Snowden on Screen at SXSW: Visual Irruptions of State Self-Image

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On Monday, 10 March 2014, Edward Snowden appeared on a large video monitor to reach out to attendees of the South by Southwest (SXSW) festival in Austin, Texas. Rerouted through dozens of proxy servers, Snowden discussed how the NSA uses its surveillance capability to reportedly spy on its own citizens and those abroad. In what is perhaps more interesting than Snowden's remarks at SXSW, Snowden appeared on webcam with a full screen mockup of the U.S. Constitution behind him. This visually striking image, of a man labeled a traitor by some and whistleblower—or even a hero—by others, carries with it a series of meanings that warrant investigation with respect to how aesthetic irruptions destabilize the self-image and ultimately the ontological security of the state. This essay seeks to first define ontological insecurity in international relations and to stress the importance of visual analysis in constructing intertextual meanings and representations of state security. Then, it argues challenges to state self-image occur in different contexts, through various mediums of representation and communication, and make up larger webs of meaning, particularly in the digital age.

Ontological Security in International Relations Theory

Physical security concerns dominate realist accounts of security in world politics (Mitzen 2006: 342). Ontological security in international relations goes beyond the premise that states are solely concerned with physical security. The preoccupation and assumption that states seek only physical security, Mitzen (2006: 364) argues, constrains international relations theory by failing to explain why states may seek or continue conflict—for example—at the expense of physical security. Inherent in a conception of a state's ontological security is the notion of the state as person, or at the very least, that states are concerned over their own self-image.[1] Ontological security is about constructing and maintaining the stability of the state's self-image. Power, in this regard, can be understood in terms of "a centralized body's internal capacity to perceive its ability to operate upon its own self-image, as well as influence others and determine outcomes" (Steele 2010: 15). Thus, power is not solely based upon a state's ability to make another actor do what it would otherwise not do, to pose material threats to other states, or global influence; power is about the state's recognition that it can use and recreate its own self-image. States narrate about themselves through state agents, such as government officials. State actions must be justified, even if they go against the grain of international norms or expectations (Steele 2008: 10). What is particularly interesting about the U.S response to the Snowden disclosures is the manner in which the disclosures are framed, the contradictions that arise as a result of the framing, and how the narratives that the state produces regarding the practices of the NSA harken back to the self-image-making of the U.S. state.

Why the United States?

When examining speeches made by U.S. state agents, publications regarding U.S. citizenship, and the ways the United States is presented in popular culture, common trends emerge; the United States is presented as exceptional, as a *land* of shared values, including liberty, freedom, and prosperity, and as a country based upon foundational elements created by the nation's founding fathers. David Campbell (1998: 131) suggests that America is an imagined community "par excellence." America, like all other states, is dependent upon practices that make up its ontological being. However, Campbell (1998: 91) argues:

"Defined, therefore, more by absence than presence, America is peculiarly dependent on representational practices for its being. Arguably more than any other state, the imprecise process of imagination is what constitutes American identity."

Space and time in reference to U.S. identity is crucial to this analysis, because a fulfillment of ontological security for a state is predicated upon its ability to maintain a consistent self-identity and self-image. Void of a people as a foundational element, the United States' self-identity is quite fleeting, and, thus, hinges on representational, symbolic, and iconic imagery in order to ascribe to itself some form of identity (Campbell 1998: 132).

Visual Analysis in International Relations

Visual analysis in international relations and security studies can lend itself well to a broader analysis of discourse and meanings that occur by way of cyber discourse. What is the background is not the meanings that the image generates on its own, but rather, the intertextual context of the image as an intentional gesture by Snowden to send a particular message to a global audience. Counterpower, in this regard, meets the state on its own self-constructed terms (Steele 2010: 47). The message, through the medium under which the state is ontologically insecure, cyberspace, goes beyond what Snowden says and shines light on the aesthetic irruption, placing the Self of the United States under a (micro) pressure. Hansen (2011: 53) notes four components to inter-visual/intertextual analysis: "the image itself, its immediate intertext, the wider policy discourse, and the texts ascribing meaning to the image". However, insofar as Hansen (2011: 52) is concerned with how images 'speak security,' this examination harkens back to ontological insecurity as states confront challenges to self-image. As such, this analysis theorizes how this particular image of Edward Snowden comes to 'speak counterpower'.[2]

Snowden on the Screen at SXSW

Situated within the wider discourse of internet privacy, the surveillance practices of the NSA, and Snowden as a hero or villain, Snowden's choice of backdrop can be understood in two ways. First, whether intentional or not, the image can be understood as a challenge to the United States' self-image; Snowden is perhaps trying to represent himself as the contradiction to what the United States holds to be an idealized self-identity and self-image. In other words, the background represents the idealized self-image of the United States, harkening back to Campbell's (1992: 132) notion of the United States' self-identity as fleeting and hinging on symbolic or iconic imagery. In the foreground, Snowden represents counterpower by way of countertechnology. In other words, Snowden represents a pressure on state self-image using a medium of communication that is pervasive and difficult to control. Reclaiming the Constitution of the United States, in this sense, is a challenge to the legitimacy of state action in what Snowden sees as an objectionable practice. The second interpretation of Snowden's choice of backdrop begs the question: does Snowden subscribe to an idealized self-identity as a citizen of the United States, and view himself as a defender of said self-identity in the face of what he understands as an irreconcilable contradiction to that self-identity by the NSA? Does the intention of Snowden matter, or does meaning become ascribed to the image by the discourse surrounding Snowden, the NSA, and cyberspace?

Circulability is an important aspect to consider when examining visuals (Hansen 2011: 57). Here, circulability means more than passing from person to person, place to place; circulability involves the way an image is able to reach a broad audience in terms of meaning, speed in relation to circulabilty, and transgress language boundaries (Hansen 2011: 57). The Snowden image targets a particular audience: the American people. The image does very little by way of meaning transference to those who do not speak English and are unfamiliar with the U.S. Constitution as an image. However, the image, with respect to the constitutive members of the United States, sends a rather clear message, one that evades, to a certain extent, what David Campbell (2003: 59) refers to as "cultural governance": the image circulated widely and quickly without a timely official response to Snowden's remarks. While cable news networks, the print media, etc. are more easily co-opted by the government to advance policy agendas, the internet holds no such promise by way of cultural governance. In a sense, what Snowden presents here is a counter-image that mocks the traditional image of centralized power, where agents of the state stand in front of iconic symbols such as flags, or in traditional, historic rooms.

The Snowden leaks and the official response on cyberspace and the leaks following the disclosures can be seen similarly to, say, the Cold War "…as another episode in the ongoing production and reproduction of American identity through the practices of foreign policy, rather than simply an externally induced crisis" (Campbell 1998: 132). While the Snowden leaks represent an aesthetic irruption of state self-identity and self-image with regards to cyberspace, the event itself must be situated within broader state behavior in the digital age. The NSA leaks by Snowden represent a form of counterpower that came about through information disseminated on the internet, and put pressure on an administration, an organization within the state, and the state itself. This moment is fleeting, and represents only a micropressure to traditional notions of state power. However, it is a prime example of a broader ontological insecurity that states must face in cyberspace by virtue of the very characteristics that make cyberspace unique and attractive for states. This ontological insecurity is met with a variety of narratives that seek to dislodge and delegitimize the source of the challenge to security of self.[3] All of this returns to the notion that the state must mediate contradiction in order to "save face" and to justify particular practices in cyberspace, such as its own surveillance in and of cyberspace. The Snowden leaks and his presentation at SXSW represent a challenge to that justification and focus attention on the contradictions themselves.

Capturing, Co-opting, or Erasing Snowden? Handling the Aesthetic Irruption

Aesthetic irruptions, in the wider scheme of state security, are fleeting moments. While cyberspace poses consistent ontological insecurity for states, aesthetic irruptions take hold of the imagination if but for a moment. Thus, what is important when examining the Snowden leaks through the state's response is how narratives change, or how narratives mediate broader concerns about cyberspace in light of such aesthetic irruptions. Debrix (2006: 787-788), in an analysis of Cindy Sheehan's demonstrations outside the Bush farm in 2005, argues that "events as surprises" that take place in the global media can be captured, co-opted, or erased:

"But it is nonetheless an event that commands a presence, that does not want to be ignored (in fact, it is its main point), and that brings a haunting reality back in the face of those who promote and champion a higher idea, ideal, and ideology."

Steele (2010: 49) notes that counterpower ends when it is quarantined or "classified." Confronting the leaks, official discourse places emphasis on the act of disclosing, rather than the disclosures themselves. Further, when pressured into a response, state response must place the leaks within a broader context that harkens back to state self-identity and self-image, all the while arguing that the behaviors that spurned the leaks are not as problematic as once thought. In a speech on NSA reforms on January 17, 2014, President Obama argued:

"What I did not do is stop these programs wholesale, not only because I felt that they made us more secure, but also because nothing in that initial review and nothing that I have learned since indicated that our intelligence community has sought to violate the law or is cavalier about the civil liberties of their fellow citizens."

The impact of global media, the 24/7 spotlight on states, and the manner in which the NSA actions are continually being leaked places a different sort of pressure on the state than a demonstration that has a clear beginning and end. The magnitude of the leaks leaves too much to be erased. However, the leaks can be captured and co-opted by way of paralleling reforms to self-image, on the one hand, and equivocating these surveillance practices as part of a necessary, and fruitful, security venture on the other (for example, these ventures stopped X number of security threats from happening). Therefore, while continually harkening back to an idealized image of state self-identity, the Snowden leaks, as an aesthetic irruption, are mediated in the same way that the broader contradictions between liberty and security in cyberspace are: through a call to principles that make up self-identity, calls to security that seize upon public anxiety over cyberspace, and claims of American exceptionalism that suggests that governance in the digital age should be met head on by the United States.

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[1] See Wendt (2004) for a discussion of the validity and appropriateness of understanding the state as person in international relations theory.

[2] Steele (2010: 47)

[3] This is not to say that Snowden did the "right" thing; rather, the narratives that circulate that suggest such a thing must be discredited.

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