RADICAL INTERACTIONISM AND CRITIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Edited by Norman K. Denzin

STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

VOLUME 52

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STUDIES IN SYMBOLIC INTERACTION, VOLUME 52

RADICAL INTERACTIONISM AND CRITIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

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POLICE BODY-WORN CAMERAS AND AXON ENTERPRISE'S CLAIMS IN MEDIA

Erick Laming and Christopher J. Schneider

ABSTRACT

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) are quickly becoming standardized police equipment. Axon Enterprise, a United States company based in Scottsdale, Arizona, is currently the worldwide purveyor of BWCs having near-complete control over the police body camera market. In 2012, the company launched their Axon Flex body camera alongside claims about the efficacy of these devices. While the research is expanding, scholarship has yet to explore the role that stakeholders like Axon may play in the implementation of body cameras across police services. This empirical chapter examines claims made by Axon in media in relation to the efficacy of their body cameras over a six-year period (2012–2018). Three themes relative to our analysis of Axon claims emerged: officer and community safety*; cost and* officer efficiency*; and* accountability and transparency*. A basic finding that cut across all three themes is that most of Axon's claims appear to be shaped by beliefs and assumptions. We also found that Axon's claims were mostly predicated on the market (i.e., financial considerations), rather than say scientifically or legally grounded. Some suggestions for future research are noted.*

Keywords: Police body-worn cameras; Axon; media; TASER; accountability; transparency

INTRODUCTION

First piloted in the United Kingdom in 2005, body-worn cameras (BWCs) have spread across police services worldwide. Police body cameras have received

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considerably more coverage in news media and on social media platforms than in the research literature on the subject (Schneider, 2018a, 2018b). The cacophony of claims across the media landscape contribute to the ongoing debates over body cameras such as whether or not BWCs should be adopted across police services. There are numerous stakeholders worldwide invested in the implementation of police BWCs, including law enforcement agencies, politicians, civil liberties associations, and industry groups, most notably, the United States–based technology and weapons company Axon Enterprise.

Headquartered in Scottsdale, Arizona, formerly known as TASER International, the publicly traded Axon Enterprise (Axon) is the worldwide purveyor of BWCs. In early May 2018, Axon purchased its main competitor company Vievu LLC. At the time of Axon's acquisition of Vievu (the latter of which retained its name but was subsequently rebranded as "now part of the Axon Network"), BWCs and related technology services (i.e., software) accounted for approximately 30 percent of Axon's revenue; however, Axon "expects the [BWC] business to surpass Taser in the next few years" (Brustein, 2018). Following the announcement of the aforementioned merger, Axon claimed to have 43 of 54 BWC contracts with major police departments across the United States.[1] "This dynamic could raise questions about whether a single company should control such a sensitive market" (Brustein, 2018).

There is no doubt that Axon dominates the BWC market, an observation made by many others (e.g., see Gelles, 2016; Stoughton, 2018).[2] The issue of Axon's near total control of the police body camera market is certainly an important one that we suspect will be the topic of much discussion and debate. In this chapter, we present another question that we think would help provide additional insight into some of the ways this single technology and weapon company controls the BWC market: What claims does Axon make relative to their body camera products in media? Addressing this question we think might help us better understand how such claims may contribute to the role that Axon's current market share dominance has over influencing law enforcement agencies' adoption and implementation of BWC technology.

Certainly, financial considerations and other conditions contributed to Axon's ascendance in the body camera market. We do not claim here to present the entire history of Axon; rather, we suggest that Axon's rise and market dominance can be empirically tracked and better understood through the collection and analysis of claims made by Axon representatives. Investigating Axon claims about their body cameras, on the one hand, provides some insights into the process of Axon gaining a dominant share over the BWC market and, on the other hand, helps to illustrate some of the ways in which the company seeks to retain its dominance over competitors.

As a publicly traded company motivated by maximizing its sales and profits for its shareholders, Axon has an obvious interest in promoting claims to persuade others, particularly law enforcement, about the value of their devices.[3] Practically no scholarship has focused attention solely on the issue of Axon claims relative to the hawking of their body camera products. In this chapter, we

contribute to this gap in the research literature by examining public claims made about BWCs by Axon representatives in media.

In what follows, we begin with an overview of BWCs and review the relevant research literature. Our purpose is not to provide an exhaustive review of the literature since this has been done elsewhere (e.g., Ariel et al., 2017, pp. 4–5). Instead, we review a few more recent and selected key studies that provide evidence for the efficacy of body cameras, the findings which are pertinent to our investigation of Axon claims. We then detail our methodology, before turning to our analysis and conclusion.

POLICE BWCS

It is estimated that at least one third of all police services in the United States have adopted BWCs (Sousa et al., 2016) and, further, that organizational characteristics of police in the United States can predict the adoption of BWCs (Koen, Willis and Mastrofski, 2018; Nowacki and Willits, 2018). The widespread adoption of BWCs is also evident in other countries such as the United Kingdom, and to a lesser extent in Australia and Canada (e.g., see Laming, 2019). Body cameras are expected to produce several benefits for the police and the public. For example, empirical research suggests that the use of BWCs reduces police use of force (Ariel et al., 2015), decreases citizen complaints against police (Ariel et al., 2017), and improves evidentiary collection and efficiency (Owens et al., 2014). Some researchers suggest that BWCs can improve police accountability and transparency (Henstock and Ariel, 2017). Scholarship has also explored the perceptions of command staff views of BWCs and how this may impact the use of force by officers wearing cameras (Smylka et al., 2016). One area that has received practically no attention in the research literature is the role that various stakeholders have in the adoption of body cameras. An analysis of claims made by Axon relative to their body cameras helps provide some needed insight into the role that the company might play in terms of the implementation of police body cameras, i.e., police decisions to adopt cameras based on Axon claims.

Axon has increased its dominance in the weapons and technology market and in doing so has created subsidiary companies in several countries to help expand its reach (e.g., Axon Public Safety Canada, Axon Public Safety UK, and Axon Public Safety Australia). Previously, Axon was exclusively an electroshock weapons company that supplied stun guns to thousands of law enforcement agencies around the globe. The company then rebranded to Axon in 2017. Axon has since added BWCs and related technologies to its product offerings that collectively fall under the umbrella of "digital evidence management systems" (DEMS). The rise of DEMS is directly attributed to the expansion of BWCs, the latter of which creates digital evidence (e.g., video) that must be securely handled and stored. For instance, Axon operates its Evidence.com – a secure cloud platform for law enforcement to manage digital evidence captured by police body cameras. According to Winston (2015), Axon's:

> cloud-based evidence strategy is central to the company's plan for profitability. The company is focusing on increasing annual Evidence.com subscriptions, which range from $15 to $109 per month, or up to $1,200 per year per camera – that's up to three times the $399 price tag of the hardware itself. For large departments, this carries a hefty price tag: The Los Angeles Police Department's purchase of cameras for its patrol officers is expected to cost $7 million a year.

Research on BWCs has expanded in recent years, and the literature continues to grow as more police agencies choose to test and adopt the technology. Despite the growth in scholarship, most studies have been nonexperimental, which restricts public knowledge regarding the effectiveness of BWC technology (Ariel, 2016; Cubitt et al., 2017; White, 2014). Nevertheless, police use of force and citizen complaints against the police are the most frequent outcome measures examined in experimental research involving BWCs. The research that has tested the effects of police BWCs on these two issues has been mixed; however, of these research studies, the results of the Rialto experiment has received the most attention (Schneider, 2018a).

The so-called landmark "Rialto study" is one of the most influential BWC studies conducted thus far and has set a standard for subsequent replication experiments (Ariel at el., 2016). The study was conducted in Rialto, California, between 2012 and 2013 with all frontline officers ($n = 54$). The research team employed a comparative design of shifts in which police officers wore cameras (treatment group) and shifts where officers did not (control group).[4] Over the course of the study, a total of 988 shifts were randomly assigned with 489 treatment and 499 control conditions. The findings demonstrated that police use of force was approximately 50% lower for the treatment group ($n = 8$) when compared to control conditions ($n = 17$) and that complaints against officers dropped by 88% compared with the 12 months prior to the experiment (Ariel et al., 2015). The study design was replicated in the United Kingdom with the Birmingham South Local Policing Unit in the West Midlands Police force jurisdiction for six months in 2014 (Henstock and Ariel, 2017). A total of 430 shifts were randomly assigned with 215 treatment and 215 control conditions. The primary outcome measure was the cameras' effect on use of force. These results suggest that the treatment group exhibited a 35% reduction in use of force compared to control conditions (Henstock and Ariel, 2017).

Another experimental BWC study was conducted with the Orlando Police Department in Florida between 2014 and 2015 (Jennings et al., 2015). The researchers randomly assigned 46 officers to wear cameras (treatment group) and 43 were not assigned cameras (control group). Researchers tested the effect of body cameras against response to resistance (R2R; use of force) and serious external complaints (e.g., unnecessary or excessive use of force and/or harassment by police). The findings of this study showed that officers wearing cameras had a significantly lower prevalence of R2R incidents compared to the control group, and camera-wearing officers accumulated a significantly lesser number of serious complaints compared with the officers who did not wear the cameras (Jennings et al., 2015). Similarly, Jennings et al. (2017) conducted a similar study in Florida of the Tampa Bay Police Department and found that use of force decreased by

more than 8% in the 12 months after body cameras were deployed when compared to the predeployment period.

Elsewhere the Spokane (Washington) Police Department participated in an experimental BWC study between 2015 and 2016. In this study, 149 officers were given body cameras in two phases during which the first group of officers ($n = 82$; treatment group) began using cameras six months before the second group ($n = 67$; control group). This study measured the effectiveness of cameras on use of force and complaints against the officers. The results suggest that both citizen complaints and use of force incidents decreased for both treatment and control groups after they started wearing body cameras compared to predeployment (White et al., 2017). However, use of force incidents and citizen complaints increased for the treatment group during the postrandom control trial period. White et al. (2017) explain that officers may at first be willing to adjust their behavior because of the novelty of the new technology but return to "normal" behavior after the novelty wears off (White et al., 2017).

In another study involving the Las Vegas Police Department, Braga et al. (2018) found that officers equipped with BWCs had fewer complaints and use of force reports compared to officers not wearing cameras. Officers wearing cameras conducted more arrests and issued more citations relative to officers without cameras (Braga et al., 2018). In the largest randomized controlled trial of BWCs to date, Yokum et al. (2017) found very small effects across all measured outcomes, including the use of force and complaints in their study with the Metropolitan Police Department (Washington, D.C.). Notably, the outcome measures failed to reach statistical significance, meaning there were no detectable or otherwise, meaningful effects on use of force or complaints. Similarly, Ariel et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of ten BWC experiments with use of force as an outcome measure and found that the cameras had no effect on police use of force and that the use of cameras led to an increased rate of assaults against officers.

Most experimental research that has examined body cameras' effect on complaints against police show significant reductions (Ariel, 2016; Ariel et al., 2017; Braga et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2014; Mesa Police Department, 2013; Owens and Finn, 2018). Research also suggests that BWCs can civilize behavior between the police and public (Ariel et al., 2015; ODS Consulting, 2011) and improve evidence collection (Katz et al., 2014). The technology has also served useful for court purposes. Owens et al. (2014), for instance, found that officers wearing cameras had a higher proportion of intimate partner violence cases that resulted in a criminal charge and conviction compared to officers not wearing cameras. Similarly, results from other studies show that BWC videos resolve significantly more cases through guilty pleas rather than criminal trials and can increase officer efficiency (Goodall, 2007; ODS Consulting, 2011; Ready and Young, 2015).

Lastly, it is worth highlighting that the majority of research on BWCs has been conducted in the United States and the U.K. Therefore, most of our knowledge of the technology is limited to jurisdictions in these two countries. Nevertheless, some police departments around the world have completed pilot projects and are slowly rolling out BWCs. Some law enforcement agencies in countries like Canada and Australia have been testing the efficacy of BWCs for years but have

been slow to adopt the technology. Despite the relatively mixed and diverse research results on police use of body cameras, what has remained constant, lurking in the background across these experiments, is the presence of Axon's cameras and technology (e.g., Axon supplied their body cameras for most of the aforementioned research studies) and the obvious financial interest that Axon has in the police adoption of their technology devices. Thus, as BWC experiments continue to expand, our research question then regarding claims made by Axon relative to their body camera products, we assert, remains paramount, for garnering insight into Axon's market dominance and illuminating the company's role in influencing the adoption and implementation of body camera technology across law enforcement agencies.

METHODOLOGY

The research topic and question informed the selection of a suitable method. Given our stated interest in claims made by Axon in media, we selected *Qualitative Media Analysis* (QMA; Altheide and Schneider, 2013). QMA is an approach that places emphasis on documenting the process through which discourse is presented to audiences. A review of the research literature indicates that scholarship has not *directly* investigated Axon claims about its body cameras and related technologies in either news reports or on social media platforms. This observation indicates there exists a concerning gap in the research literature regarding understanding the role a private enterprise corporation like Axon plays in the promotion of their body cameras and related services (e.g., software). This void in the literature attracted our attention and directed our focus upon content analysis of select news media articles featuring Axon product claims.

QMA, or ethnographic content analysis, is a specific type of content analysis that differs from conventional types of content analysis as a method in that QMA focuses on a reflexive awareness of the process, meanings, and emphases to allow for concepts to emerge throughout the entire research process. The method involves 12 steps (for a longer discussion of these steps, see Altheide and Schneider 2013, pp. 39–73). The first three steps concern the topic of investigation (i.e., BWCs). The researcher first identifies the topic (step 1), reviews the literature (step 2), and then becomes familiar with some relevant documents (e.g., news reports) (step 3). Steps 4–6 involve creating a data collection instrument or research protocol. Relevant variables or categories that emerge from the previous three steps are listed (step 4), these variables are then tested against the data (step 5), and the protocol is revised if needed (step 6). After the protocol is developed, a sampling strategy is employed (step 7). The data are then collected using preset codes (step 8) followed by analyses of these data (step 9). The categorization of differences discovered during data analysis are then identified and included in written summaries (step 10) along with some typical examples (step 11). The materials should then be compared and contrasted with differences in the data and finally integrated together into a draft that will become the final manuscript (step 12).

We directed our focus upon Axon claims as presented in two media formats (steps 1–3): news media documents (mass media) as our primary data source and Twitter (social media) as our secondary data source. These formats were selected for the following reasons. First, regarding mass media, research demonstrates that the major news media continue to retain their legitimizing function, especially for law enforcement.[5] Major news media are basic aspects of popular culture, and the logic of these media or "the process through which media present and transmit information" (Altheide and Snow, 1979, p. 10) is strategically used by companies such as Axon in order to bring more widespread awareness and legitimacy to its claims about its products. For example, Axon has regularly published press releases since 2009. A principal aim of a company press release *is to direct announcements to news media*. When journalists publish stories citing press releases, the news media facilitate, whether inadvertently or not, the legitimacy of companies such as Axon, which has published 374 press releases since 2009 (found here: http://investor.axon.com/press-releases). Given the role of news media in both disseminating and legitimizing Axon's claims about BWCs, it is vital that we consider mass media news documents where we can empirically observe and track how points of view and claims may change subtly over time and across reports.

Second, regarding our secondary data source, and following news media, social media platforms increasingly serve as significant sources of supplementary legitimation. This is especially the case with Twitter as the majority of topics are news based (Kwak et al., 2010) with the platform serving as a curated news feed for many of its users (Wang, 2018). Twitter now predicts "relevant topics and send[s] breaking-news notification *based on a person's interests*" (Wang, 2018, *our emphasis*). Research indicates that Twitter is among the most used social media platforms by police agencies (Schneider, 2016). Therefore, considering police use of Twitter, news stories featuring Axon's press releases (relevant to police), Twitter's breaking news notifications that would be sent to police, and also Axon's direct engagement with police groups to help promote its claims about its products, we surmised that Twitter would provide us with additional and relevant secondary source data. We first utilized the LexisNexis database to collect our news media data (articles), which served as our *primary documents*, or those documents that comprise of the objects of study (Altheide and Schneider, 2013).

As we developed and revised our protocol instrument (steps 4–6), we searched the LexisNexis database with the terms "taser" and "axon" and "camera." We included "taser" as a search term because the company did not change its name to Axon until April 2017. We conducted searches from January 1, 2012, to August 1, 2018.[6] Therefore, it was important that we included "taser" to capture all news articles relating to body cameras prior to 2017.[7] The search parameters returned 376 "hits" across international and local news media outlets primarily in the United States but also in other countries like Canada, Australia, and the U.K. Our initial review of these data revealed that 143 news articles were either duplicates, business briefs of Axon stock, or unrelated to Axon body cameras (e.g., articles that only discussed Tasers). Our focus per our research question was with select news media reports – those articles with a thematic emphasis on Axon

body camera technology and related claims (step 8). Themes are connected to stories told by journalists who must "get specific information from sources that can be tied to" the reporting of the narrative itself about BWCs (Altheide and Schneider, 2013, p. 52). For this reason, we excluded the aforementioned 143 articles that did not meet these thematic criteria, resulting in 233 reports for analysis (step 9).

The collection of Twitter data followed a careful reading of our news media data. These Twitter data serve as our *secondary documents* or those records about primary documents that "are at least one step removed from the initial data sourced by a researcher" (Altheide and Schneider, 2013, p. 7). Our data sampling strategy (step 7) of both news reports and Twitter data involved "progressive theoretical sampling," or "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 and Schneider, 2013, p. 56). Lastly, numerous discussions with Axon employees in the form of in-person meetings, phone conversations, and email and Twitter exchanges with the first listed author further informed our approach and data sampling strategy.

Our primary sample of 233 news media documents were downloaded from LexisNexis and converted into a portable document format consisting of an 879-page data set for careful reading, review, and further analysis. We identified 42 news articles that featured quotes coded as claims by Axon employees about its body camera technology (step 10). Analyses of these news media data produced three basic themes (steps 11 and 12) that we explore below: *officer and community safety*; *cost and officer efficiency*; and *accountability and transparency*. The emergence of these themes from our analysis of the primary data set informed our searches of Twitter.

At the time of our secondary data collection, Twitter only allowed public access to the most recent 3,200 tweets of user profiles. A "tweet" is a user-generated posting of 280 characters or less and can include any combination of text, photos, videos, or links to websites. Tweets can also be "retweeted" or shared with others. We gathered the most recent 3,200 tweets made to Axon's United States and Canada Twitter profiles, @Axon_US and @Axon_Canada, respectively. Through the platform users can engage or tweet at (i.e., send public messages) using the @ symbol, which serves "as a marker of addressivity (i.e., to direct a tweet to a specific user)" (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009, p. 1). Hashtags (#) can also be used to categorize tweets, so topics can easily be followed by users on the platform. We retrieved our Twitter data using allmytweets.net.

Axon Canada was very active in "retweeting" law enforcement personnel tweets that limited our data to the most recent 3,200 tweets on @Axon_Canada between July 2017 and September 2018. Whereas we were able to retrieve data from the U.S. Axon account from October 2015 to September 2018. U.S. Axon Twitter posted 1,003 tweets between October 24, 2015, and September 21, 2018, and the Canadian account posted 327 Tweets between July 9, 2017, and September 21, 2018. These tweets were downloaded from Twitter for additional reading, review, and analysis and are included below, where relevant as secondary data provided in support of our primary media data.