

Notes for CCA talk

Introduction

SLIDE ONE

- Hi, I'm Tom. I've just completed my PhD in the Design Department here at Goldsmiths. My research sits at the juncture of design and social research and draws on design, criminology, policing studies, and science and technology studies.
- Today I thought I'd talk about two things that that were related to my PhD research.
- The 1st – I thought I would briefly talk about why I think the BWC is something of a paradox in relation to the subject of this event.
- And the 2nd – somewhat relatedly, about a specific thing I observed whilst doing my research regarding how I observed BWCs interact with, and perhaps sustain, a particular kind of police culture.

SLIDE TWO

Part One – 2014

- 2014 was a big year for body worn video.
- In the July of that year, Eric Garner was killed by New York Police Department officers, and Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson, in August.
- The unrest that followed prompted the then president, Barack Obama, to call for BWCs to be issued to all officers. These calls were echoed by civil rights organisations who asked for the cameras to be mandatory.
- In the same year, here in the United Kingdom, a large scale trial was conducted by the London Metropolitan Police.
 - A force keen to restore the trust of the public following the deaths of Charles De Menezes in 2005, Ian Tomlinson in 2009, and Mark Dugan in 2011.
- BWCs, so people claimed, would reduce use-of-force and complaints, and more generally improve transparency, and efficiency of policing.

SLIDE THREE

- A study, conducted in Rialto Arizona – which reported a drop in instances involving use-of-force by officers of 59% and complaints from the public by 87% – seemed to back up what many thought to be obvious outcomes of the technology.
 - It should be highlighted that the study has since been widely criticised for having some relatively significant methodological flaws;

- *that the department had been under scrutiny for some time for to issues relation specifically to use-of-force;*
 - *and that one of the authors of the study and a senior officer within the force was hired to 'clean up' the department, which had it not would he been subsumed into a neighbouring force.*
- Nonetheless, the Rialto study has been hugely significant in making a case for BWCs both in the states and around the world.
- But even by 2016 – and the death in the United States of another black man, Keith Lamont, again at the hands of police – the excitement and optimism about BWCs from civil liberties groups was already beginning to wane.

SLIDE FOUR

- The murder of George Floyd, by police officer Derek Chauvin, in 2020 underscored what many always new to be the case: that BWCs aren't a technological solution to police brutality.
- It's worth saying that all of the officers' present during Floyd's murder were wearing BWCs
- But the footage that we all saw of George Floyd's death was recorded by a member of the public using their smartphone.
- Chauvin was found guilty at trial and was sentenced to 22 ½ years imprisonment . BWCs did not prevent George Floyd's murder. And it was likely citizen footage that resulted in Chauvin's conviction.
- As the rapper Ice T tweeted in the aftermath of Floyd's death 'Trust me... If we didn't have cameras... This would ALL be denied'.
- Despite all of this, internationally, following the death of George Floyd there has been a renewed discussion about the role of BWCs in policing and for their potential for preventing of police brutality, holding officers to account, and more broadly improving the quality of policing.

Part Two: BWCs, a Black Box.

SLIDE FIVE

- So, A BWC is a black box made of knurled plastic that takes video recordings from the point-of-view of the wearer. These wearers are often the police but also private security, teachers, and amateur football referees.
- But where did they come from? Who makes them? And why are they made of black knurled plastic?
- The answers to these of these questions help explain why I think the BWC is a paradox.

- It's useful here to give brief introduction to Axon Enterprise, the market leader in terms of development and supply of BWCs, both in England and Wales and around the world.

SLIDE SIX

- Axon made their mark, and their money, with TASER.
- Axon was formerly called TASER International but rebranded to Axon in 2017 to reflect “a change of focus in the company from the production of quote: ‘non-lethal’ weapons, towards police media technology”.

SLIDE SEVEN

- A little bit of a digression here, but interestingly there is some dispute as to where the original name ‘TASER’ came from. The now owner of TASER or AXON – Rick Smith, claims it was inspired by Star Treks, Captain Kirk’s *Phaser*.
- But the guy who initially 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 sci-fi book, Tom Swift and his Electronic Rifle.
- Either way BWCs are closely linked to science fiction.

SLIDE EIGHT

- BWCs specifically can be traced to a product called ‘TASER CAM’ an innovation within the TASER product line introduced in 2006.
- TASER CAM consisted of a power-pack for the TASER device, located in the butt of the gun, which incorporated a small digital-camera that would be activated when TASER was drawn.
 - You pull the TASER out and it turns on and starts recording.
- TASER CAM was designed to provide visual evidence (from the police perspective) that could be used to combat the growing number of complaints from those who perceived that the deployment of TASER amounted to excessive force.
- TASER CAM, in no uncertain terms, was a ‘design solution’ to complaints about police use-of-force.
- The TASER CAM innovation proved to be highly successful, and the potential for a more general police camera unit was recognised.

SLIDE NINE AND TEN

- Over the years the camera would migrate from the TASER-CAM onto the body. First with the 'Axon Flex' a head mounted unit, and later 'Axon Body' the first body mounted device. Were now on the Axon Body-4 I think
- So, BWCs at least in terms of them as a piece of design, are directly linked to attempts to justify police use-of-force rather than prevent them.

SLIDE ELEVEN

Part Three: Culture Police Culture.

- I'm going to be honest here and say that use of force wasn't a key focus of my research. Instead I was more interested in what else BWCs were doing in police forces, aside from what was being talked about and looked for in studies such as the Rialto one mentioned previously.
- However, when putting together this talk I thought about my research and there's one specific example of how I saw BWCs being used that I think is both interesting and that touches on some of the themes here today.
- When I was doing my fieldwork one of the things that shocked me was the sheer amount of time officers spend doing administrative tasks and paperwork. I knew there would be a lot, but I was still shocked.
- Anyway one evening we were sitting in the police station and the officers I was with were completing paperwork relating to a particularly eventful incident which had required TASER to be drawn, but not fully deployed.
- Given the excitement of the incident (the fact there were knives and the threatening behaviour towards the man's partner) many of the other officers on the shift had listened to it on their radios. These officers were keen to hear (and see) more about the details.
- The two officers I was with were quick to recall and describe the event to their colleagues, with a fair amount of narrative dexterity it must be added. Interestingly, the BWC footage was central to how these stories were delivered.
- Officers located the moment they entered the property in the footage and showed this on the screen, using it to explain the incident.
- Before long the a small group of officers had gathered around the desk to watch. The footage was played a number of times and paused at key moments. The officer telling the story, aware that footage from the perspective of their colleague, who had made the arrest had drawn their TASER would show more of the drama, was quick to ask specific moments to be brought up on the screen.
- These then acted as prompts for the story and evidenced some of the points being made

- This informal footage reviewing session was brief lasting all of a few minutes. Despite its brevity, a number of important things appeared simultaneously to be taking place.
 - Firstly, the footage appeared to function as a way to 'import' the drama, speed, and excitement which the officers take to be core to their role, into the police station.
 - Secondly, the footage acted as a way for the officers to establish and agree on the 'correct' procedure. For instance, a number of the officers viewed the footage and assessed it in terms of risks and assessed how these were mitigated by the officers. Many of the other officers, including the sergeant, congratulated their colleagues on their performance, bravery, and cool headedness during the incident.
 - Third, and perhaps as an antidote to the potential risks, it functioned as a way of having a laugh. The officers teased their colleague for the way they said 'whoa' for instance
- This example shows that BWCs operative in complex ways and might help support and maintain some of the cultural logics of policing, which are premised on speed, hedonism and action. Not paperwork.