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The Right to Look

The talk explores who has the ‘right to look’ in social science research, how that right is claimed and negotiated, and what sort of responsibilities are associated with it. The current interest in research on multimodal communication, particularly involving digital media, has given rise to a range of ethical challenges for researchers in the social sciences, particularly linguists who were previously preoccupied with written texts and transcripts of verbal interaction. Different modes carry different ethical responsibilities for researchers because the mode through which communication takes place has important implications for people’s ability to control information and manage their identities (Jones, 2005). This is particularly true for visual communication. Moreover, visibility is historically tied up with the exercise of power and practices of surveillance; claiming the ‘right to look’ at someone or something is invariably an act of dominance (Mirzoeff, 2011). Negotiating who has the right to look at whom, when and where is a central problem of social interaction in the age of cell phone cameras, social media sites and rapidly changing norms concerning ‘publicness’ and etiquette surrounding visibility. This problem is even more complicated for social scientists whose professional practices of looking can intersect in complex ways with participants’ own practices of looking and of managing visibility.

In order to explore these complications, I will present two case studies of visual research into everyday practices of surveillance using digital media. The first case study involves a Hong Kong video artist who engaged in televideo cybersex with hundreds of men and later combined video captures of these interactions into a multimedia art installation called ‘I am an Oriental Whore’. I examine how, through this project, the artist occupied multiple subject positions – that of an artist, a researcher, and a participant – and how each of these positions created different ethical frameworks for his practices of looking. The second case study involves the analysis of cell phone videos of police violence against African Americans. It focuses on both how the micro analysis of such artefacts can reveal the ongoing strategies people with less power use to negotiate the right to look at the powerful, as well as the potential reproduction of racial and institutional power in the gaze of the researcher.

In both of these examples understanding how researchers claim the ‘right to look’ is less about traditional ethical concerns such as privacy and consent, and more about what Kant called ‘practical anthropology’, the way ethics are worked out on the level of social practice. In both of these cases, claiming the right to look is deeply embedded in everyday and professional practices of

particular groups, and well as histories of racism and oppression, and they cannot be evaluated without confronting these practices and these histories. At the same time, in both of these cases, claiming the right to look is not just about individuals claiming the right to see, but also to be seen. Researchers who insert themselves into such negotiations must come to terms with how to productively represent people's practices of visibility in ways that honor both the political projects of participants and the demands for rigor associated with empirical research. The questions that digital technologies pose to scholars of the visual, I argue, are not primarily questions of meaning, but questions of social action. They are questions about how people use visibility to claim political rights, sometimes in the face of physical or psychological violence, and questions about how researchers can most productively claim their own right to look under such circumstances. Answering these questions requires uncovering the ontological assumptions that frame our seeing (Lather, 1993), confronting the spaces of power/knowledge that are part of all practices of visibility, and of asking ourselves not just 'what are we looking at', but 'who are we to look?'

References

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