





Head-Mounted Cameras For Security Operations:

What the officer sees, the jury sees.

By Richard Kay

Technology is a wonderful thing. An article in a car publication from several years ago proposed that ‘the aim of [technology] is to make life easier for humans’. With advances in technology increasing at a staggering rate, there are ever more options available for public safety agencies to increase operational efficiency.

One such technology is the head-mounted camera. The idea of real time capture of operational events is not all that new. Dash-mounted cameras have been in use for a while now, so this technology is a progression from that, transferring the camera from the static vehicle to the mobile officer.

One such device is described as ‘a tactical networkable computer combining advanced audio-video record/capture capabilities worn by officers. An audio-video earpiece imager, speaker and microphone integrates into the communications loop between existing radios and the communications headset, recording video of critical incidents from the visual perspective of the officer. The camera significantly changes officer efficiency by reducing report documentation workload while increasing accuracy and accountability.’

Notwithstanding the hazard this head-mounted object may pose to officers in a use-of-force incident (an indirect object may cause injury to the wearer), this article seeks to examine the effects of using the captured footage in post-incident analysis.

Reports about the head camera, currently being tested by some security companies, may be raising false expectations regarding the device that could have serious repercussions in some use-of-force investigations.

The camera, a little larger than a bluetooth earpiece, fits snugly on an officer’s temple and is commonly perceived as a ‘third eye’ that reliably captures the wearer’s point of view. For example, a recent news story in the US was headlined: “What the Officer Sees, the Jury Will See.”

Unfortunately, it isn’t that simple. There are certain important differences in how human beings process information and how a camera does. There is no camera in existence that can record an event exactly as the officer wearing the camera perceives the event.

In most use-of-force cases, that won’t present a problem. Head cameras potentially will bring many important benefits to public safety agencies, as have in-car videos. In most cases, they’ll be a great help in reconstructing what an officer faced on the street, they’ll help refresh an officer’s memory so he or she can give a fuller account of a confrontation, and they’ll help use-of-force reviewers better understand actions of the officer and the suspect.

Yet, in some cases, there may be differences between what the officer remembers and what the camera recording shows, or the officer may have no recollection of key elements of the scene and the action, or there may be



...in some cases, there may be differences between what the officer remembers and what the camera recording shows...

other discrepancies that seem inexplicable or controversial. In those cases, if the differences between human perception and camera perception are not understood, the video involved could end up confusing and misleading officers, reviewers, and the public.

To minimise that risk, it is recommended that a 'video advisory' accompany any official viewing of recordings from head cameras, as well as from other video devices. How such a warning might be phrased will be explored later in this article.

First, let us examine the rationale that makes a precautionary statement desirable. Even with a camera that is mounted near an officer's eye and theoretically recording a scene from the officer's perspective, certain inescapable differences between human and mechanical processing of information will likely prevent a recording exactly matching what an officer sees and hears during a critical confrontation. Fundamentally, these differences have to do with field of view, focus of attention, and interpretation.

Selective Perception

The camera is a 'neutral, unemotional observer' of a given scene. It has a broad focus, the expanse and detail of which are restricted only by the quality and range of its lens.

In contrast, an officer in a tense, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding situation does not have the same panoramic vision. While the camera indiscriminately captures its broader picture, the officer is trained to selectively assess a scene or individuals present from the outset of an encounter, hunting, for example, for threat cues. The officer tends to focus on certain kinds of information, determined by context, and to exclude other information that is considered irrelevant.

It is somewhat like asking a carpenter and a surgeon to describe what they see when looking at a body on an operating table. The carpenter will see the big picture – with lots of body parts and colours and

blood. But the surgeon's eye and brain will quickly focus in on the bleeding vessel in need of repair, and filter out everything else as unimportant at that moment. In the case of the surgeon, training and experience allow for the appropriately quick identification and selective focus on information relevant to an operating room crisis, just as an officer will tend to home in on potential cues to a different kind of threat. In contrast to the camera's inclusiveness, the officer's brain, like the surgeon's, is suppressing from cognition what seems unimportant. Of millions of bits of information that emanate from a given environment, only a small proportion will reach the brain's processing area and an even tinier proportion will be formulated into conscious perceptions upon which judgments will be based.

Context influences meaning. A camera does not have the officer's experience so it does not know or record how the officer is interpreting what is seen.

Recommended Advisory

With that in mind, it is recommended that an advisory be delivered before an officer views any video recording of an incident they were involved in or before persons responsible for judging the officer's actions see it.

Suggested language for this caution, formulated with the assistance of legal representatives with experience in use-of-force investigations, might read as follows:

You are about to view a camera recording of a use-of-force event. Understand that while this recording depicts visual information from the scene, the human eye and brain are highly likely to perceive some things in stressful situations differently than a camera records them, so this photographic record may not reflect how the involved officer actually perceived the event.

The recording may depict things that the officer did not see or hear. The officer may have seen or heard things that were not recorded by the camera. Depending on the speed of the camera, some action

elements may not have been recorded or may have happened faster than the officer could perceive and absorb them. The camera has captured a two-dimensional image, which may be different from an officer's three-dimensional observations. Lighting and angles may also have contributed to different perceptions. And, of course, the camera did not view the scene with the officer's unique experience and training.

Hopefully, this recording will enhance your understanding of the incident. Keep in mind, though, that these video images are only one piece of evidence to be considered in reconstructing and evaluating the totality of the circumstances. Some elements may require further exploration and explanation before the investigation is concluded.

The purpose of the advisory is not to challenge the integrity of state-of-the-art recording equipment, but to remind all parties that it necessarily has intrinsic limitations. This advisory is offered as a useful tool in promoting thorough and impartial investigations of uses of force.

Properly framed, camera recordings can be great memory refreshers for the officers involved and offer valuable insights for reviewers. The key lies in understanding that they are not the be-all and end-all for explaining every incident.

Technology is wonderful. We should embrace it to make life easier and make workplace operations for efficient. But we should be aware of its limitations, and it shouldn't be a substitute for well-trained security personnel. ■

Mr. Richard Kay is an internationally certified operational safety instructor-trainer and dynamic force-on-force simulation trainer. He is the founder of Modern Combatives, an organisation providing realistic operational safety training for security and public safety agencies, nationally and internationally.

For more information, visit www.moderncombatives.com.au.