Context, Visibility and Control: Contesting the Objectivity of Visual (Video) Records of Police-Citizen Interactions

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ABSTRACT
This poster presents some initial findings from a mixed-methods study of police officer attitudes and concerns about bystander (citizen) video and the officers’ own use of body-worn cameras (BWCs) within two municipal police agencies in the United States. Utilizing a data analysis methodology based in grounded theory, I argue that officers’ concerns stem from their perceived inability to control context (both of what is recorded and/or disseminated, as well as the physical situations in which the recordings are made) and unwanted visibility. These concerns are heightened by the fact that officers are working in an environment filled with increasing calls to “release the tapes” (and thus to hold officers accountable for misconduct), especially because these calls are often based on assumptions about the “objectivity” of these visual records of police-civilian interactions that run counter to many officers’ opinions that the video evidence lacks vital contextual information.

KEYWORDS
policing, body-worn cameras, surveillance, video, visibility

INTRODUCTION
Police departments in the United States – and elsewhere – have been outfitting their officers with body-worn cameras (BWCs) for a number of years, partly in response to a host of image management problems generated by the rise of bystander (citizen) video and the recent surge in media attention to police-involved violence. Unlike with many police surveillance technologies, widespread adoption of body-worn cameras has been supported by national civil liberties organizations as a means to protect communities from police misconduct – or at least to document aberrant police behavior. Thus, the media, the police and civil society have constructed an image of body cameras as something different from typical police surveillance technology – as something more desirable and empowering of democratic civilian oversight of the police. These narratives are often based on assumptions that BWC footage can provide more objective evidence of police-civilian interactions (like that captured by bystander video). There is a growing body of (mostly quantitative) research into the effects of BWC deployment and (mostly non-empirical) research on the role and implications of bystander video or organized “copwatching” (Farmer & Sun, 2016), but there is little qualitative social research examining how police officers understand and perceive the impact of bystander video or the use of BWCs on their work (for important exceptions see, e.g., Farmer & Sun, 2016; Koen, 2016; Sandhu, 2017; Sandhu, 2016; Sandhu & Haggerty, 2017; Tanner & Meyer, 2015; Timan, 2013). The present research builds on these earlier studies while also focusing on police officer perceptions of both phenomena, with the aim of providing a better understanding of how officers perceive and react to working on camera (theirs or someone else’s), especially where the presence of a camera has the potential to increase the visibility of an individual officers’ everyday work to a broad audience.

METHODS
I present initial findings from an analysis of data collected through fieldwork (interviews, observation, ride-alongs) with, and surveys of, police officers in two municipal police agencies in the Pacific Northwest (United States). I conducted surveys in fall 2014, May/June 2015 and June 2016, respectively, and engaged in qualitative fieldwork during the same timeframe. Besides the surveys, the project also encompassed 40 ride-alongs with 29 different officers, ranging in duration from a few hours to entire 10-hour-and-40-minute shifts, as well as numerous informal discussions with other officers and department administrators. The three survey questionnaires, designed primarily to inform the qualitative investigation and, as appropriate, validate whether certain themes drawn from the qualitative work were more generalizeable across the two departments, resulted in 148, 133 and 126 valid responses, respectively, across both departments. On all three surveys, officers were asked qualitative and quantitative questions designed to elicit their attitudes and concerns about the use of BWCs, bystanders recording them while they work and the dissemination of these recordings online.

INITIAL FINDINGS
Through multiple rounds of coding, clear themes emerged from both the interviews and qualitative survey-response data. Officers are generally concerned about a loss of control, both of the immediate physical interaction and incident response (for example, in cases of bystanders recording and getting too close or interjecting themselves into a crime scene or police-citizen contact) and of the framing and disclosure of the subsequent recordings of the incident. The first concern is connected to fears about safety and the ability to do their jobs (by restricting interference, obstruction or distraction), while the second is about visibility, tied up in ambiguities about the motivations of the recording bystanders, the loss or
misrepresentation of context and the potential for heightened visibility through online dissemination. The first of these concerns is predominately present in responses to questions about bystander video (although some officers also feel that the presence of their own BWC may also lessen the amount of discretion they are able to exert during a contact), while the second concern is connected more broadly to both bystander video and BWCs.

As I operationalize it here, the loss of context means at least two different things to officers. First, it means the recordings will not capture the full subjective experience of the officers, and thus the audience will view the video without understanding how the officers subjectively perceived the situation and why the officers chose to make the decisions they did. Second, it means the recording is limited in its ability to capture or show the entire sequence of events that led to the incidents (or interaction/use of force, etc.) of interest, because of limited visibility (on the recording), limited audio capture, distortion due to the cameras’ point of view or limited coverage from the beginning of an incident until the conclusion due to practical or intentional reasons (e.g., the bystander or officer did not initiate the recording until after the incident had started, either intentionally or not).

CONCLUSION

Police officers have historically been the most visible face of the criminal justice system. However, in the past, they were generally visible only through direct interactions with citizens – and within the view of nearby onlookers. However, this primary visibility has gradually given way to myriad additional forms of secondary visibility (Goldsmith, 2010), including from bystander video and the mandated public disclosure of officers’ BWC footage under access to information laws. The rapid growth and expansion of secondary visibility of police officers has had significant ramifications for police accountability and transparency, but it also implicates a host of other concerns, both for officers and other individuals caught on camera. These concerns, especially those about disclosure and online dissemination of bystander video or BWC footage, are amplified by the officers’ perception that many in the press and in their communities (and possibly in their own departmental leadership) want broad access to this footage in order to hold officers accountable for (even small or innocent) mistakes. Additionally, popular cries to “release the tapes” are not always about providing full (or at least more) information or context about an incident. Rather, these calls have at least three primary purposes: to gather evidence in order to “prove” the claimants preferred interpretation of events, vindicate their pre-existing concerns and interests and/or prosecute the police officers involved; to provide a more complete and accurate picture of the events and conduct at issue, also as a form of evidence, in order for the truth to come out and for justice to be done (no matter which side has its story bolstered); and the calls for greater transparency reflect a general call for less government secrecy and more popular and democratic oversight of government action, and are not always about procuring evidence.

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REFERENCES


