameras, and the 24/7 concept – it's fairly easy to understand that most of the time when someone watches the site *there's nothing to see*. Voyeurism in traditional sense, hence, has nothing to do with the program. The motivation for watching is, above all, patriotic. We can think of a particular *patriotic voyeurism*. Seeing is entangled with power because *if* one happens to spot something suspicious, there's a possibility that one can contribute in protecting the country against 'the Other'. Here lies the power of the program: in the gaze of the American, in the American gaze.

Indeed, it is the case that to have more observers, does not lead to having ethically just observations. Rather, the gaze of the voluntary patriotic American is likely to contribute in the socio-spatial exclusion of the Other. The *Texas Virtual Border Watch Program* is a perfect example of the contemporary politics of informing.

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