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An Exploratory Study of Public Perceptions of Police Conduct Depicted in Body Worn Camera Footage on YouTube

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Abstract:

This exploratory study builds on scholarship that has examined how social situations are defined and understood on social media. My concern in this paper is how users posting on a single channel on the video-sharing site YouTube judge police conduct in the context of police Body Worn Camera (BWC) footage. Scholarship has yet to explore this issue. Police conduct refers to how officers behave in the course of their duties as members of law enforcement. A total of 87,691 user-generated comments on YouTube posted in response to police BWC footage were collected and examined using qualitative media analysis. Three key themes relative to user judgements emerged from an analysis of these data: *parroting of news media narratives, audio-visual cues and interpretation of the footage,* and *cultural contexts.* The findings herein supply evidence that continues to illustrate that media formats retain a powerful influence over public perceptions and, while not generalizable, does provide some insight into the developing influence of social media on police legitimacy. Suggestions for future research are noted.

Introduction

Justice "in the media means law enforcement" (Surrette, 2015: 119). Representations of police in media have for the better part of history been limited to traditional media. A more recent development is the arrival of new media that allow the public to participate in criminal justice (Surrette, 2015). This study builds on research that has addressed the significance of mediated social cues in relation to how social situations are understood and defined by publics on social media platforms (Schneider, 2015a, 2015b; Schneider, 2016; Schneider & Trottier, 2012, 2013). This paper differs conceptually in its focus on official recordings of police. The research question that I explore in this paper is: What influence does police Body Worn

Camera (BWC) footage that is publically available on YouTube have upon police legitimacy? Police legitimacy herein is understood as "the judgments that ordinary citizens make about the rightfulness of police conduct" (Skogan & Frydl, 2004: 291).

Police are a unique organization "based on their legal monopoly on violence" (Manning, 1978: 8). The state-sanctioned police occupational mandate outlines specific tasks — notably the use of force, which sets police conduct apart from other professions (Manning, 1978). "The written rule is clear: cops are to use no more force than is necessary to subdue a suspect" (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993: 13). Police force then is not necessarily about the action itself, but rather how others interpret the action(s) in question. In other words, judgements of police actions require an audience *and* a societal reaction (see Lemert, 1951). Judgements of police conduct are of paramount importance given the need for the public to accept police as the legitimate authority (Tyler, 2004).

This paper begins with a brief overview of the relevant research literature on policing and media, BWCs, and police legitimacy. My intention here is not to provide an exhaustive review of these bodies of literature. Instead, I only wish to show that a gap exists in these bodies of literature to illustrate the need for the current research. Next, I outline my research method, qualitative media analysis (QMA). This approach is a conceptually informed reflexive form of document analysis useful for collecting and analyzing online user commentary for significance and meaning. I then turn my attention to my findings and a discussion of three interrelated themes that emerged from my analysis of 87,691 user-generated comments posted to 8 BWC videos on YouTube. These themes are as follows: *parroting of news media narratives, audio-visual cues and interpretation of the footage,* and *cultural contexts.* The findings herein provide further evidence that illustrates that media formats continue to have a powerful influence over public perceptions of police conduct.

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My focus in this paper is on a single YouTube channel called PoliceActivity. The channel is one of the most popular ones on YouTube to feature police BWC footage. The PoliceActivity channel bills itself as "your source for daily police related news, pursuits, shootouts, and more." A general warning for all videos follows: "This [*sic*] videos are only for educational and information purposes." Some individual videos have unique disclaimers such as "This footage is NOT intended to be violent or glorify violence in any way." Videos featuring this statement do in fact depict graphic violence, usually a civilian death, as a direct result of police action, such as a shooting, for example. In such circumstances, these BWC videos are restricted, that is, not visible to anyone less than 18 years of age, in accordance with YouTube policy on graphic content. PoliceActivity uploaded its first video on January 20, 2016, and has since uploaded hundreds more. Nearly all of these videos are police products such as in-car police dashboard camera footage and police BWC footage. Other videos on the PoliceActivity channel include aerial news media coverage of high-speed pursuits involving police. I now turn my attention to a brief overview of the literature on policing and media.

Policing and Media

A body of criminological research has explored some of the ways police services — as key players in criminal justice — attempt to maintain control over the representation of their public perception in news media (e.g., Chermak, 1995; Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Doyle, 2003; Ericson, 1982; Ericson, Baranek, & Chen, 1991; Fishman, 1978, 1980, 1981, as a few standouts) and the extension of this control process as it continues to develop on social media (Lee & McGovern, 2014; Schneider, 2015c, 2016). Scholarship in the latter area remains ongoing. A developing area of inquiry includes representations of justice in the form of BWC footage on social media sites like YouTube. Research has yet to significantly and directly explore this issue.

Related scholarship has explored public perceptions on social media

of user-generated video footage depicting officers engaging in various forms of police work, including undercover surveillance (Schneider, 2015c) and the use of deadly force (Schneider, 2016, 2017). This work and related research (e.g., see Brown, 2015; Nolan, 2014) illustrates, among other things, that police continue to provide official organizational statements in response to user-generated videos on social media *through news media outlets*. In other words, scholarship on the impact of social media on policing generally continues to support "the news-media [*as*] pivotal to the ability of authorities to make convincing claims" to the public at large (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991: 8).

These findings are not meant to suggest that the circulation of amateur videos online have had no impact on police claims-making practices. Rather, the distribution of these citizen recordings has complicated police accountability concerns (see Schneider, 2016, 2018). In light of these concerns, one organizational strategy has been for police services to outfit front-line officers with BWCs to help present their perspective to the public. It is principally for this reason that police accounts in news media increasingly include the authorized release of select BWC footage in an effort to bolster organizational claims related to crime stories (Schneider, 2017).

Before the advent of social media most crime stories appeared in news media at the beginning stages of a crime and, therefore, police exhibited more control since police could "decide how these recently discovered crimes [were] presented because minimum information [was] available from other sources at this stage" (Chermak, 1995: 33). Social media platforms have irrevocably altered how crime stories become known, managed, interpreted, *and understood by publics* (Schneider, 2016). Information related to crime stories is now freely and widely available — and sometimes in advance of police and/or news media accounts — on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The era of strict police control and management of crime narratives is largely gone, and BWCs are one

of the more recent organizational strategies occurring in response the evolving media landscape.

Body Worn Cameras and Police Legitimacy

Advancements in technology have led to developments in the mediated representation of justice. A recent development includes police BWCs. BWCs are small video and audio recording devices usually worn on the uniforms of front-line police officers. It has been speculated by journalists that the rapid deployment of BWCs constitutes "the fastest technology upgrade in policing history" (Pasternack, 2016). The devices were first piloted in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2005 (Harris, 2010), the very same year that YouTube — now one of the world's most popular search engines — officially launched to the public (Ratliff, 2006). The first peer-reviewed controlled experiment on the effect of BWCs on police use of force was published ten years later in 2015 (although the findings of this research impacted policing as early as 2013). Following a concise overview of the "handful of rigorous, peer-reviewed studies on the effects of these devices in policing," this specific study was acknowledged in a 2016 peer-reviewed paper by Professor Ariel and colleagues as "[o]ne of the most influential experiments to date on the effectiveness of BWCs, conducted in the specific area of use of force and complaints" (Ariel at el., 2016a: 4–5).

The aforementioned study, commonly referred to as the "Rialto experiment," was conducted on 54 front-line police officers of the Rialto Police Department in California (Ariel, Farrar & Sutherland, 2015). Half of these 54 officers were randomly assigned to wear BWCs during nearly 500 shifts. The researchers tracked the police use of force incidents and formal citizen complaints. The results of the yearlong study revealed a decrease in use of force incidents and citizen complaints among police officers equipped with BWCs (Ariel, Farrar & Sutherland, 2015). These findings were widely celebrated among various stakeholders and police services, such as Policefoundation.org and the Rialto Police Department, and among advocacy groups like the American Civil Liberties Union. The results

were also profiled extensively across news media reports. The "transferability" of these findings, however, has generated "heated debates worldwide" (Henstock & Ariel, 2017). According to White and Coldren (2017: 2):

> Advocates and critics have made numerous claims about the benefits and drawbacks of BWCs and, unfortunately, researchers have struggled to keep pace with the widespread diffusion of the technology in American law enforcement. As a consequence, many of those claims have gone untested.

While a growing scholarly area, presently the body of BWC scholarship consists of a handful of literature reviews (e.g., Cubitt, Lesic, Myers, & Corry, 2016; Lum, Koper, Merola, Scherer, & Reioux, 2015; Stratton, Clissold, & Tuscon, 2014; White, 2014) and replication studies (e.g., Ariel et al., 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) (cited in Henstock & Ariel, 2017), which, "if read together…cover the entire gamut of the research on BWCs to date" (Henstock & Ariel, 2017: 8). A review of the body of work on BWCs reveals that only a few articles examine the role of BWC footage on public perceptions of officer actions (e.g., Culhane, Bowman, & Schweitzer, 2016; Culhane & Schweitzer, 2017). Other work has found that positive perceptions of police performance are connected with perceived benefits of BWCs (Crow, Snyder, Crichlow, & Smykla, 2017); however, these studies do not examine public perceptions of videos accessible online. My intention here is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature on BWCs (for a concise and more recent summary see Ariel et. al., 2016a: 4–5). Rather, I wish to highlight that the scholarship currently lacks research of public perceptions of BWC footage that appears online.

There is currently no consensus across police services, unions, advocacy groups, or researchers about the specific uses of BWCs — such as when they should be turned on and off — or the particular benefits these recording devices may bring for police and publics.

Presently, we only know two things about BWCs with empirical certainty: first, discussions of these devices have received far more coverage in news media than in the research literature on the subject (Schneider, 2017), and, second, BWCs have introduced a host of unresolved issues, privacy matters perhaps the most salient among them. It is also not clear when and how BWC videos will be shared with the public, and in what context. My concern in this paper is with this quickly developing issue.

Along with press releases provided to media, police increasingly share select BWC footage with news organizations. Among the numerous claims made about BWCs is that it is believed that these cameras will lead to "enhanced police legitimacy" (Ariel et al., 2016a: 747). However, the relationship between BWC footage and police legitimacy remains unknown and unaddressed in the research literature (Ariel et. al., 2016a). Police legitimacy relies on public support of police actions, and thus it is important to understand how justice is represented in — and how the public responds to — media that publish BWC footage. Police legitimacy hinges upon citizen perceptions of fair police procedures as judged by publics (Tyler, 2004). The widespread implementation of BWCs can be linked to growing public scrutiny over the belief of *unfair* police conduct such as perceived instances of police brutality as documented in amateur videos that circulate on social media (Schneider, 2016, 2017, 2018). These devices represent the latest development in police accountability.

As Ericson (1995: 136–137) explains, "[a] ccountability entails an obligation to give an account of activities within one's ambit of responsibility," whereas "account ability," refers to "the capacity to provide a record of activities that explains them in a credible manner so that they appear to satisfy the rights and obligations of accountability." Police BWC video fulfills this twofold aim. BWC footage is usually not available for public viewing and is therefore mostly kept concealed from public view. Increasingly, however, police are *officially* releasing BWC footage through news media

outlets, and most of these same videos also appear on sites like YouTube.

Collecting and examining user comments on YouTube offered in response to police BWC videos provides new unexplored empirical opportunities to understand elements of police legitimacy or the judgements of everyday citizens concerning police conduct.

Methodology

In this section, in an effort to provide insight into representations of justice as they appear on social media, I turn my attention to a short discussion of the collection, sampling, and analysis of select user commentary on YouTube in order to address the question posed above regarding citizen judgements of police conduct. User comment posts online are types of documents retrievable as empirical data for analysis, each post representing an individual unit of analysis. Qualitative media analysis is a type of document analysis that offers a conceptually informed methodological approach useful for locating, collecting, and analyzing documents for significance and meaning. This approach to the study of documents, one that consists of a reflexive interaction between the investigator and data materials (outlined in greater detail in Altheide & Schneider, 2013: 39–73), occurs over a series of 12 specific steps. These steps are as follows:

1. identify a specific topic to investigate

2. learn the information source and review any existing literature on the topic

3. become familiar with examples of relevant documents (about a half a dozen or so)

4. list several categories (i.e., variables) on a data collection sheet (protocol)

5. test the data collection sheet by gathering data from separate documents

6. update and modify the protocol to reflect additional cases

7. employ sampling rationale and strategy (e.g., theoretical sampling, outlined below)

8. collect data examples using preset codes, add additional categories to the data collection sheet (if necessary), and complete data collection

9. conduct an analysis of the data

10. locate significant differences in each category and compare and contrast any extremes and write summaries

11. amalgamate written summaries with typical examples of the key differences

12. integrate these materials with your findings and interpretations in draft that will become your manuscript.

Steps 1–3 pertain to the research question and the individual units of analysis. I began my searches of YouTube with "police body camera." This returned more than two million hits. To narrow these search parameters, I elected to use the YouTube filter option and sort these results by "view count." The most watched of these sorted results (at six million views) is a video titled "Bodycam Video Shows Knife-Wielding Man Shot by Ohio Policeman." A review of these sorted results by view count revealed that an account or "channel" called PoliceActivity uploaded this video as well as 7 of the top 10 sorted videos. This observation directed my attention and focus upon this specific YouTube channel. At the time of these searches, 391 videos were available on the PoliceActivity channel, which had a total of 224,238 subscribers. I had no familiarity with the PoliceActivity channel or with any of the specific BWC videos on this channel prior to my initial search of YouTube for "police body camera." While other similarly themed channels do exist they are not nearly as popular in terms of number of subscribers or video views. For example, consider the channel "PoliceCenter." The PoliceCenter YouTube channel has 56,607 subscribers. Three videos on this

channel exceeded one million views. Additionally, when BWC videos are sometimes uploaded to news media YouTube channels like CNN, the topic and emphasis of these television segments usually only include excerpts of BWC footage in the context of broader news reporting. Another discernable difference is that news media YouTube channels do not focus exclusively on police content, unlike PoliceActivity.

Steps 4–6 involve the construction of a data collection sheet. A cursory review of posts made to BWC videos on YouTube contributed to the early development of my data protocol sheet, the design of which emerged from categories initially identified during Step 3. In deciding what data materials to sample for analysis (Step 7) from the thousands of posts on YouTube it was determined that a relevant and manageable data set could be acquired from a sample of posts made to the most viewed videos on the PoliceActivity channel. "Progressive theoretical sampling" was conducted to ensure that the full range of posts was included in each identified theme (as previously noted): *parroting of news media narratives, audio-visual cues and interpretation of the footage,* and *cultural contexts*. This methodological sampling procedure "refers to the selection of materials based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation. The idea is to select materials for conceptual or theoretically relevant reasons" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013: 56). Of the 391 PoliceActivity videos, 16 had 1 million or more views, and 8 of these videos had "bodycam" in the title of the video. These categories provide a conceptual rationale for data collection from user posts made in response to these videos. These included the following listed chronologically by upload date below in Table 1.

Table 1

Video Title	Views	Comments	Date
Bodycam Video Shows Knife-Wielding Man Shot By Ohio Policeman	6 million	48,315	04/05/16
Raw Bodycam Video Of Officer-Involved Shooting In Athens, Georgia	1.7 million	3,959	04/24/16
Bodycam Shows Police Rescue Tiny Puppy Locked In Hot Car	1.3 million	3,104	07/01/16
Police Bodycam Video Shows Arab Man Mistaken As Member Of ISIS	1.2 million	7,128	07/01/16
Bodycam Videos Show Fatal Police Shooting Of Dylan Noble	2.5 million	11,858	07/13/16
Bodycam Footage Of Cop Shooting Armed Student On Campus	1.8 million	2,747	11/18/16
Raw Bodycam Footage Captures Shooting Of Georgia Cop in Lavonia	1.7 million	2,089	12/13/16
Bodycam Footage Of Police Fatally Shooting Man With His Own Gun	1.4 million	8,491	03/21/17

Step 8 is to gather the data. Posts from the above videos were collected and saved using Adobe Acrobat Pro. Together, these 8 videos were viewed 17.8 million times and comprised of a total of 87,691 user-generated comments. These data were then combined into a single PDF document, totalling 3,162 pages for review and analysis.

There is some debate over whether or not online commentary truly or accurately reflects individual user perceptions. For instance, under the belief of anonymity a user might post inflammatory comments not reflective of his or her actual beliefs in order to inflame or start a debate. So while the collected data may not reflect user beliefs, the purpose is not with revealing objective truths (i.e., so-called "true" user judgements), but rather to locate meanings in online situational contexts and draw thematic links between documents. In other words, the collection and analysis of documents are relevant for understanding audiences' views (i.e., public perceptions) associated with issues such as police legitimacy.

Step 9 is to analyze these data. Unlike conventional and rigid methodological approaches, QMA does not necessarily rely on

counting or coding data materials:

> Qualitative data analysis is not about coding or counting, although these activities can be useful in some parts of fulfilling the goals of the quest for meaning and theoretical integration…The goal is to understand the process, to see the process in the types and meanings of the documents under investigation, and to be able to associate the documents with conceptual and theoretical issues. This occurs as the researcher interacts with the document. [Therefore] it is best to rely on the more straightforward "search-find-replace" options on most word processing programs. (Altheide & Schneider, 2013: 70)

Searches across the data set started with "shooting," a word that was used in the title of 5 of the videos. "Shooting" appeared 759 times across the dataset and produced 53 pages of aggregated data for review. Careful and extensive reading, sorting, and searching of these data produced additional terms entered into the primary 3,162-page PDF dataset. It is not surprising, given the topic of watching video footage, that variations of words consistent with visual emphasis emerged during this search process. For instance, as a few examples, we might consider appearances of derivations of the words "video" (811), "view" (263), "watch" (389), and "seen" (229). An important observation of these data materials was that across user posts use of the words "conduct" (8) and "legitimacy" (1) rarely occurred. A specific point of focus then is how closely and frequently audio-visual emphasis becomes associated with words and topics relevant to police conduct.

Step 10 involved identifying the extremes in the collected data. It is here where key comparisons between, concepts, categories, terms, words, and phrases are made and checked back against the data until no new concepts or categories emerge from the data set, that is, the point of saturation has been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For

instance, an early protocol category involved accounts narrating the context of camera footage. It was discovered that many users provided similar narratives (i.e., typical posts) whereas other posts in this category included comments that were racist or derogatory. These observations led to the conceptual development of key frames and themes. There is some overlap between these two concepts, but they are not the same. Frames provide the particular context for what will be discussed whereas themes concern how the story is told within a frame. One example was news media accounts (frame) and users parroting these accounts in their comments (theme) in response to BWC footage. Early written summaries of this theme along with two others outlined below (Step 11) were merged and developed into a more cohesive narrative (Step 12) in what follows in the findings.

Findings

A key finding concerned the situational context of the videos. In videos where officers used force to subdue a suspect, an analysis of these user comments indicated that the situational context was of *most* significance to users. Representations of justice in media rely heavily on the use of violence (Surrette, 2015). In five of the videos, police use of force involved a firearm. Two of these encounters resulted in the death of the suspect in the video as evidenced for the viewer in the video title itself (i.e., fatal encounter). Further analysis revealed that these fatalities were also discussed in news reports. Of the other three videos, two involved detaining suspects, and the third was video footage of two police officers being shot by a suspect who was later apprehended. I now turn my attention to a discussion of the three key themes relative to user judgements that emerged from an analysis of the collected data: *parroting of news media narratives, audio-visual cues and interpretation of the footage,* and *cultural contexts*.

Parroting of News Media Narratives

A short narrative context provided by PoliceActivity accompanied each video. These descriptions ranged from approximately two

hundred to six hundred words. Names, dates, and details such as statements provided by police were available for viewers. Analysis indicated that, for many users, these short descriptions provided an interpretative frame that influenced the parameters of user discussions and statements of police conduct. For instance, let us consider the video "Bodycam Footage of Police Fatally Shooting Man with His Own Gun." In response to one user's comment[1] on BWC footage that showed the death of a suspect, the following user wrote:

> Read the description and understand the whole video before commenting. The man is a Convicted felon. He was Loitering. He was Illegally Carrying a firearm. The firearm was also illegal. The police were called to the scene to tell the man to leave. The officer asked the man to talk politely. He refuses. The suspect runs and is seen grabbing his waistband at the same time. There was no bulling. There was all the reason for the man to be be [*sic*] stopped.

None of this specific information was available in the footage itself. The above comment was likely made in direct reference to a 522-word description provided by PoliceActivity that appeared immediately below the footage in question. No direct mention of felony convictions or illegal firearms appeared in the PoliceActivity description. Felony gun convictions involving the deceased were, however, referenced elsewhere in news media reports. At a minimum this discovery suggests that information relative to judgements about the rightfulness of police conduct — in this instance, the use of deadly force — as shown in BWC footage uploaded to YouTube were derived from sources *other than from watching the footage* on YouTube. For instance, another user post read:

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[1]All YouTube comments have been transcribed exactly as they originally appeared. They have not been edited for proper grammar or spelling.

> Here's the back story that the video description did not contain: Authorities have released dramatic body camera video from Roy (UT) police officers who shot and killed an armed suspect in the parking lot of a convenience store after a store employee called police over fears that the man, a convicted felon named Nicolas Sanchez with a history of gun crimes, was possibly casing the store for an armed robbery. Do you still feel sorry for this fucking criminal?

The text from this post, short of the first and last sentence, appears to have been copied and pasted from an article published on conservative website BearingArms.com. Website editor Bob Owens, described on the site as a "long-time shooting enthusiast," authored the article (i.e., above user excerpt). In another post in response to the same BWC footage, a YouTube user referenced a "press statement of Police" that, among other things, referred to the suspect's "extensive criminal history." The statement described suspect Nicolas Sanchez "[a]s a convicted felon, [who] was prohibited from possessing a firearm."

Research indicates that descriptions of user-generated cellphone videos on YouTube can have an influence over interpretations of situations involving how justice is represented (Schneider, 2016). Other findings illustrate how news media coverage of user-generated videos of police conduct serve as narrative evidence of the context of the video (Schneider, 2015c). In other words, police accounts in news media reports provide "official" situational contexts in select circumstances. Further analysis revealed that the PoliceActivity descriptions for *all* examined videos were in fact directly copied, usually with only minor editorial changes, from various local news media affiliates such as ABC, CBS, and Fox News. These news outlets also released the videos with accompanying text. Essentially, the PoliceActivity channel served as a mirror of these news media reports.

Consider again "Bodycam Footage of Police Fatally Shooting Man

with His Own Gun." With just a very minor editorial change, the PoliceActivity description of this video was copied nearly verbatim from just *a single news source*. The report, "Officer shoots suspect with his own gun during scuffle at Roy gas station," was authored by journalists Jeremy Harris and Abigail Norton for KUTV Eyewitness News Salt Lake City, Utah. The only PoliceActivity edit involved the beginning of the first sentence of the original news report that started with the word "Officials," which was changed to "Roy City Police" in the description on YouTube. No references, links, or credit to this news report or any of the others copied by PoliceActivity were provided.

Analysis indicated that numerous comments across the data, no matter the BWC footage — which spanned from the use of deadly force to an officer rescuing a puppy locked in a car on a hot summer day in Florida — appealed to viewers to "read the description" (i.e., unreferenced news media reports provided by PoliceActivity). It was not clear if users understood that these descriptions were duplications of news reports. Nevertheless, such user comments directed viewers to a text of a news media narrative of the footage as *constructed by journalists who largely sourced police officials*. Even when journalists cited other sources and when footage was not released directly by police (e.g., prosecutor-released footage as noted directly below) it was news media narratives that helped frame and influence user perceptions of police conduct as displayed in the footage itself. As another example, consider the following lead from a Fox News story in Cincinnati, Ohio:

> Hamilton County Prosecutor Joe Deters said a Glendale police officer will not face charges after shooting a knife-wielding man on Interstate 75 last week. Body camera video shows the March 29 confrontation between Officer Josh Hilling and Pablo Javier Aleman — *a wanted suspect in a Baltimore murder investigation*. "Officer Joshua Hilling is one brave individual and you're going to see it for yourself,"

> Deters said before releasing the body cam footage on
> Tuesday. (Fox News 2016 / PoliceActivity 2016, *emphasis
> added*)

This Fox News excerpt appears verbatim in the PoliceActivity
description of the most viewed PoliceActivity uploads and one of the
most watched police body camera videos on YouTube. Analysis of
the data revealed that many users were strongly influenced by
PoliceActivity descriptions in their own interpretation of the
encounters depicted in the video footage as evidenced in the user
accounts provided or the "linguistic device employed whenever an
action is subjected to valuative inquiry" (Scott & Lyman, 1968: 46).
User accounts, when provided, ranged from assumptions to
affirmative statements.

Consider Pablo Javier Aleman who was shot by police, the recording
of which was shared on YouTube by PoliceActivity. A few thematic
comments help illustrate the point: "bro read […] the description. He
is most likely a murderer... defend that" and "who gives a fuck if this
guy died on the way to the hospital, again if you'd read the
description, it says this man was [wanted] in connection with a
murder investigation." According to a few others: "Read the
description. He had already murdered someone," and "Did you read
the description? *He is a murderer*" (*emphasis added*).

These and similar statements serve as accounts that legitimize police
conduct and state-sanctioned violence, in this circumstance the
shooting of Aleman. There are accounts that *justify* conduct, or
"accept responsibility for the act in question, but [have denied] the
pejorative quality associated with it," and accounts that *excuse*
conduct, or "socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or
relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned" (Scott &
Lyman, 1968: 46). When these two types of accounts were provided
in the context of police conduct involving use of force, analysis
indicated that users relied largely on the provided descriptive text;
however, additional information gleaned from viewing the video

footage in question was also important in enhancing user interpretations of the situational context.

> I get that he was reaching down in his pants, but look how slow he is moving, and the fact that he is facing the opposite direction of the officers, means he would have no chance at attacking them. He could have just been reaching down there because he was wounded there anyways. The cops really should have waited to see if he had a weapon or not.

Audio-visual Cues and Interpretation of the Footage

In many circumstances in the data user interpretations of BWC footage on YouTube often merely reinforced news media / PoliceActivity narratives. For example, according to this user: "the video and police reports clearly show he was armed, and unholstered his weapon on the officers." According to another user: "He was breaking [the] law by being a felon in possession of a firearm […] It's all in plain English in news reports and on this video." Elsewhere users embedded time links in their comments as affirmation in the footage in support of their judgements of police conduct. When clicked by others these links play back a precise moment in the footage. These split second snippets highlight for others what are believed to be *visual* and *aural* catalytic moments in the interpretation of the footage.

As one thematic example, a few users wanted to highlight the four-minute mark of the shooting death of Dylan Noble: "4:00 Look at that shit, one hand behind your back, ignoring a police officer's orders, why he got shot is no mystery." Another user writes: "At 4:00 he is warned if he keeps approaching with his hand concealed behind his back he will be shot. He ignores the cop." Of note, and consistent with the influence of news narratives, is that the YouTube description mentions that Noble "ignored repeated commands to stand still and show his hands," and that "[h]e didn't comply with commands."

The interpretation of suspects ignoring officer commands as a justification for police use of force — from deadly force to restraint — was a recurring theme across the data. "After getting shot, he [suspect] still reached for something despite being warned multiple times. They [police] even said [in the video] 'you will get shot again' and he still didn't comply." In such situations, audio and visual cues from viewing the video footage merely provided additional information in support of news narratives. This was also the case with the use of deadly force when interpreted as justified, while excessive. "Still he ignored warnings and they gave him plenty. It's unfortunate that such a young person died, but all he had to do was follow the instructions of police."

Regarding footage depicting deaths at the hands of police, "suicide by cop" was a key thematic *excuse* for police conduct that appeared to have also been influenced by the YouTube description. For example: "he was trying to comit [*sic*] suicide by cop yes it was his full intention to get shot hence him yelling 'please shoot me.'" The accompanying video description noted "the suspect advancing toward officers while yelling 'Kill me, kill me.'" In the description that accompanied another video (the shooting death of Dylan Noble), it stated: "he is heard saying he hates his life." According to one user: "Could've been suicide by cop. Meaning he wanted to get shot. I think he said something about hating his life right before he was shot, so I'm going to re-watch the clip."

Some users questioned the legitimacy of the use of force in select footage. In various circumstances, concern among users was expressed over the number of shots fired by police. "Also when I say that he [the suspect] deserved it [to be shot], I mean the initial two rounds that took him down. The 3rd shot and the shot from the shotgun were not necessary." And another user: "the 3rd shot was murder the 4th and 5th was definitely murder." Users also debated other options that they believed police might have reasonably exercised to neutralize the situations depicted in the videos. The use of less lethal options, such as batons, pepper spray, conducted

electrical shock weapons (e.g., Taser), and even "hand to hand combat" were regularly invoked. Use of these less lethal police options relative to moments identified in footage was an often-expressed concern. For example: "If you look at 5:37 you see a police officers [*sic*] holding tasers, and not all American police officers have them." In comments that discussed less lethal alternatives, international cultural contexts were another basic theme that emerged across user posts relative to police conduct. For instance: "Where I live (in the UK) every single police officer is armed with a tazer, one of the reasons why gun deaths are so low."

Cultural Contexts

The examined commentary user discussions of police-suspect encounters were mostly framed in terms of confrontation and violence — rather than investigations or traffic stops (although these discussions did exist). This specific type of framing on YouTube is consistent with representations of justice in media that are found to rely heavily on the use of violence (Surrette, 2015). Frames focus on what will and will not be discussed. Analysis of these data with respect to cultural contexts in terms of how police encounters with suspects were violently framed was found to be limited to discussions of the availability of firearms in the US. Other related topics included discussions of legal issues associated with firearms, like police possession of guns and civilian rights to carry guns, as well as general tensions related to the culture of fear in the United States (US).

International commentary was provided on YouTube from users of various self-identified nationalities / countries that included the US, Canada, the UK, Australia, Israel, Sweden, Brazil, and Germany, to name just a few. Different cultural contexts identified in user comments across the data provided a lens that shaped perceptions of police conduct relative to the expectations held of local police forces. The following thematic account in support of the justification of the police use of force in a US context helps illustrate the point.

…he [suspect] could have lunged forward and stabbed him [officer]. If you cant see that as a possibility then I'm afraid you are naive. Watch the video again and look just how close he was when he pulled the knife. At 1:52 cop already had his gun drawn and the perp is about 2 feet or less from the end of his gun. If American police responded any slower at pulling the trigger we would be replacing them every ten minutes. That's a lot of funerals. This isn't the UK! We all have guns here...good and bad. If police couldn't have guns no one in there [*sic*] right mind would go out there on the streets. It would be a massacre. Crime would take over in a single day and complete anarchy would prevail. You really have no idea what your talking about. I don't think you could understand.

Numerous others across the data expressed doubt over such cultural assertions: "There is a video of 2 UK cops (a Man and A Woman) taking down a psycho with a machete with pepper spray and batons… American cops are cowards." According to another: "other countries don't have a billion guns." Another user posted: "A simple solution would be nobody getting guns in the first place, or dare I say it, actually restricting firearm ownership to those with a license and a valid reason to own." In response to this specific comment another wrote: "well we have something called [the] second amendment right to bare arms so shut the fuck up because this is not Australia." Such concerns even when expressed in different cultural contexts across videos usually returned to the theme of ignoring police commands: "Sometimes its best to comply and if you feel your rights were violated, sort it out later — at least you'll be alive to do that."

Discussion and Conclusion

A basic finding of this research is that BWC footage and accompanying text (i.e., news media) descriptions on the PoliceActivity channel often mirrored news media reports. Additional evidence demonstrates that news media continue to retain a powerful influence over public opinions in relation to police conduct (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991). Let us now briefly return to the question

posed at the outset of this paper: What influence might police BWC footage on YouTube for public viewing have upon judgements that average citizens make about police conduct? Findings herein indicate that judgements of police conduct derived from BWC footage on YouTube are influenced by three interrelated key thematic factors: news media accounts, visual and aural cues derived from the footage itself, and cultural contexts.

First, as outlined above, narrative text descriptions provided by PoliceActivity presented alongside BWC footage were found to be near-verbatim copies of news reports complete with statements and accounts from official claims-makers such as police and lawyers. These narratives had an influence in how users judged what was depicted in the footage. Many users simply parroted these same news accounts in their own judgements (i.e., comments) of police conduct. In other circumstances, users adapted news narratives to make unverified assertions about suspects in the videos as evidenced in user statements about motives and guilt. For instance, use of force as justified and whether the suspects in the footage were deserving of force was often congruent with these narrative accounts, even if it meant death, with little to no concern for due process. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that YouTube could serve as a potential model for democracy that would allow users to participate in the pursuit of social justice and engage in dialogue (Curry, 2012). Others have explored how social media sites like YouTube might act as platforms of alternative journalism (Poell & Borra, 2011) "for the production and distribution of grassroots media" (Jenkins, 2008: 274, cited in Fuchs, 2017). The research findings on the democratic potential of social media have been mixed. However, as Fuchs (2017: 75) points out, democratic-based assumptions usually fail to consider corporate ownership and it is for this reason that YouTube cannot serve as "an expression of participatory democracy." The findings herein lend some support to this assertion but, more importantly perhaps, challenge assumptions that YouTube acts as an alternative space of knowledge production, outside of the enterprise of commercialized

news media.

Second, for many of these very same users, viewing footage served to augment PoliceActivity / news media narratives. In these textual contexts, specific moments in the videos served as key visual and aural cues to users as confirmation of why the police did what they did when they did it (i.e., police conduct). Most notably, this included ignoring police commands as heard on the footage and fleeing police, or holding a weapon as seen in the footage. For others, viewing the footage provided an occasion to question police conduct, often when force was interpreted as excessive, such as the volley of shots fired.

Third, YouTube users traverse cultural boundaries, and the findings herein briefly illustrate that the rightfulness of police conduct is judged quite differently by users across different cultural contexts. This paper reveals the significance of the way that cultural context can have an impact and influence in how users judge police conduct. Little is known about the impact that this may have upon public perceptions of police conduct at various local jurisdictional levels or how cultural contexts may differ with non-violent police-suspect encounters. The importance of culture as a primary lens and how narrative media descriptions influence international users might be one area for future research. Additional research might include comparative analysis of international footage on YouTube, and more videos over longer periods of time. Future work may also explore the "promotional value for police" (Ericson, 1991: 224) of BWC footage and the process by which police attempt to maintain control over their image on social media in response to BWC footage on YouTube.

This exploratory project (1) contributes to the growing research on police Body Worn Cameras; (2) provides some empirical evidence in support of the influence of media formats and news media framing; (3) documents developments in representations of justice on new media and illustrates some of the ways that new media allow the public to participate in criminal justice; and (4) is among the first

research projects to conduct a qualitative document analysis of online user commentary offered in response to officially released BWC footage of police. A basic limitation of this paper is that it focuses on just a single YouTube channel. Further, another limitation is that these data may speak to a mix of user perceptions including those not necessarily reflective of actual beliefs. While the concern here was not with uncovering "true" beliefs, interviews with citizens about police BWC footage may help provide additional insight into understandings of the representation of justice. Lastly, these findings are not intended for generalization; however, future research might consider incorporating additional sampling procedures to accommodate this consideration to provide further insight into this social phenomenon.

Acknowledgements

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