

Bilge Yesil
CUNY, College of Staten Island

Response to “Television, Technology and Everyday Life” Roundtable

I want to approach the roundtable questions from a socio-political exploration of how Turkish user/producers have transformed the camera phone into a tool to intervene in the production and distribution of information and knowledge. I want to examine how Turkish user/producers, against the backdrop of their long and complicated history of the state-as-the-ultimate-guardian-of-its-citizens, have come to consider camera phones to be the ideal apparatus to expose government corruption, police beatings and any other misuse of authority, and thus challenge the official discourse

Mobile phones equipped with cameras are commonplace among Turkish population and have been on the market since 2000. According to a recent global mobile phone survey conducted by Gartner Dataquest, every other mobile phone sold in Turkish market has a built-in camera. In recent years, Turkish consumers have embraced camera phones not only to create a mobile photo album of loved ones, but also to photograph misbehaving authorities. As video vigilantes, they have exposed the beating of children in orphanages, mistreatment of minors by security officers in shopping malls, police beatings of demonstrators on the streets, and the like. Videos captured by these so-called citizen/journalists are first circulated online (usually uploaded on YouTube and forwarded to a network of contacts) and once they attract millions of viewers they are picked up by news websites eventually making their way into the mainstream media. From then on, the caught-on-tape video (or should I say caught-on-on-cell phone?) re-doubles as content on mainstream TV as it is looped on nightly news and news magazine shows incessantly, inviting the audiences to question the authorities and help the news organizations break the next scandalous story.

To further explore how the citizen powers of the gaze rupture the discourse that authorities try to produce and sustain, I want to discuss a few examples from Turkey, such as a lynching that took place in an Istanbul mosque in 2007. Following a Friday prayer, the *imam* (leader of mosque prayer) was stabbed to death by a deranged man, and there were allegations that the angry crowd had lynched the murderer. The police denied all such claims and tried to quell fears and contain further questions from the public and the media. However, a few days later a video recorded on a cell phone camera that showed the actual lynching surfaced on the web and thus challenged the official discourse. Unable to argue against this self-evident video that revealed the “truth,” and pressured by citizens demanding transparency and openness, the police had to acknowledge that the lynching did take place inside the mosque and promised to bring to justice those involved in the lynching.

Through this and other examples from the Turkish context, I suggest that cell phone cameras re/organize visual documentation in convergence culture by changing the relationship between producers and consumers of visual imagery. The cell phone camera,

like the photographic camera in general, is considered to be an instrument that we can believe in as a neutral recorder. It stands as a symbol of neutral vision and transparency mostly because it serves as a “nonhuman witness” in the sense that human capacities are irrelevant to its operation. As such, cell phone cameras have begun to occupy a central position within the matrix of visual documentation and the construction of truth and reality, and more significantly they illustrate how technology and activism commingle as users, citizens, citizen/journalists embrace communication technologies to engage in media interventions. With the popularity and prevalence of user-generated content online and on television, many cell phone users have come to view cell phones not only as a communication technology but also as an emancipatory tool to rupture the official discourse and intervene in the actions of the authority they are supposed to obey.

In light of these recent developments, I want to discuss if and in what ways these practices can be considered meaningful, participatory spaces opened up by new media. How can we make sense of the intervention/empowerment potential of these practices? In what ways do such specific uses of camera phones and video-sharing websites mark the emergence of a decentralized system where citizens can now share the power to observe and control? And if this decentralized system is one where camera phones are players in a complex network of surveillance/sousveillance, can we still argue that camera phones are empowering citizens or making them implicit partners in the maintenance of surveillance society?