

Social Technologies & Politics

Police Body Cams: How they hurt those who are supposed to be helped

Mateo Pimentel

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As the importance of social technologies increases, many users fail to pay sufficient critical attention to the political incursions that such technologies invite.

Millions who cannot fathom life without social technologies are, in all likelihood, the same demographic that is most willing to excuse the political transgressions these technologies engender—particularly if the consequent harm affects people other than themselves.

For example, the police state has routinized extra-judicial killings in America's black and brown communities. In response, liberal reformers advocate a nationwide adoption of body cameras by police departments.

By placing body cameras on thousands of officers, these reformers hope for a drastic drop in the number of police killings and brutality. They hang their hopes on the new visual record of police cruelty. Footage of the police shooting black Americans and others, their argument goes, will make it no longer so easy for the authorities to ignore, or for the media to brush aside.

Though it happens regularly across a spectrum of devices and digital platforms, profiling and surveillance is illegal to differing extents. And, it may be unconstitutional for the state to invade citizens' personal lives with technologies like body cams.

Nevertheless, the public outcry for these devices on police officers allows the state to monitor, with unprecedented closeness, the actions of all individuals in the public sphere, especially those whom it has systematically targeted well before the advent of the body cam.

This is precisely in keeping with what critical technologists mean when they assert that technologies have a politics.

That is, in lieu of addressing the fact that police already wield lethal weapons in an often illegal manner, or that specific laws disproportionately have affected specific ethnic communities for decades, some reformers are uncritically willing to give the state a front row seat at virtually every traffic and pedestrian stop.

It is much easier to delegate a misplaced sense of civic duty to a watchful technology than actually confront the racism inherent in the policing and judicial institutions of the state. Hence, the line of thinking that espouses body cameras also tends to "eclipse other sorts of moral and political reasoning," as technologist Langdon Winner writes. Ultimately, it is imperative that technology users recognize that important technologies in their lives remain capable of wreaking havoc on the "moral and political" rights and liberties of others.

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