Thomas Marriott

A Button as an Invitation to Design

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**Presentation: A Button as an Invitation To Design
Thomas Marriott**

The Right to Design:
A BUTTON AS AN
INVITATION TO DESIGN

Thank you for inviting me to talk today. I'm sad that I can't be there to talk in person.

Today I'm going to talk about a button as an invitation to design, and how it might work as a tool for design research. The following quote, from the book 'Power Button', sums up why I think buttons are exciting, and frames in many ways, the rest of the talk: [Thomas reads from the screen]

Onkar
The next session is a short presentation by Thomas Marriot. Thomas will briefly talk about his doctoral project and research around Police Body Worn Cameras at Goldsmiths University, London. The seed of this research began whilst Thomas was a Postgraduate student at the Royal College of Art in London in 2015, which studied the possible implications of Live Video Editing of arrest footage through scripting and choreography.

   Thomas's research draws on design, sociology, science and technology studies and sits at the intersection of design and social research. Currently the project has involved the design and production of research devices which have been used with police officers during fieldwork as a way of facilitating and prompting conversations about the multiple roles of capturing technologies within policing.

"push buttons loom large in our cultural imaginary, with a vision of button pushing that always looks the same: push a button and something magical begins. A sound erupts that seems never to have existed before. A bomb explodes. A vote registers. A machine animates, whirling and processing. A trivial touch of a single finger sets these forces in motion. The user is all powerful, sending the signal that turns on a television, a mobile phone, a microwave. She makes everything go. Whether or not she understands how the machine works, she determines the fate of the universe."
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Plotnick, R. (2018) Power Button: A History of Pleasure, Panic, and the Politics of Pushing.

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PART ONE: Police Body-Worn Cameras

First, let me give a brief introduction to my research and the matter with which it is concerned. My PhD research is about a piece of technology: the body-worn video camera, and more specifically, about the use of this technology by police. Let me give a quick history of body worn cameras.

then migrate from the TASER gun. First onto the head with the TASER FLEX, pictured here. And then onto the body: with the TASER BODY cameras.

This is the TASER BODY-2, but there's now a BODY-3 and I'm sure there will be a 3-5-6! TASER have since rebranded to AXON reflecting a shift from so called 'non-lethal weapons', towards body-worn video cameras and evidence management systems.

Body-worn video cameras – in law enforcement at least – started out as a device called TASER-CAM. TASER-CAM is an attach-ment which is fitted to the battery at the bottom of a TASER gun. And was designed in response to an increasing number of complaints. Unsurprisingly, people didn't take kindly to being shocked with 50,000 volts. TASER-CAM was a success, and helped, if not to reduce the number of complaints, at least explain them. In a sense, access to footage allows officers the ability to create a coherent narrative of events in response complaints. Something which Body-worn cameras continue to provide today. It was so much of a success that the camera would
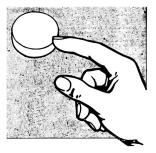
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But the guy who actually invented the device back in the 1960s, Jack Cover (who, incidentally, was a NASA physicist, and who invented it in his garage), claims it was named after his favourite childhood book, Tom Swift and his Electronic Rifle. Either way, both of the men who were instrumental in the design, and later success of TASER were deeply influenced and inspired by science fiction. Suffice to say, Body-worn cameras emerge from police use-of-force and have an ongoing link between speculative fiction and techno-utopianism.

Part of the shift essentially was to turn AXON into a kind of 'platform' for policing. Interestingly, there is some dispute as to where the original name TASER came from. The now owner of TASER or AXON – Rick Smith, who bought the company in the late 1990s claims it was inspired by Star Treks own Captain Kirk's Phaser.

Use of Body-worn cameras has really taken off, with other companies entering the market - this is a reveal media camera. And Body-worn cameras are now used by police forces around the world. But in many ways we know very little about how a technology – which the police themselves refer to as 'the future of policing' – actually functions. And this is despite a host of well-funded studies. Following, and in relation to this, my research is based on the premise that we, not only need to know more about Body-worn cameras but, we need to know differently. Simply put, my research is concerned with the use of design to know more about a piece of design, one which, as we have seen, has somewhat questionable origins. It's worth saying at this point that I am not for or against Body-worn cameras; instead, It is given that they are here to stay, and that, as one officer put it: 'they are now part of the DNA of policing'.

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PART TWO:
The Button as an Invitation to Design

So this leads me to talk about buttons, which, of course, Body-worn cameras have. More specifically, in this second part of the talk I will discuss how I used a button as an invitation to do design. I have tried to connect this with some of the questions posed in Onkar and Henric's paper, The Right to design, and specifically, their question: 'what is it then to design if you are not a designer?' I am going to discuss a specific example, from a range of design work which I took with me during some fieldwork with a police force in the West of England. One of the central theoretical concepts in the thesis based some of the ideas in Annmarie Mol's Book The Body Multiple. As I am sure some are aware, the book is concerned with

multiplicity, and suggests that a disease, atherosclerosis is enacted in multiple ways and, as a result, is multiple. Mol says:

"If practices are foregrounded there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen from the point of view of seemingly endless series of perspectives. Instead, objects come into being-and disappear-with the practices in which they are manipulated. And since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies. The body, the patient, the disease, the doctor, the technician, the technology: all of these are more than one. More than singular.

My research contends that the BWC is multiple: the BWC used by an officer on the street, is a different one to use by a politician in a debate, to that used by a senior officer in the media, or by Rick Smith. These Body worn cameras also "hang together" so part of what my research has tried to do (at times more successfully than others) is to unsettle or shake up the BWC as it hangs together. One of the ways I did this was to show the officers I was shadowing during my fieldwork a range of design work. One of these was a 3D render of a BWC with an additional and undefined button. I introduced the idea extra button with some officers when travelling in the back of a police minibus after a night shift. I started off, first by asking what they thought of the design of the current cameras, I had found this to be a good way to get the conversation started. The results were pretty pragmatic, such as improved battery life or tougher screens for example. Following this, I showed the render and asked them:
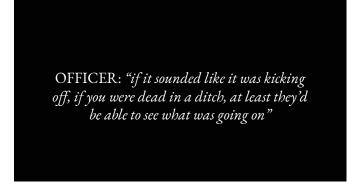
what would you do with this button?

The first officer to respond started off by saying that it would be useful to be able to take photos duringma recording, something he said would make collecting evidence easier.

  The other officers agreed with his suggestion and there was a brief discussion as to whether or not the cameras could actually be programmed to do this already. One of the things that many of conversations highlighted was how little the officers knew about the existing functionality the cameras. That's not to say that they didn't know how to use them, but that their knowledge of this use was highly specific – their camera was a different one to the designers one perhaps! Another officer then said he'd like the button to allow footage to be streamed back to the station so that the sergeant and inspector could see what was going on. The other officers seemed to also think this was a good idea. A lively discussion followed, in which some more of the implications of this speculative innovation were collectively thrashed out. This was an intriguing suggestion, and one I had not anticipated.

   I pointed out, an article by Kelly Gates which notes the privacy issues concerned with the ability of superiors to check up on subordinates remotely, and the potential for this to open the door to peer-to-peer surveillance. I asked if the officer would see this as an issue. One of the other officers interjected, joking

that having the camera coming on while you were on the toilet or grabbing food wouldn't be ideal (something also noted by Gates). In response, the officer who had made the suggestion noted that his idea was for the camera to "beam the footage" only if the officer had pressed the button, but that being said, he wouldn't be against superiors being able to 'request' to view what you were doing. It was then agreed that adding GPS would make locating them easier if something did happen, and one of the officers rightly pointed out that some of the newer cameras on the market already have some of these features. Another officer, building on the idea, suggested that if you could live-stream from incidents it would be good to be able to receive advice from superiorsor from experts in some situations, for instance, those related to mental health such as those we had attended in the previous days.

> OFFICER: *"if it sounded like it was kicking off, if you were dead in a ditch, at least they'd be able to see what was going on"*

Finally, as we entered the station, and the officers removed their radios and Body-worn cameras from their stab vests, the officers talked about how they imagined that Bodyworn cameras might become integrated with police radios in the future. This would – they said – allow for images as well as audio to flow freely within the organisation. Unlike the questions about how the camera might be improved, which tended to result in pragmatic answers based on the existing qualities of the device, the extra button, as I hoped, offered a way in to a fictional or speculative space. The space arguably from which the body-camera originally emerged.

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The button was a design problem which invited consideration of how the technology might relate to a heterogeneous array of different actors and entities. Moreover, this speculative technology emerges, much like Mol's disease: though practice. This practice; this testing of the technologies new functionality, takes place within the frames of the officers speculative fiction. Guggenheim, Kräftner and Kröll ask
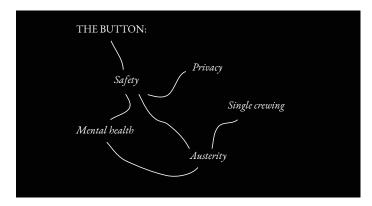
"How can we create speculators and make the world speculate? [...] to allow anyone to speculate, we thus suggest to create a device that triggers a speculative practice that brings into existence immediate actions of anyone, expert or non-expert"

–
Guggenheim, M., Kräftner, B. and Kröll, J. (2017) 'Creating idiotic speculators: disaster cosmopolitics in the sandbox'

They refer to the idea of a 'speculative machine' – which I would argue the button could be thought of. That said while anyone is invited to speculate, or to do design, it is important, to recognise and remember where and who these speculations come from – the officers are not anyone. In terms of research, the button, and the speculation that it invites tells us a number of things. Or, perhaps, it offers the opportunity for the offers to tell us about a number of things: Firstly, the primary idea or topic, that the button introduced was safety and security. The officers response to the button, tells us that they see their job as dangerous. Something which in many ways the offers declined to say openly...

During the following conversation, however, we touch upon another issue: privacy. The second main topic that is raised in the speculation, is the suggestion that live-streaming might allow for advice to be given to officers remotely. Incidentally, this is also perhaps links to safety: A high proportion of the jobs I attended with officers were related to mental health these kinds of jobs, the officers said, were unpredictable in turn making them dangerous and hard to police.

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Moreover, one of the things which came up in following conversations was that officers were aware that these were vulnerable people in moments of crisis, people that needed help, and therefore did not fit easily into the officers conceptions of their role as protectors of good from bad. In other words this wasn't really their job or area of expertise. Arguably both these issues relate to the implications on austerity policies implemented by the Conservative government in the UK. The button, and the invitation to design, raises issues which questions wouldn't have. And the responses, rich in contextual details, present these issues in new and interesting ways...

I'm aware this is a somewhat abrupt end, but I'll leave it there for some questions. Thanks.

–[audience applause]