

# How video can help police – and the public

July 6 2016, by Mary Angela Bock

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The police accountability, or cop-watching, movement includes activists who go out on regular patrols to videotape arrests. Credit: Mary Angela Bock, Author provided

With [three billion camera-equipped cellphones in circulation](#), we are

awash in visual information. Cameras are lighter, smaller and cheaper than ever and they're everywhere, making it possible for nearly anyone to watch, create, share and video.

One of the most dramatic ways [camera](#) proliferation is changing our lives is in the area of [law enforcement](#). Dashcams have been around for years and are [increasingly popular](#). President Obama called for local departments to [start equipping officers](#) with badge cams. Citizens, too, have cameras, usually in their smartphones, but [increasingly on their own dashboards](#). Yet even with all this footage, we are often in the dark about what really happens during [police](#) encounters.

For the past three years I've been studying the [police accountability movement](#) and the role that [video](#) has played in fueling activism by citizens concerned about criminal justice policies in their communities. "Cop-watching," as it's known informally, cannot be understood without also studying the way the law enforcement community uses video. As a result, my work has taken me to courtrooms, police stations and city streets where citizens and police are watching each other through their camera lenses.

## **Multiple perspectives, one timeline**

A recent research project I conducted with my husband, David Alan Schneider, [showed how this worked in a courtroom](#). We examined the way video evidence played out in a criminal courtroom. On January 1, 2012, as a woman under arrest by Austin, Texas, police called for help, an Afghanistan veteran turned activist, Antonio Buehler, pulled his phone out to photograph the scene. He ended up getting arrested himself, and [put on trial for allegedly interfering with police work](#).

The jury watched three videos and listened to multiple versions of what happened that night: police alleged that Buehler lunged at them

menacingly; he argued that he was the one assaulted. Another bystander, across the street, had filmed the scene, too, showing officers throwing Buehler to the ground. Police dashcam video showed part of the start of the woman's drunk-driving arrest and included some of the audio. A surveillance camera from the nearby convenience store bore silent witness and showed where Buehler's car was in relation to the rest of the action.

Three videos, three narratives, but time passes along only one line. By incorporating the other evidence into what they saw, and tying everything to that one timeline, the jury came up with yet another, constructed narrative, [acquitting Buehler](#).

The famous [Rodney King case](#) in 1991 that acquitted four officers and sparked riots in Los Angeles shows just how important the timeline is to our ideas of reality and truth. When the video is played in real time, the scene is devastating; officers are seen swarming the truck driver and striking him swiftly and repeatedly.

But defense attorneys for the officers never played the video straight through; instead they stopped and started it second by second. With the images taken out of context and isolated from the timeline, the moments shown seemed more defensible. The jury, left with competing narratives and a set of images detached from the timeline, found in favor of the officers.

## **Documenting police work**

Video's combination of timeline with [visual information](#) has significant implications for the current debate about badge-cams, dash-cams and cop-watching. When it comes to really figuring out what happened, more cameras are helpful; multiple perspectives tied to the timeline present a narrative that better mimics the way we move through the world. We

don't stand in one place, like a surveillance camera, nor do we hold our focus on one spot. We look close, we scan and move. For the sake of really understanding an event, the more video, the better.

From a public policy perspective, this is expensive and complicated. Much depends on who controls the cameras and the resulting videos. Dashcams only show what was in front of the car. Like most of the video from the drunk-driving arrest in Buehler's case, the [confrontation between Sandra Bland and a Texas police officer](#) happened outside the camera's range. Badge-cams can show what was in front of an officer, but they come with a long list of other considerations: [privacy for certain kinds of crime victims](#) and the officers themselves; protocols for [when and how to turn them on](#) and off; [storage and distribution procedures](#) for the millions of hours of video they will eventually collect.

Citizen videos have provided some of the most dramatic and troubling evidence of police misconduct, but by nature are happenstance and the result of being on location at a particular moment. Based on my own research, it's clear that [cop-watching video only captures events of note](#) once in a while; their work is most effective as a preventative. This "[sousveillance](#)" movement is conceived as a way for the public to monitor and keep a check on power, serving as a sort of democratized fourth estate.

## **Do cameras lie?**

My interest in video has grown out of my first career as a TV journalist and a lifelong interest in how photography conveys reality, which is not nearly as simple as it seems. True, cameras perfectly capture the light waves from a scene in front of them in ways that we could never duplicate by drawing or painting. Cameras can provide extraordinary evidence, which is why police and crime scene investigators document everything, why journalists use cameras as documentary tools, and why

citizen journalists are able to gain credibility for their own investigations.

Yet anyone who's ever looked at photos someone else took of them at the party last weekend and thought to themselves "I don't look like that!" can relate to the way a camera distorts and flattens a scene. There's much more, though: Consider the way photographers work, using their own bodies to capture a particular perspective, with lenses that do what our eyes cannot, framing a scene in a way that captures certain elements but not others. Those are just some of the decisions that happen before the darkroom or Photoshop stage, when images are [cropped, enhanced and sometimes distorted](#) in misleading ways.

Then there are the ways our brains mislead us, because images work differently in our heads than language does. Pictures seem to take a faster highway, metaphorically speaking, [inspiring emotional responses faster than language](#) and its logical reasoning. They seem to [work in our memories differently than words](#) do. Add to this the way photographic images feel real, and it becomes easier to understand why [images can be very convincing even when we know we're being manipulated](#) by special effects in a movie or an ad that shows a cupcake that's simply too perfect to be true – but now we're hungry.

Video offers up its own set of real and unreal characteristics. We've all seen the way editing can change the nature of a soundbite or a TV story; the [now-discredited attack video about Planned Parenthood](#) is a perfect example of how scenes can be deliberately distorted. Yet unedited, raw video, while subject to all the limitations of cameras generally, usually adds not just images but also audio to the timeline. Still images offer up a form of visual reality. Raw, unedited video shows us what happened in what order – and that means it provides its own version of a story.

Un-edited, raw video is a "triple threat" for public safety. It has the

visual presence of photography; the power of language in its audio; and the ultimate, unyielding evidence offered by the timeline. The public must demand transparency and input for the way police and any other branch of government creates, stores and distributes it. The public must exercise its right to video police and other public servants working in public spaces. Cameras may not lie, but people do all the time. While it's not infallible, video offers an invaluable way to find the truth.

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