# Sousveillance and Activism: Challenging Asymmetries of Power?

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## Abstract

Although sousveillance may expose or challenge existing power asymmetries, undertaking or attempting such an activity may also perpetuate existing power relationships. We consider two aspects of this in the context of our work with a UK charity campaigning on accessible transport.

## Author Keywords

Sousveillance; activism; vulnerability; public space.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## Introduction

Sousveillance potentially allows ordinary citizens using panoptic technologies [5] to challenge asymmetries of power, by documenting injustices committed by officials [2] or members of the public [1]. Yet they may also reinforce existing power relations. We reflect on a project where campaigners for a national charity engaged in evidence collection on accessible transport. We developed a wheelchair-mounted, phone-based technology probe, 'JourneyCam', to capture video and metadata 'on the go' (*Fig 1*). Although designed to enable the documentation of accessibility issues, some participants also envisaged using it to document the

Figure 1: the hardware of the "JourneyCam" device *in situ* on a participant's powered wheelchair.

negative attitudes and behaviours they encountered. As such it formed an applied 'sousveillance' technology. We consider two issues highlighted by the device: visibility and vulnerability, and sousveillance in public.

## Visibility and Vulnerability

To fully capture its environment, sousveillance technology is often at least partially visible. In turn, this may expose the user to the disapproval of those being surveilled, or in the worst case to possible physical violence [1]. This poses difficulties for users considered 'vulnerable', such as our participants, whose muscle-wasting conditions in some cases restricted upper arm function and precluded them from holding out a phone.

Although they welcomed the ability to capture everyday experiences, some participants felt that being seen to engage in sousveillance could make them more vulnerable. They were already more visible than other transport users due to their use of wheelchairs, which at times exposed them to negative attitudes from some transport staff and members of the public. They would not necessarily be able to remove themselves from a dangerous situation, particularly in an enclosed space such as an Underground station or train where recording equipment is more likely to be noticed. Sousveillance, although most valuable in such situations (especially where there may be no other witnesses) may therefore draw additional unwanted attention to this group and unintentionally heighten existing perceptions of vulnerability.

## Sousveillance in 'Public'?

Sousveillance as an act undertaken in the 'public realm' also poses problematic questions. One is whether it is right for campaigners to undertake sousveillance in

such places in the first place, where bystanders may not have given their consent. More broadly, there is the issue of what actually constitutes 'public space'. Although accessible public transport is commonly thought of as a 'public activity', much transportation infrastructure is in fact private property. Railway and underground stations are not public spaces, but are regulated with permits officially being required for non-personal photography or recording (e.g. [6]).

This reflects a broader trend: an increasing number of what in the folk imagination are 'public' spaces are actually privately owned [4], including the London mayoral offices, as well as shopping centres and many other residential and mixed-use developments. Sousveillance is a social practice which must be individually negotiated by campaigners in relation to local laws, governance, and norms. If social conventions or legal restrictions prevent sousveillance, and campaigners are unable or unwilling to engage in it, injustices may remain unrecorded.

## Conclusion

Although sousveillance may assist people in overcoming power asymmetries, we must also be aware that it may sometimes perpetuate or heighten existing power relationships. Considering the places in which our technology would be deployed, and the users we worked with, shows that sousveillance may also serve to heighten the vulnerability of 'vulnerable' people. It also demonstrates that undertaking sousveillance may become ever-more difficult in an increasingly privatised 'public' realm, and sheds light on a broader issue of the fuzziness of what are considered as 'private' and 'public' spaces in the modern city.

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