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# Painting the narrative: Police body-worn cameras, report writing, and the techno-regulation of policework by Bryce Clayton Newell and Marthinus C. Koen

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## Abstract

Police body-worn cameras (BWCs) have emerged in response to calls for greater police transparency and accountability. Leveraged as techno-regulatory tools with the potential to influence officer behavior, BWCs may also afford officers opportunities to review video footage prior to writing incident reports, which has implications for how police-public interactions are documented in official records. In this study of BWC adoption by a police agency in the United States, we examine how officers' ideological perspectives on BWCs, technological limitations, and policy-related concerns influenced their decisions about whether and how to review video as part of their report writing practice. In conclusion, we argue that police practitioners and policy-makers should provide clearer policy guidance to officers about how BWC footage should be used in the report writing process and that police administrators, policy-makers, and researchers should directly consider the role that technology might play in regulating officer behavior, even in unintended ways.

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## Introduction

By some accounts, police body-worn cameras (BWCs) aim to correct power imbalances, address abuse, and deliver ground truth. However, a longstanding legal culture of deference to police officers, and the goals of the carceral system more broadly, within the United States — in combination with widespread BWC adoption—present officers with opportunities to leverage and shape the very footage that is supposed to hold them accountable. Despite research evidence supporting the subjectivity in interpreting visual records of “real life” police work (*e.g.*, Adams, *et al.*, 2020; Boivin, *et al.*, 2017), many appear willing to accept the “mechanical objectivity” [1] of visual records created by BWCs, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “naïve realism” [2]. In the current moment, “the only evidence more powerful than ‘I saw it with my own eyes’ is ‘I have it recorded on camera’” [3]. However, the notion that “video ‘tells us exactly what happened’ [is] an ideology which extends throughout the justice system” [4]. The decision to allow pre-report viewing by officers is often not based in evidence but “is often guided by ‘common sense’ — the

footage is available so it might as well be useful to those who recorded it” (Boivin and Gendron, 2022). As police officers and others become attuned to the visual production of BWC video and its use as evidence, we might question whether they may, at least on occasion, purposively “construct an inauthentic moment of visual theater” [5], whether through activities that capture the scene or in post-incident narratives (written reports) that describe officers’ perceptions of the depicted events.

Of course, officers are not the only ones recording. The broader role and existence of video evidence documenting police work has expanded precipitously in recent years. Video evidence recorded by bystanders, including during the widespread Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020, have also contributed to our understanding of police violence and treatment of people of color. We have witnessed a succession of highly publicized killings of unarmed black people at the hands of (mostly white) police officers (Koen and Willis, 2017, 2020; White and Malm, 2020). For example, video that captured the killing of George Floyd showed that those police officers were quick to rely on excessive physical force as opposed to de-escalation tactics. Comparing police responses to myriad BLM protests and white supremacist rallies, or even the domestic terrorist attack of the U.S. Capitol building in January 2021, the police appear to respond more violently toward BLM protestors (Soule and Davenport, 2020). Consequently, such video depictions have continued to exacerbate police–community tensions (Gaub and Koen, 2021; Malm, 2019).

In 2020, the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd enraged an already vexed public. Public outrage manifested in protests across the U.S., with protestors often evoking calls to defund the police (Herrera, 2020). Police transparency and accountability remain central topics of public discourse. Indeed, “justice may need to be seen in order to be done” [6]. However, as was demonstrated in the 1992 criminal trial of four Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers who assaulted Rodney King — in which defense attorneys reframed the narrative surrounding the beating by playing the video in slow motion and offering officer-friendly explanations of the depicted events (Brayne, *et al.*, 2018; Goodwin, 1994; Stuart, 2011) — the interpretation of video evidence is not always a straightforward task leading to a clear, unitary meaning. Indeed, visual images operate “as de-contextualised records of corporeal experience” and differ from text and language in how they are, and should be, interpreted [7].

The diffusion of BWCs in the United States increased significantly between 2013 and 2016, and rates of adoption continue to rise (Gaub and Koen, 2021; Reaves, 2015). Reportedly, most U.S. police agencies with BWCs allow pre-report review [8]. Academic research into BWCs has explored various aspects of the technology (Lum, *et al.*, 2019; Malm, 2019; White and Malm, 2020), including impacts on police passivity (Adams and Mastracci, 2018; Wallace, *et al.*, 2018), citizen perceptions (White, *et al.*, 2017), organizational processes (Koen, *et al.*, 2019; Koen, *et al.*, 2021; Koen and Mathna, 2019; Kyle and White, 2017; White, *et al.*, 2018), and their use by specialized units (Gaub, *et al.*, 2020). However, much BWC research has centered on police outcomes and perceptions (see Lum, *et al.*, 2019; Malm, 2019; White and Malm, 2020), especially the impacts of BWCs on formal citizen complaints and use-of-force incidents.

Most BWC research is situated within criminology (Gaub and Koen, 2021; Lum, *et al.*, 2019), although scholars outside criminology have also sought to make sense of BWCs through their own disciplinary lenses. Some of this research has examined the use and interpretation of BWC footage as visual evidence (*e.g.*, Adams, *et al.*, 2020; Bailey, *et al.*, 2021; Birck, 2018; Blanchette and Becker, 2018; Boivin, *et al.*, 2017; Culhane, *et al.*, 2016; Fan, 2017; Gates, 2020; Kalle and Hammock, 2019; Ristovska, 2020). However, BWC research has generally overlooked how BWC footage plays a role in the report-writing process. This is an important scholarly lacuna, as producing and processing information is a major element of police work (Reiss, 1992) — what Ericson and Haggerty (1997) referred to as “knowledge work” [9] or “doing paper” [10].

BWC footage can affect the report-writing process in three potential ways. First, it can change the way police officers report what happened during citizen encounters (Koen, *et al.*, 2019). For example, officers might choose to review footage to jog their memories or include specific details, such as time stamps, or to quote suspects, witnesses, or other informants more accurately when they draft their reports (Koen, *et al.*,

2019; Koen and Mathna, 2019). As Fan [11] has argued, “If video is elevated as the objective truth — and officers are regularly encouraged or even required to view the video before writing reports — then there is intense pressure to conform memory and accounts to the video even when human perceptions may have been different than what was recorded.” Second, the availability of BWC footage can improve the (perceived) objective quality and accuracy of police reports (Dawes, *et al.*, 2015). Third, BWCs can change how officers are held accountable for the way they write their reports or frame their conduct (Koen and Mathna, 2019).

Several studies (Boivin and Gendron, 2022; Dawes, *et al.*, 2015; Koen, *et al.*, 2019; Koen and Mathna, 2019; Newell, 2021) have explored these aspects of the report-writing process, albeit to varying depth. Others have reported that officers have developed positive perceptions of the impact that BWCs have had on the report-writing process (Gaub, *et al.*, 2020; Jennings, *et al.*, 2015; Pelfrey and Keener, 2016). Similar findings have emerged in studies of correctional officers (Dodd, *et al.*, 2020) and emergency medical services providers (Ho, *et al.*, 2017).

Dawes, *et al.* (2015) measured how many mistakes a small convenience sample of officers made in their written recollection of events compared to what was depicted in BWC video. Without claiming statistical significance, the study showed that officers did make mistakes when writing reports and that viewing BWC footage before drafting reports helped jog the officers’ memories, allowing them to provide more accurate reports (Dawes, *et al.*, 2015). Koen, *et al.* (2019) and Koen and Mathna (2019) framed report writing as an organizational process and found that while the report-writing process did not change significantly with BWCs, officers did rely on BWC footage to write reports when they anticipated their reports would be compared to video. This was especially the case for incidents they deemed “complex” [12] or incidents they anticipated would be scrutinized by people within or outside their department (Koen and Mathna, 2019). Newell (2021) found that officers frequently watched their own BWC footage (especially after use-of-force incidents), generally supported the idea of pre-report review of BWC footage as a policy matter, and were concerned that defense attorneys would “eat officers alive” [13] on the witness stand if their written reports did not match footage. Lastly, Boivin and Gendron (2022) tasked officers and officers-in-training with a live simulation followed by a report-writing exercise. Boivin and Gendron (2022) found that participants who wore cameras were statistically more likely to record longer and more accurate reports, but that wearing a camera on its own did not reduce factual errors. However, participants who reviewed their footage prior to writing reports were less likely to include factual errors in their reports and were also less likely to report certain details clearly visible in their footage (Boivin and Gendron, 2022).

These studies have contributed to our understanding of report writing and the extent to which BWCs play a role in this process. However, we still have very few in-depth explorations of how the availability of BWC footage has impacted report writing. Relying primarily on semi-structured interviews with police officers and administrators at a municipal police agency in midwestern United States, we draw from theories of techno-regulation and informational politics—anchored in the context of Ericson and Haggerty’s (1997) conceptions of police knowledge work and the informational practices of policework — to understand how the introduction of BWCs has affected report writing within this agency. We contextualize our analysis by explaining the theoretical underpinnings of techno-regulation and information politics and how they connect to Ericson and Haggerty’s (1997) conception of police knowledge work; describe our research site, participants, and data collection methods; and present our findings. We end this article with a discussion of the limitations and implications of our research.

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## Background

BWCs have gained a notable role in the collection, production, and synthesis of information and knowledge in policework, to both internal and external stakeholders — a phenomenon Ericson and Haggerty (1997) refer to as police “knowledge work” [14]. Ericson and Haggerty frame this knowledge work as a vital

element of the communication systems police departments have designed to deal with uncertainty and risk, arguing that knowledge production within policework has become an institutionalized form of risk communication, guided by rules of internal and external information-sharing and communication. Interestingly, the long-present “paper burden” on the police and “the prevailing sentiment that external knowledge demands are excessive and insatiable and detract from policework” [15] are present in police officers’ perceptions of BWCs and their connection to report writing. BWC adoption appears to highlight and reemphasize the role that information and knowledge work play in police work, especially report-writing practices.

### ***Information politics***

The advent of BWCs within local law enforcement has recalibrated the information politics of police work (Newell, 2021, 2019). Castells [16] and Jaeger [17] defined information politics as “the use of information and information processing as a decisive tool of power-making” and “the manipulation of information access for political gain,” respectively. Newell (2021) conceptualized information politics as “encompass[ing] the collection, use, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of information to enable or effectuate governance, regulate behavior, or implement information policies for normative purposes” [18]. In sum, information politics “create and shape the environment in which information is made available” [19] and are present in officers’ decisions about how to represent police–public contacts in official written reports.

Informational politics are tied to police report writing in multiple ways. For frontline patrol officers, they emerge in decisions about how to frame their activities and report their actions to avoid accountability and discipline, considering the existence of BWC footage; for administrators, they contribute to broader image management practices, or “police image work” [20]. These meaning-making information practices, by both groups, are about “seeking and retaining legitimacy” [21] by deflecting and reframing possible negative narratives. As Gates (2020) has argued, “turning media records into evidence is an analytical, interpretive activity” [22]. However, naïve realism — in which media is consumed with the idea that “seeing is believing” [23] — has surfaced in high-profile judicial decisions [24]. Federal courts have proclaimed that video evidence “corroborates or lays aside subjective impressions for objective facts” and that “to record is to see and hear more accurately” [25]. This naïve realism, apparent inside courtrooms as well as in the outside world, flies in the face of evidence that visual records are subject to biased interpretation and that the meaning of these records — what information they communicate — is often highly dependent on contextual factors such as perspective, placement, or field of view (Adams, *et al.*, 2020; Birck, 2018; Boivin, *et al.*, 2017; Kahan, *et al.*, 2009; Kalle and Hammock, 2019; Smith, *et al.*, 2019; Taylor and Lee, 2019). Outside the laws of evidence, the interpretation of visual media is also a matter of media literacy and visual ethics (Bock, 2020a).

### ***Techno-regulation***

In addition to the rapid diffusion of BWCs, we see consistent rhetoric about how BWCs will improve police–public interactions, police transparency, and police accountability by regulating officer and civilian behavior and providing more “objective” evidence of these encounters (Newell, 2021). BWCs are clearly a normative technology — that is, a “technology with intentionally built-in mechanisms to influence people’s behavior” [26]. This use of technology has been defined as techno-regulation (Koops, 2011; Leenes, 2011; Newell, 2021). Like regulation more generally, techno-regulation involves elements of “standard-setting, information-gathering and behaviour-modification” [27]. Techno-regulation does not occur in a vacuum but, rather, works within the existing regulatory context — alongside law and social norms, for example — to alter behavior. Additionally, BWC footage provides certain new affordances to the police: it may allow officers to align their written narratives with what they see on video rather than basing their accounts purely on memory. Indeed, as boyd (2014) noted, technological affordances such as these “make possible — and, in some cases, are used to encourage — certain types of practices, even if they do not determine what practices will unfold” [28].

Understanding how the normative dimensions of BWC technology are connected to knowledge production and information politics within the police has become increasingly important. Regardless of whether the regulatory aims behind BWC adoption explicitly include changing report-writing practices, the technology clearly has the potential to alter the way some police officers report their activities — especially in use-of-force incidents with the potential to lead to officer discipline and outside scrutiny. Although public rhetoric about BWCs may focus more on improving front-stage police officer behavior, changes to backstage report-writing practices are also a likely and important, even if not always pervasive, outcome of BWC implementation.

## Methodology

We studied BWC adoption by a police agency in the midwestern United States, which we identify by the pseudonym "Pennybridge Police Department," or "PPD." Data were collected in 2018. PPD employed fewer than 300 sworn officers. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2018) data, PPD served a population of roughly 120,000, with 82 percent of the population being white, 12 percent black, three percent Latinx, and the rest divided amongst other groups in an area of approximately 47.8 square miles. Moreover, about 23 percent of the Pennybridge population lived under the poverty line with the median household income below US\$37,000. PPD implemented BWCs in 2014, 3.5 years prior to our data collection.

A total of 149 officers (127 patrol officers, 19 patrol supervisors, and three patrol command staff) were equipped with BWCs at the time of our study. According to the PPD BWC policy, all citizen encounters had to be recorded, BWCs had to be turned on once officers were dispatched to a run, and supervisors conducted monthly run-card audits to ensure officers were recording in accordance with policy. On average, officers had a mean of 14 years ( $SD = 9.37$ ) of experience within the department, and most officers reported having worked in a law enforcement capacity for more than 10 years. Fifty-eight percent of officers had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, 17 percent had an associate degree, and 25 percent held a high school diploma or GED. Ninety-seven percent of the participating officers identified as white, while one percent identified as black and two percent identified as biracial. Politically, most of the officers (83 percent) identified as conservative, while 14 percent identified as moderate and three percent as liberal. Lastly, 92 percent identified as male, while eight percent identified as female.

This study employed mixed methods, including 106 semi-structured interviews and a patrol survey resulting in 101 valid responses. Interviews lasted 42 minutes each, on average, and were conducted with 17/17 commanders, managerial, and administrative personnel; 14/19 first-line supervisors; 25/60 randomly selected investigators; and 50/127 randomly selected patrol officers. These interviews allowed us to draw comparisons between respondents within the department while offering us freedom to probe as necessary. We relied on six distinct interview guides directed to the chief, command/administrative staff, information technology (IT) officers/staff, first-line supervisors, detectives, and patrol officers. Some questions were unique to each group of respondents while others were asked of all respondents. Interview questions focused on how officers perceived the implementation of BWCs and policy creation as well as impacts on officer behavior, organizational structures and practices, and the community. We have reported related findings from this study elsewhere (Koen, *et al.*, 2023, 2021; Koen, 2022; Wy, *et al.*, 2022).

To gain quantitative and descriptive insights, we asked the entire patrol division ( $N = 146$ ), comprising all patrol officers and patrol supervisors, to take a 39-item electronic survey, resulting in 101 valid responses (69 percent response rate). On average, respondents spent 18 minutes completing the survey, which addressed demographic information and perceptions like those outlined above. Some questions were created from scratch and some were gleaned from previous research (Chan, 2001; Gaub, *et al.*, 2016; Koen and Willis, 2020; Newell and Greidanus, 2018). Means reported in the findings below are based on responses to five-point Likert-scale questions, from 1 (positive responses, *e.g.*, "strongly agree") to 5 (negative responses, *e.g.*, "strongly disagree"). The quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS.

Coding interview transcripts and field notes occurred deductively using qualitative data analysis software. To ensure reliability and validity, content analysis of the interview data was independently read, coded, grouped, and analyzed by two different people. Lastly, we relied on multiple data sources, solicited multiple perspectives on BWCs, and presented our report to PPD command staff to validate its credibility.

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## Findings

Given the techno-regulatory aims of BWC adoption and the fact that police officers' reports are such a fruitful source of information, we expected the existence of BWC footage to substantially change report-writing practices. However, what we found was something more muted: BWCs only had a mixed and mitigated impact on report writing. We theorize that some mix of ideology and perceptions of the technology, technical shortcomings of the systems, and lack of direct policy contributed to this outcome (see also Koen, *et al.*, 2021). In our findings below, we identify respondents using pseudonyms. Despite this limited impact on report-writing practices across the agency, we did find evidence of a shift in the information politics of report writing and that the existence of BWC footage had some techno-regulatory impacts on officer behavior.

### *Ideology, perceptions, and behavior*

Responses from frontline officers suggest they do not typically review their footage with great frequency. However, some officers explained how footage had affected their reporting practices, especially in use-of-force cases or others deemed likely to draw later scrutiny. Few survey respondents agreed that BWCs caused them to report their activities more frequently (18.0 percent;  $M = 3.30$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ). A third (33.7 percent) of respondents agreed they reviewed BWC recordings to help author affidavits ( $M = 3.21$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ). Similarly, a minority also agreed or strongly agreed that they used footage when writing driving under the influence (DUI) reports (30.0 percent;  $M = 3.29$ ;  $SD = 1.24$ ) or domestic assault reports (24.2 percent;  $M = 3.52$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ). However, a majority (70.0 percent) did agree that they reviewed footage when writing use-of-force reports ( $M = 2.04$ ;  $SD = 1.16$ ). Supervisors and investigators reported watching BWC video frequently to aid investigations, review use-of-force incidents, or respond to complaints.

Some frontline officer resistance to viewing footage may be attributable to the fact that some took a dim view of relying on footage to write reports. As stated by one respondent, "If you have to go back and review your camera and do your report, you're probably not a very good police officer" (Phyllis, patrol officer). To officers with this perspective, this was an issue of competence and professionalism; the solution was to "just take good notes." Additionally, some officers may not view footage simply because they have not had to do so over decades of experience. As noted by one officer: "I don't use my camera to write an affidavit. I don't use my camera to do a use of force. When that happens, I sit down, and I type it up how I always have. I'm a creature of habit" (James, patrol officer).

For officers who reported viewing footage prior to writing reports, the most common reasons were to refresh memory, capture details they may have missed, or produce more accurate reports. Consistent with findings of prior research (*e.g.*, Dawes, *et al.*, 2015), these were the most coded themes within our interview data. Likewise, in our survey responses, although only 8.9 percent of our respondents agreed or strongly agreed that BWCs had changed the way they reported their activities ( $M = 3.80$ ;  $SD = 1.12$ ), more than a third of respondents reported that BWC footage helped them write more detailed reports (35.6 percent;  $M = 3.00$ ;  $SD = 1.29$ ) or made their reports more accurate (35.6 percent;  $M = 3.01$ ;  $SD = 1.27$ ).

In some cases, viewing footage allowed officers to refresh their memory, ensuring they did not forget to include something important, or provided a way to capture "subtle nuances ... that you can't really express in a written report" (Phyllis, patrol officer). For some officers, capturing detailed, verbatim statements from suspects, witnesses, or others was a particularly valuable reason to review video. As put by one officer, "the

body camera can capture things, and retain things that there's only so much that I can when I'm on the scene" (Lando, patrol officer). Officers could include specific details they might not otherwise remember, whereas "before the cameras, you just had to make your best guess" (Frank, patrol officer). However, other officers occasionally noted that they would write less detailed reports, relying on the video directly — for example, "I used to paraphrase more what people said. Now, I don't anymore. I just say, 'See video'" (Marty, patrol sergeant). Another told us, "the more details that you put in a report sometimes can hurt, just because you've got to be able to testify to all of that ... in five years, when it goes to court" (Jay, patrol officer).

In other cases, officers augmented what they remembered with additional details they missed in the heat of the moment, making their reports more "complete" or "accurate." Video was often ascribed an "objective" status, perceived as being more truthful and offering a more comprehensive picture of the events than the alternative. When memory and details in the video conflicted, some officers decided to reframe their reports to fit the footage: "Even though you believe it's truthful in your mind, the video doesn't lie" (Rosa, detective). For another officer:

the paperwork takes longer when I do review the body cam footage, but really it creates a more specific, detailed affidavit that I really feel pretty good about when I turn it in, because I know I went through — I combed that body cam, and everything that's in there, I know 100 percent for a fact it's in there. (Lando, patrol officer)

Another reason to review footage was to "paint the scene":

You have to be able to paint the scene and paint the narrative. I've seen people, probationary officers, use the body-worn cameras to paint that scene and set, you know, talk about how disheveled the apartment was or what the victim looked like, and stuff like that, when they can't do it from memory. (Phyllis, patrol officer)

Officers offered nuanced accounts of how refreshing memory, ensuring accuracy, and collecting additional details interacted. One overriding theme in these responses was the need officers felt to ensure their reports matched their video so that they were not later accused of lying or trying to cover something up — that is, reviewing video was a means of resisting what they perceived as unwarranted discipline or accountability. However, some respondents also expressed concern that officers might mold their reports to match the footage, even when it might contradict what they perceived during the incident. Similar concerns led one officer to state that officers should "write ... what they perceived or saw, and then watch the footage [and write a] supplemental report" (Timothy, patrol officer). The fallibility of human memory and the difference in the perspective offered by an officer's BWC was noted by multiple officers: "What happens in your memory versus what happens on camera is two different things" (Lewis, patrol officer). The reality may also be complicated by the fact that some officers saw the adoption of BWCs within their agency as a direct response to a lack of perceived societal trust in what officers write in their reports. Viewed in this light, matching reports to video is an unsurprising development.

For some, video held the potential to make a much clearer and more powerful impression on a viewer — for example, the judge or jury in a DUI case:

A lot of time you can say in a report, the suspect was aggravated and yelling, but until you see it on camera where they're screaming and yelling as loud as they can, they're clearly under the influence. The camera almost does it more justice, you know. (Oliver, detective)

The perception that the footage would “back up my reports” (Caden, patrol officer) was a common one, although often in tension with broader disciplinary and accountability concerns. Another frequent statement was that defense attorneys, supervisors, or the public would assume officers were lying in their reports if the officer’s written report did not match the viewers’ perception of what the video showed. As noted by one officer, “if your paperwork doesn’t match up with what actually happened on the footage, you’re putting yourself in a trick bag” (Roger, detective) — a sentiment shared by half a dozen of our respondents. Similarly, another noted, “the report now, itself, isn’t enough. The body-cam has to be there to match up with what your report says” (Luis, patrol officer). Others lamented, “it’s like your word means nothing anymore. You have to back it up with the camera” (David, patrol officer). Officers were concerned about omitting even small details, as even “a slight technicality ... can be used against you” (John, patrol officer). One patrol supervisor explained that the policy to have officers view their footage in use-of-force cases was designed to protect officers in these instances:

As somebody that’s worked on the street a lot ... sometimes you’ll forget how many times you said something, or how you said it. You wanna be specific about how you said it. In the past, when there was no body-cam footage, semantics didn’t necessarily play a big part in this. Now, if you omit a word or change it, just a little bit, the defense attorney, if somebody’s smart, will immediately jump on that. (Clayton, patrol sergeant)

It was clear from our interviews that these concerns contributed to the importance officers placed on the ability of the footage to refresh their memories, provide details, and bring their reports into alignment with their interpretation of what their BWC footage depicted.

### ***Technical shortcomings***

Technical difficulties were also a primary reason officers did not review their video more frequently. Officers could not easily view video on their computers or phones (an issue that may be specific to the type of BWC system the agency had adopted). Instead, officers had to plug their cameras in, upload, and view their footage on a computer located at the police station or local jail. When officers felt their reports would likely be compared to BWC video, they often opted to review footage despite ideological objections or technical complaints. Officers cited the time it took to upload and view footage as a primary impediment to their lack of frequent review. Several officers also reported that they would review their footage more frequently if the agency adopted technology that afforded more streamlined access. But, for some, the time was well spent: “It takes me a lot longer to write a report, because I’ll watch it, and I’ll pause it, rewind it, play it, because I’ll use it. I’ll take verbatim quotes from the offender, and I’ll put it in my affidavit so the judge can read that” (Lando, patrol officer). As we have reported in more detail elsewhere (Koen, *et al.*, 2021), frustration with the technical aspects of the cameras and back-end video storage system was common among officers, and it was one of the primary reasons the agency decided to abandon their existing BWC program and search for a replacement technology.

### ***Policy***

While most officers had a clear idea of what their agency BWC policy required, we did encounter some differing interpretations about what the policy meant for daily report-writing practices. At the time of our research, the department’s policy stated, in part: “Body Worn Camera equipment will be used for official law enforcement purposes only. The viewing of body camera video is for investigative purposes only and not for entertainment.” Officers who addressed the policy in our interviews generally agreed that the rule was that officers could watch their footage prior to writing use-of-force reports (or after making a felony arrest), although some claimed that officers should or were required to watch their footage in such cases. As stated by one detective, “the rule is that the officer, before they do their use-of-force report, downloads the



video, watches the video, they type their report. And before the sergeant can do his report on it, or her, they have to watch the video as well” (Lewis, detective).

However, one noted, “I really don’t take the time to review this stuff. We’re not required to. It would be a lot of boring footage” (Rick, patrol officer). Others explained how they would sometimes view footage for mundane reasons — for example, to verify the camera was recording properly or that its field of view was capturing traffic stops. According to several officers, the need to watch footage prior to writing reports had to do with stress and the science of memory in tense situations and the idea that officers could not be expected to remember and recall everything they experienced in highly charged, dangerous, or high-stress incidents. This became even more important with the advent of BWCs, as the officers’ written reports are now compared to visual documentation of the events.

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## Discussion

While it would seem commonsensical for police officers to regularly rely on or use BWC footage to write official reports, this did not seem to be the case at PPD. Instead, our data reveal a more nuanced picture of this practice. For example, while the use of BWCs provided opportunities for some officers to modify the way they reported their activities, it did not occur broadly. Most officers used BWCs to write reports when they thought that their footage would be reviewed by internal or external entities, especially in use-of-force incidents. In those cases, officers would struggle through their frustrations with the technical difficulties of accessing footage to ensure their reports would reflect what occurred in the video. However, footage review was sporadic and depended on the individual discretion of officers.

In general, officers did not want to use BWC footage when drafting reports for two specific reasons. First, some officers raised ideological objections to incorporating body-camera footage into their report-writing process. This finding is consistent with extant research (Pickering, 2020) where officers felt that doing so would subject them to a higher standard and that the value and credibility of their testimony would be diminished. Second, most officers at PPD did not use BWCs for reporting purposes because of the technical shortcomings of the back-end camera systems that provided access to footage. The most important contribution of this study, however, is that when officers felt their reports would likely be compared to BWC video by internal or external reviewers, they often opted to review BWC footage despite their ideological objections or technical complaints. Our findings show that the decision to incorporate BWCs into reporting practices was calculated and dependent on the type of case. This is consistent with Ericson and Haggerty’s (1997) conception of police knowledge work as a process designed to deal with uncertainty and risk. Specifically, we saw higher rates of reported footage review in use-of-force cases and others likely to be subject to future scrutiny. Efforts to align written narratives with video, rather than simply reporting their subjective experience, is the type of pre-report review most maligned by critics, specifically because of fears that officers will cover up misconduct by simply matching their reports to a visual record that may not capture problematic conduct. Officers’ conduct has historically been judged, after the fact, based on the reasonableness of their actions, considering what they subjectively perceived during the incident. If officers’ reports no longer represent that subjective perspective but, rather, are augmented and crafted to match the visual record perfectly, this change potentially has significant implications for police accountability processes. That some officers feel the need to review their footage, even if only in high-profile or use-of-force cases, is evidence that the information politics within the agency have been affected by the adoption of BWCs. No longer is a written narrative always enough — rather, the narratives most likely subject to further scrutiny may require some additional attention and must be brought into alignment with the officer’s interpretation of the available visual evidence.

Finally, questions about the specific requirements and expectations stemming from the department policy also contributed to these varying report-writing practices. BWCs are often characterized as presenting radically new problems and opportunities. However, BWCs are, in many ways, simply a new iteration in


the technology that has driven and empowered the risk-centered information practices of the police, perhaps since the inception of the police in modern society. Our findings suggest that both written policies and decisions agencies make about which technology to adopt have implications for frontline officer behavior. That is, officer behavior may be affected by the affordances provided (or limited) by a particular technology as well as the specificity of language and enforcement of official policy.

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## Conclusion

Our research is not without limitations. Our study was with a single agency, and that agency had adopted a brand of BWC that did not gain a large share of the overall BWC market, which implies our findings cannot necessarily be generalized. However, PPD was similar to other departments that are likely to implement body cameras. It was large enough to have specialized units, a multi-rank bureaucratic structure, and some civilian staff (Reaves, 2015). Similarly, during semi-structured interviews, social desirability may have impacted the validity of our data, especially regarding negative information about police behavior, BWCs, or how the department had been affected by BWC implementation. Interviewing members of different ranks and organizational groups did reduce some of this risk. Survey data were anonymous, and respondents may have been more likely to be truthful when answering survey questions since that did not require them to speak directly to researchers. Lastly, the study's findings include the limited sampling of newer, non-male, and non-white officers in survey responses (although the sample generally reflects the overall demographic composition of the department, at least in terms of gender and race).

Despite these limitations, our findings suggest that future research should consider and critique the affordances and limitations of particular BWC technologies and their likely impact on user behavior prior to and throughout the implementation process using a variety of methodological approaches. Moreover, at PPD, the absence of clear policy created a behavioral vacuum, resulting in inconsistent use of this technology within the reporting context. Research can, therefore, seek to understand how policy directives impact the incorporation of BWC footage into report-writing practices. Lastly, researchers must also continue to show how these decisions and practices inform the continually evolving information politics of the police—how police institutions use these technologies to manage their image and promote their legitimacy and how these practices coincide or conflict with claims about enhanced transparency and accountability.

Future research should also attend to the reality that “the meaning-making potential of visual artifacts of surveillance has proven especially powerful in furnishing proof” [29], while “the way images are created, narrativized, and rendered meaningful” [30] can be a subjective and contested process without a single, unitary conclusion about what the visual evidence means. That “photos and video ... are more memorable than words and pack more emotional punch” [31] also suggests their interpretation is more likely to be subject to bias and the perspectives of the viewer. If BWCs are to be used fruitfully as a techno-regulatory tool, serving aims such as improving police–public interactions and providing greater police transparency and accountability, agencies and regulators should think holistically about the existing and possible regulatory mechanisms at their disposal, and about the possible unintended consequences of these (techno-)regulatory choices. Researchers should consistently examine and critique these regulatory efforts. Choices about cameras, back-end servers and systems, and policy language designed to promote transparency may, even unintentionally, affect officer behavior in various ways, from use of force to report writing. 

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## Editorial history

Received 12 June 2023; accepted 14 June 2023.

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Painting the narrative: Police body-worn cameras, report writing, and the techno-regulation of policework by Bryce Clayton Newell and Marthinus C. Koen. *First Monday*, volume 28, number 7 (July 2023). doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i7.13243>