Commentary

We're all witnesses now

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Of all the calamities that have befallen the RCMP, the worst came last month, when a 25-year-old citizen named Paul Pritchard took aim with his video camera at the Vancouver airport. His images of the tasering of Robert Dziekanski have become the shots seen round the world, and the fallout has been deadly. People are revolted by what they saw. The RCMP's reputation, already badly tarnished by the death of another B.C. man in custody, by the death of a rookie officer in the North, by the fatal ambush of four officers in Mayerthorpe, Alta., and by various administrative scandals, is in ruins. Our national police force is now widely seen as an outfit that guns down the innocent and can't protect its own.

The Mounties have cautioned the public not to rush to judgment, but it's too late. A large majority of B.C. residents say they believe the actions of the officers were unreasonable, and more than three-quarters said the images made them less supportive of the police.

Welcome to the age of citizen democracy, when the digital revolution has made eyewitnesses of us all.

There's a term for what happened in Vancouver. It's called "sousveillance." It describes a sort of Big Brother experience in reverse, a world in which ordinary citizens make recordings of authority figures and their actions. The word was coined by Steve Mann, an engineering professor at the University of Toronto who devises wearable computers.

Sousveillance alters the power dynamics between citizens and the authorities. Recently in Toronto, another amateur video helped convict a cop of punching out a Somali immigrant outside a coffee shop. The officer originally claimed the man had attacked the police when they arrived to break up a fight. But the videotape told a different story, and it's the cop who's going to jail.

These days, it's highly likely that most encounters with police will feature someone with a video camera or a cellphone who's recording the incident for posterity. "In a future where most citizens carry cameras with them at all times and have the ability to spread them phone to phone, or by posting them to a website, there's tremendous potential for sousveillance to serve as a check to people in power," says Ethan Zuckerman, an expert on the Internet and society at Harvard Law School. He points out that quite often, the abusers do it to themselves. Recent examples include the botched execution of Saddam Hussein (captured on a cellphone) and those souvenir torture shots from Abu Ghraib. The latter marked the end of U.S. moral authority in its conduct of the war.

Technology is aiding the spread of citizen democracy in the developing world, where cellphones are everywhere. There are more than two billion users in the world today, and people are increasingly using these phones to organize protests and promote causes. In 2004, text messaging helped bring thousands of demonstrators into the streets of Kiev to protest election fraud. In the Philippines, protests organized by text message helped bring President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to power (and later spread news of a corruption scandal she was caught in). Democracy activists in Egypt have used their phones and digital cameras to record police crackdowns on demonstrators. China alone has 400 million cellphone users, give or take. In the city of Xiamen, people used text messages to organize a large middle-class protest against a new chemical factory that would pollute the city. The government put the plans on hold. A few months ago, there was a wave of online protests in response to revelations about child slave labour in the brick kilns. Thanks to cheap technology, the Chinese are learning more and more about abuses in their own backyard.

None of this will bring RCMP victim Mr. Dziekanski back to life. But it's bound to be a powerful check on police incompetence, carelessness and abuse. There's one thing they now know for sure. The people are watching.

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