The distributed performance of artefactual representation by mobile video in Brazil

Juliana Rocha Franco
Bráulio de Britto Neves

DURING 2013, between June 18 and September 7, the demonstrations in Brazil, (nicknamed *June Journeys*), comprised successive massive street demonstrations across the country. Their immediate cause is usually taken to be the increased cost of public transportation fares. As the usually harsh repression of street demonstrations by military police spilled over some journalists, the protests of *Movimento Passe Livre* (Free Pass Movement), originally mobilized through cyber-activist networks gained the massive visibility and sparkled manifestations on a wide range of issues. State's response to protests was marked by police abuse (Amnesty International, 2014). Notwithstanding this, police repression backfired: at its peak, millions of Brazilians were out in the streets demonstrating dissent on a wide range of issues. The abuses by the security forces spanned from the unnecessary extreme use of force – indiscriminate usage of rubber bullets and tear gas, arbitrary arrests of peaceful protesters (Amnesty International, 2014) to press releasing of ungrounded allegations of vandalism.

The novelty in the context of such street manifestations was the pervasive usage of mobile computing devices by the protesters. Hundreds of *ad-hoc* media-activists uploaded hundreds of hours of images, taken from the events in an ongoing basis.

Even if they weren't upstreamed through services like Tweetcast, they were mostly posted in social networking sites, commented, tagged, and associated with hashtags in almost no time. Many then became online memes, viewed by thousands of appreciators who sticked online watching video streaming and posts. Such practices have enabled the emergence of unique public circuit of real-time online counter-information.

Police unlawful behavior was relentlessly recorded, photographed and released online. In these conditions, the sousveillance (Mann, 2004) was widely used to expose, as it happens in many activist videos of urban public expressions of dissent. But now, only to fosterer a retrospective accountability, but an immediate one, preventing police violence.

Sousveillance as distributed networking

Repression was countered by a novel political adversary, which, by many reasons, can be said *faceless*: literally, because many protesters worn masks or hoods, making identities non-individualized and interchangeable. But, in a more profound sense, as the streets were occupied by a swarm of protesters with no central identifiable leadership, doing without no *front nor leadership face*, so to say (Galloway & Thacker, 2007). A new form of the habermasian "subject-

less communication" was accomplished through the gaze of a myriad of handheld cameras, expressing extreme variegated perspectives of the events. The unprecedented plurality of their representation fostered a *relay relationship* between the actors, as people took up, successively, viewers', social actors' and cameramen roles. This relay relation was already present in 1990s' cyber-activist videos (like *This is what democracy looks like*, and *Brad: one more night in the barricades*, cf. Neves, 2010). But now, the artifactual political representations didn't stemmed from highly ideological media-activist networks, but from the general public. The legitimacy of the representation they provided stems from the unusual form of impartiality emerged by the aggregation of a wild diversity of points of view, published in raw conditions by a faceless multitude.

Going beyond the countering of the streams of institutional information, the artifactual political representation provided by the usage of mobile computing and imaging devices connected to the civic communication in social networks sites became an update of the prefigurative ethics and stylistics of the cyber-activist documentaries.

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Demonstrations were profoundly linked to the creation of autonomous communication networks afforded by the spread of mobile Internet access, deemed to be non-hierarchical and dynamic (Castells, 2015). In such conditions, any mobile device user could transmit online information and images, countless real-time transmission channels have been used (through Tweetcast, YouTube, among others), encouraging cyberaudiovisual utterances to be shared, edited, tagged, and commented by thousands of Internet online users. Some channels, at the height of the protests, achieving audiences of many thousand users live.

The flow of the street demonstrations and live broadcasts was incorporated into the very flow of the crowd in the streets virtualized networks. The superimposed distributed networks of urban grids and of telematics public spaces became fused. The sousveillance effects of this fused cyber-urban web were brought into being by a

coalescence of agents who came together in the construction of a cognitive distributed system, or a civic "extended mind" (this term supposes the human mind is not entirely contained within biological bodies).

The usage of mobile technologies in 2013 Brazilian demonstrations promoted a decentralized sousveillance that occurred as a process of distributed cognition, actualizing the crucial role of mobile media in organizing collective action stressed by Rheingold (2008).

The sousveillance afforded by interactive and multimedia ubiquity has been incorporated into many devices. It is exercised in a decentralized fashion, yielding non-hierarchical, self-aware collective public expression practices.

The evidence of the decisive role of this mobile distributed network here we can seen in the frequency we can find takes of policemen grabbing and breaking smartphones of protesters with no avail, as the network is kept working, as these images very existence proves. Besides it doesn't depends on any of the isolated individual in the crowd, a huge distributed network keeps linking a multitude of non-electoral would be representatives – often with disparate political agendas – allowing an ongoingly live participation on the events and its public expression.

Performing the distributed sousveillance

Sobchack (1992) suggests that the distinctive reversibility of expression and perception provide by audiovisual media is historically understood by film theory by successive metaphors: as pictures, as windows and as mirrors. As it is obvious that the theories usually reflects and is very influential in the audiovisual production, we better take these metaphors as correspondent to the distinct rhetoric networks of cinematic communications, emerged through history (as does Nichols, 1992, 1994).

We propose a fourth metaphor, corresponding to the emergence of performative and political-prefigurative usages of documentary audiovisual communication arrangements. The mask metaphor, afford us to understand the cyberaudivisual political representation provided, firstly, by new social movements and cyber-activist practices, extended to the widespread video production through mobile media. Taken, in the present case, as sousveillance gear to public urban demonstration events like clashes with police or repression by other physical devices and corporations.

As this kind of sousveillance occurs anonymously and in ephemeral and risky conditions, the relations created between the participants matters a lot more than their intentions or proficiency as cinegraphists.

SOUSVEILLANCE PRACTICES

This essay seeks to examine the sousveillance practices of the ad-hoc media activists in 2013 protests in Brazil, stressing its political prefigurative dimension. The political prefigurative dimension (Neves, 2010) refers to political relay relationships between the participants of the audiovisual utterances who could equally engage the enunciation roles of actors, cinegraphists and appreciators. We are interested in understanding the specificity of sousveillance processes fostered by the use of pervasive computing devices and mobile telecommunications networks by a "media activists swarm" in these protests. Our hypothesis is that the videographies in mobile media in question built public visibility prefiguring experimental that happen in a heterogeneous network of relationships that involve humans, cell phones, cloud storage in real time, mass media and so on. We want to show that this network performs the counter-surveillance effects (Mann, 1998). These images impact the broad public opinion in a pre-reflexive level, able to pivot collective activation of emotionally intense experiences, such as resumption of urban space as a public space, the occupation of abandoned buildings because of speculation real estate for housing or production knowledge, and so on. The solidarity experiences in protests disseminated through prefigurative sousveillance ability to catalyze autonomous public visibility spaces is, however, dependent on the topology of the appreciation networks. At the present stage of development of appreciation settings, the interpretation of the multitude of documentary images is severely maimed, both by the curatorial models of festivals, and by the interaction design of video-sharing platforms, determined by the particularistic interests of the semantic Internet corporations.

The video-activist's mask-camera fully exhibits the reversibility of positions of cinematic communication. Masks and cameras are both rhetorical devices that work in pre-reflexive level. As uniforms or costumes, they depersonalize individuals. Such depersonalization is critical to establish a distributive rhetoric, nonlinear, audiovisual narrative and argumentative communication that constitutes the network that performs the counter-surveillance.

The mask metaphor allows recognize not only the disguising purposes but also as the grounding of collective identifications provided by the swarming action of urban demonstrations not institutionally organized. The camera, as the mask, is the artifact that immerses the appreciators as vicarious participants of the events.

Unfolding in the extra-field the post-production, real time editing, the organization's publishing platform and exhibition space-time can do without institutionally places of cinema consumption. The camera-mask prefigures the overriding of the individual authorship in favor of collective pseudonymity. By creating alternative roles to the implicitly engaging subjects of documentary communication (social actors, cinematic apparatuses operators, and appreciators), new intersubjective and interobjective relations can be practically tested in a cyberaudiovisual utterance.

In the case of Brazilian demonstrations, the horizontalized and reversible relations aimed by cyberactivist documentaries approached to attain a new quality, that of a multitudinal urban political artifactual representation. The sousveillance was already turned into a kind of swarm's gaze. Notwithstanding this, the conditions of reflexivity of this gaze were – and still are – quite poor, as the demonstrations participants and demonstration documentarists have to opt between two different devices to make their way in the ocean of video images (Neves, 2010).

In the one hand, the raw material have to be bundled in a linear, static, determinate, transient, asynchronous, and arbitrarily controlled textuality to be exhibited in documentary festivals or in artistic installations. In this case, its collective appreciation settings afford the dialogical inter-

pretation, at cost to be shaped by single curatorial perspectives (Aarseth, 1994: 61 ss.). In the other hand, the very same archives are still kept as a non-linear, indeterminate, intransient, and random access topological textuality. But appreciators are kept in isolation, interacting in online environments with little affordances to the building of arguments.

As we can see in the comments sections of online video sharing platforms, the dialogue is utterly shallow, fragmented and filled with personal attacks between viewers with very little room for emerging of new consensual arguments.

In both appreciation arrangements, the public is prevented of building dialogically interpretations robust enough to foster collective action beyond a mere (narcotic) spectatorship. ∎

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