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Debating Police Body Worn Cameras: Legitimacy, Surveillance and Power in U.S. Media

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Debating Police Body Worn Cameras: Legitimacy, Surveillance and Power in U.S. Media

by

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Abstract

Prominent cases of black individuals killed by the police in the United States of America have prompted a firestorm of debate around perceived issues with police brutality and racial discrimination by police. This thesis investigates the discourse on police body-worn cameras through a qualitative content analysis of public rhetoric in the USA between 2012 and 2018. Using the social construction perspective of social problems, this research examines how technological solutions to social problems can themselves become problematized.

The data was drawn from both online articles and reader comments attached to those articles from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal websites. The activities of claims-makers, their various positions in these debates and also their tactics in response to competing positions are examined through claims-making about body-worn police cameras. The findings suggest that within the comments sections of online news articles about BWCs, audience members can critically evaluate media messages and articulate their own ideas about the police, power, authority, transparency, accountability, and legitimacy, but still often make use of pre-existing cultural resources. This thesis contributes to knowledge about the role the internet plays in the development of social problem debates, and public beliefs about the role of surveillance and the police in society.

Keywords: policing, media, legitimacy, accountability, surveillance, transparency

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Chanin A. Seeger

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Abbreviations

Closed-Circuit Television – CCTV

Ethnographic Content Analysis – ECA

Body-worn Camera – BWC

New York City - NYC

New York Times – NYT

United States of America - USA

Wall Street Journal - WSJ

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Instances of alleged police brutality or excessive use of force have been the focus of frequent news stories for decades, but recent prominent cases of Black individuals killed by the police in the United States of America (USA) have prompted a renewed firestorm of debate around perceived issues with police brutality and racial bias (Lowery, Leonnig, & Berman, 2014). Police wearing of portable cameras that can be attached to an officer's uniform (commonly known as police body-worn cameras – herein BWCs) has been proposed as a potential solution to the perceived problem of police excessive use of force, racial bias, and other forms of misconduct in the USA (Stross, 2013). On August 12, 2013, a federal court ordered the New York Police Department to initiate a BWC pilot programme as part of its ruling that the NYPD's 'stop and frisk' policy was unconstitutional, due to civil rights violations and evidence of racial bias. This further fuelled what would become a national discussion on the technology (Santora, 2013). Despite public awareness of alleged police excessive use of force, BWCs were not widely discussed as a solution until after the shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black man killed by Ferguson police in 2014, and the subsequent civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. Further attention to the policing technology was garnered through a statement from Michael Brown's parents, who advocated the placement of BWCs on "every police officer working the streets in this country" (NBC News, 2014). The police department of Rialto, California, became the first in the USA to deploy body-worn cameras to all uniformed officers in 2014, after conducting one of the earliest studies of the technology in 2012 (NBC News, 2014). The department's pilot program garnered the interest of police departments across the US.

Among others, the killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown by police officers mark a critical point in the USA regarding both rising awareness of alleged excessive use of force by police as a significant social problem and police use of body-worn cameras (BWCs) as a solution to that problem (Ortutay, 2014; McLaughlin, 2014). Proponents argue that BWCs increase transparency and accountability and act as a deterrent to visible forms of misconduct by police (Stastna, 2014). Critics express privacy related concerns (Weiner, 2013) and note that body camera footage provides a one-sided view that can be taken out of context (Hansford, 2014).

Statement of Problem

This thesis investigates the social construction of knowledge around BWCs through a qualitative content analysis of online news articles and reader comments attached to those news articles. This research examines how media discourses around BWCs developed and how those discourses have been received by online news media audiences. According to Young (1986), “[i]t is widely held that the media are the principal definers of information in society” (p. 255). However, Hall (1980) argued that audiences are also active in their relationships with the media, being able to make critical interpretations of the media they consume. Later studies have supported this assertion (e.g., Millington & Wilson, 2012; McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). This research contributes to knowledge about the development of social problems in the age of online news reporting, as well as audience interpretation of news media through online comments.

Drawing from a social constructionist framework (see chapters 3 and 4), this research uses an exploration of the claims-making processes surrounding the police implementation of BWCs through an analysis of media discourses as well as the interpretation of media representations by members of the public. This strategy reveals the linkages between these

representations on one hand and public perception on the other. Four research questions guide this research:

- What claims about BWCs are presented in online news media?
- How are these claims received by news reading audiences?
- Do news audiences present their own claims when given the opportunity?
- If so, what are these claims and how do they differ from claims presented in the media?

Overview of chapters

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on media effects and reception, attitudes towards the police in general and towards police body-worn cameras in particular. Chapter 3 describes social constructionism, the theoretical orientation taken by this thesis. Concepts from social constructionism such as claims-making are explored. Chapter 4 details the methodology of the study. This thesis employs a qualitative content analysis of both news articles and online reader comments. Chapter 5 breaks down the findings. While most article writers and commenters agree that BWCs are likely beneficial overall, there is disagreement over details such as why cameras are needed, how reliable they are, policies over their use, and if they are sufficient solutions to the perceived problems in policing. Readers are found to resist news narratives but still extensively use pre-existing cultural resources such as pop culture items like the George Orwell novel *1984*, and stock phrases like ‘race baiting’, ‘nothing to hide’, or ‘blue wall of silence’.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Media effects

Researchers began empirically studying the effect of mass media on audiences in the 1930s (McQuail, 2010, p. 456). This ‘media effects’ research examines to what extent and how media portrayals affect public perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) describe three main models of media effects: framing, agenda-setting, and priming – which have been the focus of theorizing and research on the impact of media on audiences and society in general. Framing theory presents media effects at their strongest. It proposes that how an issue is presented in the media can influence how it is understood by audiences. Goffman (1974) argues that individuals cannot understand the world fully until they use ‘frames’, or interpretive schemas, that are used to classify and interpret reality.

Agenda-setting theory proposes that the media placing greater emphasis on certain issues, via the placement and amount of coverage, results in audiences attributing greater importance to those issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). By increasing coverage of a topic, the media increases the amount of public attention to that topic. As a result, the audience assumes that the phenomena getting coverage are more common, more pressing, or otherwise more worthy of coverage. Priming theory goes beyond agenda-setting and suggests that the media can create associations between topics such that the media shapes the standards and considerations people use to make judgements about issues and political candidates (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Production of News Media

Given the evidence that news content can affect audiences and society at large, scholars have also considered it important to examine how news media content and its messages are produced. Tuchman (1978) argues that news is produced under organizational ideologies that define what constitutes newsworthiness. A news organization's ideology, shaped by its owners and editors, functions to organize and give meaning to "everyday reality" (p. 193) through the selection and coverage of stories. According to Knight and Dean (1982, p. 145), "news accounts, as a major form of constructing and transmitting social knowledge, are fundamentally ideological."

Ideology naturalizes ideas and beliefs, making them seem common-sense and taken-for-granted. Ideology is constituted by both ways of knowing and also ways of not knowing, which acts as a "form of silence" (p. 146). Certain topics or positions are rarely or never spoken of because they have been construed as absurd or even impossible. Knight and Dean also (1982) argue that news accounts create ways of knowing that are framed uncritically by "developing notions of expertise and legitimacy" (p. 144). By consistently referring to the opinion of specific individuals or types of individuals as 'expert opinion', media creates the image of these claims as legitimate knowledge.

Audience Reception and Interpretation

Another strand in media research examines how audiences can re-interpret media to take away something other than the dominant messages. From this perspective, while media producers can place a variety of explicit and implicit messages within media, audiences are not simply passive receivers of that media content. Researchers have found that audience members can actively interpret and analyze media content and can critique and reject the messages, whether implicit or explicit, contained within (Morley, 1980; Millington & Wilson, 2012).

Police and Body-worn Cameras

Media and Official Representations and Audience Consumption

Scholars have long examined media representation and its framing of crime and policing as a key factor in the development of public perceptions (Fishman, 1978). Most members of the public get their information about crime and policing from the news (Dowler, 2003). For example, news reporting on police use of force is usually episodic (Iyengar, 1991), sensationalized (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995), and reliant on official voices (Lawrence, 2000). Hirschfield and Simon (2010), drawing on their content analysis of 105 news articles between 1997 and 2000, argue that newspaper narratives of police use of deadly force tend to portray victims of police killings as physical and social threats and the actions of police officers as reasonable and legitimate. However, they also found that news stories after the highly publicized killing of a black male named Amadou Diallo were more likely to contain direct mentions of racial and civil rights dynamics, but that these new themes still were generally overridden by official narratives that rationalized shootings.

Such representations are significant because they can influence how the public understands crime and policing. Weitzer and Tuch (2004, p. 409) find that “frequent exposure to media reports on police is one of the strongest predictors of citizens’ stance on reforms, net of other factors.” Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2006) examined public opinion in Indianapolis before and after a highly publicized police misconduct trial involving several White officers of the Indianapolis Police Department. Their results suggest that public attitudes towards the police changed because of the news coverage, but that this change differed between Black and White respondents. Black respondents who consumed more news coverage of the case were somewhat more likely to think that police in general harass citizens, while White respondents

who consumed more news coverage of the case did not, only being more likely to think the officers involved were guilty. The authors suggest that of those who consumed coverage of the trial,

Whites... directed their concern to the officers involved in the case... but their concern did not extend to other officers. Conversely, Blacks... were somewhat more likely to generalize the coverage and think that the officers' behavior was representative of other officers.

The authors conclude that “[media consumers’] interpretation and reactions to the coverage will depend on other factors, like prior experience with the police or existing perceptions of the police” (pp. 273-274). Similarly, Dowler and Zawilski (2007) found that heavier consumption of TV network newscasts such as NBC Nightly News led to an increased likelihood of believing that police misconduct was frequent. They also found that ethnic minority respondents that frequently viewed network news were more likely to believe that police treated White civilians better. While these studies examined how the amount of news media consumption influences public attitudes, Graziano, Schuck, and Martin (2010) argue that it is important to also examine how the specific content within media constructions of police misconduct influence public attitudes. Their experiments involved showing respondents news video of a traffic stop incident that resulted in outrage from Black officials and community leaders. They found that media constructions can influence some beliefs about the police (for example, the level of danger officers face during traffic stops) but that other beliefs could not be significantly impacted (for example, the causes of racial profiling). Graziano et al. (2010) conclude that this difference may be due to the nature of the specific beliefs. Respondents were unlikely to have firm beliefs about how dangerous traffic stops are for police because they likely do not have related personal

experiences. In contrast, attitudes about race and racism are grounded in fundamental beliefs about society, which are resistant to change.

Research also shows that media consumption can influence the interpretation of media consumed in the future. An online survey of American citizens conducted by Culhane, Bowman, and Schweitzer (2016) found that two months following the beginning of the Ferguson unrest in 2014, respondents were more likely to judge a video of a shooting by a police officer as unjustified as they were immediately before the unrest. Culhane and Schweitzer (2017) repeated this study one year following the Ferguson unrest, finding that people returned to the same (lower) likelihood of judging a shooting as unjustified as before the Ferguson events. Culhane and Schweitzer argue that protest and dissatisfaction with the police portrayed in the media during the unrest led to the change in judgements of footage. They also argue that, after coverage dissipated, judgements returned to what they had been. This second study indicates that media effects may be limited or temporary.

Despite the large amount of research on the effect of media portrayals and public perceptions of police misconduct and bias, and the police in general, only a relatively small number of studies have examined media representations of police use of BWCs. Bud (2016) examined both official documents such as policies and news media reports, finding that BWCs were presented as a tool for evidence gathering and risk management. Schneider (2017) analyzed media coverage of research on BWCs and argues that news reports lauded the studies and BWCs before the studies were even completed. Despite apparent support for ‘evidence-based policing’ commonly found within the articles, they often cited anecdotal claims, speculations, and extrapolations as the basis for the implementation of BWCs. Schneider also argues that official police knowledge becomes reinforced and legitimized “under the objective/neutral guise of

academe” (p. 14), especially when news reports de-emphasized the direct police involvement in the production of academic studies.

Public perception and opinion of police body cameras

How does the public perceive police use of body cameras? Hempel and Töpfer (2009) argue that media shape and promote public support for surveillance. Additionally, public attitudes towards surveillance technologies depend on the nature of the surveillance. Marx (2006) theorizes that the type of personal information gathered is one of the most major influences on attitudes towards surveillance. Drawing on group interviews with European citizens who do not possess any expert knowledge of surveillance technologies, Pavone and Esposti (2010) found that members of the public in Europe tend to fall into two groups: those that trust governments to increase security by using surveillance technology without overly impacting privacy and those that feel that their privacy is infringed by surveillance without significant enhancement in security. Nakhaie and de Lint (2013) found similar results in a study of Canadian and American public opinion. They found that acceptance of surveillance policies is positively correlated with trust in government and airport officials. Additionally, they found that low tolerance of minorities was also associated with greater acceptance of surveillance. Support for surveillance also varies by culture. Dinev, Bellotto, Hart, Russo, and Serra (2006) found that people in the USA found internet surveillance more acceptable to improve security and safety, while Italians were concerned about government intrusion and privacy issues.

There is a small but growing body of US-based studies that indicates general acceptance of BWCs among American citizens. Research on attitudes towards cameras worn by police has shown that the American public generally supports the implementation of BWCs by police officers, with some caveats. Crow, Snyder, Crichlow, and Smykla (2017) conducted a survey in

2015 that found that most Floridians had positive perceptions of police use of BWCs but that they held concerns about privacy which reduced support. However, most respondents rejected the proposition that BWCs were invasions of residents' or police officers' privacy. In addition, Crow et al.'s (2017) structural equation modelling shows that increased concern with crime and decreased belief in the procedural fairness of the police force both had the indirect effect of decreasing belief in the benefits of BWCs. They suggest that residents who already think the police are not doing their job well may not think that adding BWCs will improve police behaviour. Sousa, Miethe, and Sakiyama (2018) similarly found in a 2015 national sample that BWCs are generally supported by Americans and that belief in the capacity of BWCs to increase transparency, trust, and police-community relationships each predicted support for the implementation of BWCs by police. Ray, Marsh, and Powelson (2017) conducted 81 interviews of residents in Maryland, finding racial differences in the perceptions of the effectiveness of BWCs. According to this study, Blacks and Asians are more skeptical about BWCs' ability to improve police-community relations than Whites and Latinos, but Whites are more likely to believe that BWCs violate privacy rights and least likely to believe that BWCs improve transparency. Despite some racial differences, Ray et al. (2017) also found that interviewees of all backgrounds generally supported police use of BWCs.

Closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) can be seen as a precursor technology to body-cameras and so findings about attitudes toward CCTV may provide insights into how the public will perceive body-worn cameras as they become more widespread (Piza, 2018). Many studies examining public perceptions towards CCTV surveillance are European so these findings must be received cautiously when considering perceptions of surveillance in the USA. Bennet and Gelsthorpe (1996) found that CCTV surveillance is generally supported by the British public and

seen as effective in deterring and detecting crime. Over 10 years later, Gill, Bryan, and Allen (2007) interviewed residents in a neighbourhood before and after the installation of CCTV cameras. They found that support for CCTV dropped from 81% before the installation to 74% one year afterwards. Interviewed participants said that the cameras were not as effective as they had hoped in deterring crime. This suggests that support for surveillance in the abstract may differ from support after direct experience. Like surveillance in general, attitudes towards CCTV surveillance also differ by culture. Zurawski (2010) found that Germans did not feel significantly more secure or safer because of the presence of CCTV. In their focus group study of the Canadian public's awareness and attitudes toward a CCTV street-surveillance program, Lett, Hier, and Walby (2010) found that while people drew on a diverse range of resources, rationales, and forms of knowledge, nonscientific knowledge is more influential in securing positive opinions about CCTV. Their focus group participants largely maintained their supportive attitudes toward CCTV surveillance even when faced with scientific evidence suggesting its ineffectiveness in achieving the most commonly invoked rationales of deterring crime and improving safety. While research on police body-cameras is in its infancy, early studies suggest that its effectiveness could be limited or context-dependent. Lett, Hier, and Walby's findings may suggest that even if scientific evidence does not support claims of BWCs' deterrent capacity, the public could maintain their approval as they draw on other resources such as shared moral outrage. The lack of research in the USA on attitudes towards CCTV surveillance makes drawing conclusions difficult as findings from Canada or European countries may not be transferable. Nevertheless, this body of research may provide insights into the dynamics that influence attitudes towards police use of body-worn cameras as more and more officers are being equipped with the technology and more of the public have experience with these officers.

Some scholars have made methodological critiques of the literature on public opinion on surveillance. Haggerty and Gazso (2005) have brought attention to the issue of response rates in opinion research on surveillance. They note that privacy-minded individuals may be more likely to have unlisted telephone numbers and email addresses, less likely to respond to unsolicited phone calls and electronic messages in the first place, and if they do answer a phone call, less likely to agree to participate. This would lead to underestimating the opposition to surveillance. Additionally, Watson, Finn, and Barnard-Wills (2017) criticize much of the literature on surveillance opinion research for inadequately conceptualizing and operationalizing the key concepts of privacy, security, trust, and surveillance. They argue that many surveys on opinions towards surveillance provide vague or no definitions of such terms, and fail to differentiate between these four concepts. This lack of clarity in terms used, they hold, leads to issues of reliability and validity and an inability to compare different studies.

New/Social Media and the Police

New digital information and communication technologies are credited with producing significant changes in society, leading to phrases like the ‘digital revolution’, the ‘information age’, and the ‘network society’ (Castells, 1996). Researchers are finding that new developments in media technology are altering the construction of news. Livingston and Bennet (2003) found that event-driven news stories are becoming more common as live feeds allow easier coverage of distant or unexpected events. Lee and Tandoc (2017) examine the growing trend of news programs incorporating audience feedback in the construction of news. They found that news organizations often look towards topics trending on social media for events to cover, use audience submitted photos and videos in their coverage, and use online audience rankings via ‘likes’, ‘favourites’, and ‘clicks’ to determine which articles gain more prominence on their websites, often via

‘popular articles’ sections. Lee and Tandoc also summarize the research that examines how audience feedback also affects consumers of news. First, the research shows that audience feedback affects which stories get read as users tend to read what the news sites’ algorithms have determined are becoming popular. Lee and Tandoc suggest that this could be “altering the traditional direction of agenda-setting” (p. 440) as audience feedback determines what readers see rather than the selection of journalists. Second, audience feedback affects how readers process news stories. For example, user comments can enhance audience members’ recall of the elements of a news story that are commented upon (Lee, Kim, & Cho, 2017), lower the perceived quality of the news article by being uncivil (Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2018), or increase readers’ estimates of the crime rate in areas mentioned in the comments of a crime story (Lee, Kim, & Cho, 2017).

Greer and McLaughlin (2010) and Schneider (2016) argue that the affordances of modern communications technologies such as video-equipped cell phones and the internet can reduce the control the police previously had on narratives around the use of force by allowing the dissemination of narratives that challenge ‘official’ versions of events. A key concept in such literature is that of citizen journalism, which “refers to a range of web-based practices whereby ‘ordinary’ users engage in journalistic practices. Citizen journalism includes practices such as current affairs-based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events” (Goode, 2009, p. 1288). Greer and McLaughlin (2010) found that the density of recording devices present at the G20 Summit protests in London provided ample resources to both professional and citizen journalists. Greer and McLaughlin argue that the “hyper-mediatized, high-surveillance context” (p. 1050) countered the traditional control of information held by police. For example, citizen recordings that were publicized through online networks and then in

the news challenged the ‘official’ story that protesters had thrown bottles at police officers. Despite the growing capability of citizen journalists to produce counter-narratives and challenge traditional media’s gatekeeping function (Goode 2009), mainstream press coverage still tended, at least initially, to reproduce police narratives and to portray the police as the line of defence between society and the violent mob of protestors (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010). It was only after strong and consistent public pushback, largely fuelled by the recordings made by citizen journalists, that mainstream news narratives shift to the frame of *police* violence. The impact of citizen-generated content came to include multiple official inquiries into the police actions at the G20 Summit and subsequent changes to the police service’s strategy for protests (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010).

Schneider (2016) also found that social media provides a space for counter-claims to official police claims in the USA. However, Schneider argues here, and in another study (2015), that social media can also reinforce police social power, for example, when online commenters cite official police statements from news media reports as an authoritative source of information (Schneider, 2015). As such, Schneider argues that police still maintain much authority to create definitions of the situation (Goffman, 1959). Schneider (2015) found that users of social media were reluctant to believe activists’ claims that the police used undercover officers until the police department admitted to doing so. Also, while citizens can use social media to reach wider audiences, so too can the police. The police can respond directly to user-generated online content. Many police organizations create social media strategies and hire public relations specialists to manage social media accounts that can engage with the public (Schneider, 2016). Another issue with user-generated content is the ease of spreading unsupported claims. Schneider (2016) recounts a case of a protestor who was investigated by the police after claiming

on social media to have fought police officers and lit a police vehicle on fire at a protest. The police concluded that his claims were likely exaggerated and found no grounds for prosecution. From cases like these, Schneider raises the problem faced by consumers of user-generated content of sifting through this abundance of various claims for ‘accurate’ reports of events. Despite the advent of social media and citizen journalism, overall, research indicates that users tend to believe official reports over citizen-generated reports unless strong material evidence such as video is provided.

Conclusion

The research on media effects shows evidence for limited influence of media consumption on people’s views and behaviours. The literature on the public perception of policing issues, media representations, and the interlinkages between the two shows that a great deal of variation exists in how crime and policing are understood by claims-makers and members of the public.

Research shows that not only are perceptions of police and police-worn cameras diverse but also that these perceptions may change over time, in part due to changes in media coverage caused by new information and communications technologies. This review of the extant literature suggests the need for a research approach that is flexible, sensitive to variation and context, and capable of tracing changes across time.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL APPROACH

Social Constructionism

Police in the UK have used body-cameras since 2007 (Associated Press, 2007), but the idea of mounting cameras on police officers' uniforms or helmets did not gain much attention in the USA until 2013. In the UK, BWCs were implemented with little publicity or controversy while in the USA, interest in BWCs arose out of intense public debate over police tactics. How might sociologists better understand the dynamics behind the rise in public attention to BWCs in the US? Social theory provides analytical frameworks that help researchers break down and investigate social phenomena. Researchers have used constructionist theory in particular to analyze a variety of social problems. Since BWCs are being demanded as solutions to perceived problems in policing, this framework can aid in interpreting the rise of BWCs in the USA.

The constructionist approach to social problems examines claims-making activities in which people and groups make moral claims about putative social conditions. Spector and Kitsuse (1987 [1977]) define claims-making as “a demand made by one party to another that something be done about some putative condition” (p. 78). Given this broad definition, claims-making activities include “demanding services, filling out forms, lodging complaints, filing lawsuits, calling press conferences, writing letters of protest... [or] supporting or opposing some governmental practice or policy” (p. 79). Constructionists examining social problems describe how claims-makers make use of various public arenas such as the news media, governments, non-governmental institutions, and advocacy organizations to advance particular definitions of social conditions (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) as well as the vernacular and rhetorical strategies and styles they employ within those public arenas (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993).

Spector and Kitsuse (1987 [1977]) proposed the utility of examining the ‘natural history’ of social problems. A natural history approach “trace[s] the progression of a social problem through a sequence of stages” (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, p. 54). Traditionally conceived, groups use public arenas to put forward claims about the existence of a social problem. Then, if these claims gain prominence in society, official entities and institutions are pressured by public demand to respond. After an official response, the original claims-makers or others may express dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction can produce a new cycle of claims-making and official responses. Prolonged dissatisfaction may also lead to the development of alternative, parallel, or counter-institutions. This current study situates media narratives and media consumer responses to these narratives online as part of a wider natural history of BWCs in relation to instances of alleged police misconduct and excessive use of force. Police use of BWCs constitutes the official response to the growing public concern around the use of force by police and can be examined as part of the ‘natural history’ of the ‘police brutality’ problem. This study centres on the third and fourth stages of the natural history model, *the reaction to an official response*. Additionally, responses can themselves become problematized, reinitiating the natural history process as the first phase of a new social problem. Specifically, this study examines both media discourse regarding the social problem of BWCs, but also the responses posted online by those who consume these discourses. The following sections unpack in more detail particular concepts used by social constructionists to make sense of claims-making in relation to particular social problems.

Vernacular Resources

Constructionist analysis brings the linguistic and rhetorical features of claims-making to the fore. For example, Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) urged the examination of the “vernacular resources” used

by claims-makers within moral discourse. They hold that all social problems discourse is moral discourse and argue that claims-makers categorize social phenomena into condition-categories and then problematize these phenomena by contrasting them with the conditions that *should* exist. These morality-based claims are expressed via *vernacular resources*, rhetorical tools employed by claims-makers to convince others of the problematic status of certain conditions. Ibarra and Kitsuse suggested that social problems researchers look at how social problems are expressed, for example, the idioms, figures of speech, tone and styles of rhetoric used by claims-makers.

Loseke (1993), following Ibarra and Kitsuse's lead, brought attention to the construction of categories of *people* which are used to advance social problem claims. For example, the category of "victim" and the associated category of "victimizer" are often used by claims-making groups to elicit sympathy for one group of people while at the same time promoting anger at another group in order to advance social problem definitions and associated policy changes. The label of "victim" and "victimizer" are often used by claims-makers to create emotional arguments in favour of certain social problem constructions. In some cases, competing groups will argue over who should be considered victims, who should be considered victimizers, and what are the causes of victimization. Holstein and Miller (1990) call this situation a "victim contest". Such victim contests are disputes over what sort of "interpretive schemata" are to be used to give meaning to the facts of the case (p. 115). Assignments of victim and victimizer statuses are therefore rhetorical procedures for organizing and evaluating the issues at stake. Events are opportunities for reinterpretation of the statuses of those involved and claims-makers on both sides of an issue attempt to guide such reinterpretations through their framing of those events. Holstein and Miller suggest broadening the analytic focus of victimology to include the

interactive practices through which victim and victimizer statuses are socially constructed. They argue that “[m]any ‘social problems in-the-making’ are ‘problems in search of victims’ in the sense that the problem itself is not fully constituted until its victims are made apparent” (p. 117).

As another example of a study of vernacular resources, Spencer (2011) used the social constructionist framework to analyze news representations of youth violence in the USA during the 1990s. Spencer identified groups that competed to establish certain interpretations of the problem of youth violence over others. In this case, these were Democrats versus Republicans and academics versus front-line workers (often teachers and school administrators). Spencer’s analysis identified what he calls “iconic narratives”; specific cases of youth violence that are referred to repeatedly across news outlets and become symbolic of the ‘problem’ of youth violence. These cases are explored in intimate and dramatic detail in the media and become powerful rhetorical tools that are frequently employed by claims-makers. These studies help inform the general approach to the present research on BWCs, though we need to consider in greater detail the research related more to interactive online news sources.

Theorizing Interactive News Media

While print news media wanes, news media has become strongly integrated with the internet and social media. For example, many newspapers also have articles hosted online where readers can post comments that are publicly displayed under or beside the article itself (Paskin, 2010). Many studies have examined reader comments on online news articles. However, according to McDermott (2018, p. 176),

Much of the research carried out in this vein has primarily been content (largely quantitative) and/or framing analyses. Little research has been directed at considering either readers’ comments specifically in relation to the news issue being covered or

exploring the discourses being reproduced and/or challenged in relation to the media's framing of said issues.

Online news and the dynamics of reader interactivity presents new opportunities for examining social problems claims-making processes. In this section, I will argue how the social constructionist framework can aid research regarding both online news discourses and online discussions related to those discourses. In my search of studies which examine user comments on news websites, I found that they tend to use one, or occasionally more, of four theoretical concepts or perspectives to guide their analysis. These are social representations, framing, public sphere, and social construction. Here, I compare these frameworks and evaluate their appropriateness for my current study.

Social representations

Len-Rios, Bhandari, and Medvedeva (2014) conceptualize online comments on news articles as 'social representations', which they describe as:

cognitive schema individuals have developed over time through their experiences. These cognitive schemas, or mental maps, are created through *anchoring*, taking a concept and putting it into context with one's social reality. (p. 779, original emphasis)

This framework presents online comments as primarily derived from the pre-existing cognitive schema of individuals (see also Jaspal, Nerlich, & Koteyko, 2013). While useful in several respects, the theory does not provide much help in understanding how social representations are formed or how they might change. Additionally, the social representations theory of online comments production fails to adequately consider the context in which online comments are made. Users do not make comments in isolation; rather, they comment on online newspaper

forums regarding both the subject matter of the article and the content of other comments already on the forum.

Frames & Framing

One of the most common theoretical concepts used in the analysis of news article reader comments is that of the frame (Suran, Holton, & Coleman, 2014; Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014). Goffman (1974) defines frames from a reception angle as “schemata of interpretation” that allow individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” their experiences (p. 21). Similarly, Entman (1993) defines frames from a media production angle as the selection of “some aspects of perceived reality [in order to] make them more salient” (p. 52). Common to most conceptualizations of frames is the idea of framing as some form of filtering. Akin to the originating analogy of a picture frame, a frame centres some aspect of reality while leaving other aspects of reality blocked out. Another common component of these theories is the argument that frames are cultural packages which can be employed with the knowledge that it will be widely understood if not accepted. Compared to social representations, framing research more fully explores how media portrayals influence public perceptions and understandings. For example, several framing studies quantitatively examined correlations between media frames found in online news articles and frames found within the user comments (Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014; Suran, Holton, & Coleman, 2014). While the frame is an important concept within media theory, framing is just one way the media influences public opinion. Expanding the theoretical toolbox available can further aid media analysis.

Public Sphere

Another common approach conceptualizes online news comment sections as a public sphere, a forum in which the discursive processes of democratic politics operate (e.g., McDermott, 2018;

Singer, 2009; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Singer (2009) analyzed news comments from articles on a national newspaper's website about the 2007 Scottish Elections. She found that 10% of users accounted for 55% of the sampled comments and suggests a minimum of three active contributors form an online political community. She argues that although some comments were impolite or offensive, they did not become uncivil to the point of "threatening the democratic nature of the discourse" (p. 16). In a different vein, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) analyzed online news comment sections as counter-public spaces that can provide a forum for reactions against hegemonic mainstream public spheres. They draw from Fraser's (1990) definition of counter publics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67). Unlike the social representation conceptualization of online comments, the public sphere model considers comments in relation to other comments within the context of a forum for debate. While influential, public sphere theories have been criticized for overstating the rationality of public deliberations and neglecting structural inequalities in access to the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992); although more recent scholars have begun addressing these critiques (e.g., Benson 2009).

Construction of Social Problems

The final group of studies uses a social constructionist approach to understanding online user comments. The role of the media has long held a central place in constructionist theory.

According to Ibarra and Adorjan (2018),

[c]onstructionist analyses of social problems commonly turn to media coverage as a way of documenting the definitional strategies of claims-makers and counter-claimants, or as

a way of investigating how the tropes, motifs, and idioms of social problems talk are mobilized to make sense of problematic experience. (pp. 288-289)

Turning to the study of online claims-making, including within online news forums, is a natural development. A few studies have examined user comments to explore processes of social problem development from a constructionist perspective. Lancia (2016) uses a social constructionist framework to examine narratives of police deviance found on social media platforms as claims-making and counter-claims-making strategies of activists and police departments. Lancia found that social media users could challenge the authority of police as ‘authorized knowers’ in an officer-involved shooting case. Koltsova and Nagornyy (2019) found that attention to topics and their problematization could diverge greatly between Russian news media and their audiences. They observed a dynamic process of problem formation within comment sections that involved a clash of diverse views. Significantly, these readers’ problematizations were not influenced by the media sites, which are censored in Russia, to frame events as part of social problems. Koltsova and Nargonyy conclude that readers can make their own conclusions and generalizations about events using their background knowledge. Maratea (2013) argues that cyberspace provides new public arenas and strategies for claims-makers that can circumvent the traditional gatekeeping function of mainstream news media. However, Maratea also notes that traditionally powerful groups are also well positioned to take advantage of online public arenas and that the internet does not fundamentally alter the dynamics involved in the claims-making process such as the competition for attention.

Social constructionists take a similar approach to online comments as the researchers who use the public sphere concept described above, by developing a model of online forums as arenas for competing claims about social conditions (Maratea, 2008). This constructionist framework,

however, differs from the public sphere concept in that it is a more pluralistic model of public discourse (Benson, 2009). Benson (2009) argues that the original public sphere model in Habermas' (1989 [1962]) *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* "overlooks the myriad social forces" outside of commercial pressures that influence the public sphere and "ignores the significant variations that have occurred in national public sphere development, both over time and cross-nationally." (p. 178) Constructionist theory opens up analysis to a wider array of social forces. For example, constructionists examine how emotions are often among the most powerful factors driving the rise of certain problems in the public mind over others (Loseke, 2003). Additionally, the natural history model used by constructionists has a wider scope than the public sphere model. Much of what influences the construction of social problems and the policies aimed at alleviating those social problems occurs outside the public sphere. Discussions behind closed doors within corporations, professional associations, non-governmental organizations, government committees and agencies, and so on can have a substantial effect on public opinion, but often after decisions have already been made as to what claims will put to the public.

Public sphere theory's use of the concept of "the needs of society" (Habermas, 1989, pp. 175-176) is problematic. First, public sphere models have been criticized for leaving fragmentation and marginalization within the public underexamined (Benson, 2009). Different groups have quite different, even incompatible ideas about what society needs. Second, what people think society needs changes over time. Unlike the public sphere model, constructionists presume neither a cohesive public community nor specific needs of society. The concept of claims-making brings attention to the process by which "needs" are socially constructed. Social construction theory aids in understanding the reception and interpretation of those claims by the audiences who receive them. As Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) note, "[r]eading

media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings. Further, it is frequently interactive, taking place in conversation with other readers who may see different meanings” (p. 375). Nichols’ (2003) proposal of a dialogical model of constructionism is relevant here. Nichols argues that the natural history model too often gets taken up in a static way; i.e., a claim is made, subsequently responded to, a counter-claim is made, policies ensue, etc. However, Nichols (2003) emphasizes a more dynamic model centred on “the interplay among communicative acts in the larger discourse” (p. 111). He suggests that constructionists can examine the dialogical progression of claims “from mass media to public opinion” (p. 113). Nichols (2003) argues for the need to develop “indicators of reception of messages and responses to them, as well as the consequences of the responses” (p. 113). Following Nichols’ suggestions, I propose that online comment sections on news articles offer an excellent site of dialogical claims-making, with the potential to advance knowledge of claims-making processes given today’s online-mediated news landscapes.

Conclusion

By taking on the social construction of social problems perspective, the diversity of claims around police use of BWCs can be better appreciated. The social constructionist perspective provides a framework for understanding how individuals construct meaning while giving deference to the plurality of viewpoints that exist within a given context. Constructionism aids in understanding how claims-makers use a variety of rhetorical tools, from numerical statistics to dramatic narratives, to advance particular understandings of social conditions. This framework is conducive to producing detailed and contextually sensitive analyses of social problem cases.

Chapter 4: METHOD

Qualitative Content Analysis

This study uses qualitative content analysis (see below) to examine the creation and reception of claims in public arenas. Content analysis involves the sampling and coding of existing human-produced material. Content analysis originated after WWII as a positivist method “used to characterize and compare documents” (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 464). Qualitative forms of interpreting and analyzing texts gained more prominence in the 1970s as social scientists adapted approaches and methods from the humanities (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Researchers have used content analysis to examine a massive variety of texts and topics from gendered depictions in children’s books (Adler & Clark, 1999) to the construction of deviance in news articles (Altheide, 2002; Young, 1986).

Content analysis can be performed in quantitative and qualitative forms (Berg & Lune, 2012). While quantitative content analysis is effective for the testing of hypotheses and theories, the richness of the data gained from qualitative analyses is conducive to the generation of theories (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). New areas of study require this sort of exploratory research. The social problem of BWCs is still relatively new and understudied and so an appropriate topic for qualitative scrutiny. In addition, the way the social problem is debated given its online mediation remains understudied. My research draws upon a form of qualitative content analysis developed by Altheide (1987) called ethnographic content analysis (ECA), which can be used to provide in-depth and rich analyses of textual data. ECA conceptualizes documents as the products of social interaction and emphasizes the context in which a document is socially generated. Some of the goals of ECA listed by Altheide include immersion into the data, allowing concepts to emerge during research, attention to nuance, and covering the full

range of a given topic. Simonetto (2016) argues that social media is fertile ground for ethnographic research, especially given how it permits researchers' to "[easily] access a variety of people and topics" (p.102). She found that social media allowed her to "grasp the symbolic meanings that [social actors] themselves defined as important and real" (p. 102).

An advantage of using content analysis for this topic is that we can examine communications over a period of time to draw out processes and changes that occur over time (Adler & Clark, 1999). Second, content analysis is an unobtrusive method that examines 'naturally' produced texts, thereby avoiding the Hawthorne effect, i.e., the tendency for people to change their behaviour when they know they are being observed by a researcher (Berg & Lune, 2012). An additional advantage is reduced expenditure of time, money, and person-power. Also, since content analysis does not require interaction with human research subjects, there are reduced ethical risks.

Analyzing Reader Comments

A common criticism of content analysis is that it only examines what is in a text, not how that content is received by its audience (Millington & Wilson, 2012). For example, Bud (2016) examined discourses contained within official and media narratives around police use of BWCs and Schneider (2017) examined the portrayal of research on BWCs in news media, but neither examined how the public interpreted these narratives and portrayals. Examination of audience reception has typically involved research involving human participants (Millington & Wilson, 2012). While participant audience research produces high-quality in-depth data, it is subject to the issue of reactivity or biasing effects (Berg & Lune, 2012), where interviewed subjects may give answers that do not reflect their true attitudes because they may feel that they will be judged based on their responses. Interview or focus group studies also usually require more time and

monetary funds than content analyses and consequently tend to only be able to include a small number of participants, especially among graduate students. This study will employ a method for audience research *within* a content analysis that, while used in the sociology of health (Gesser-Edelsburg & Shir-Raz, 2017; Glenn, Champion, & Spence, 2012; Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014), is underused in studies on crime and policing.

Online news articles, with the interactive affordances of the internet, provide new opportunities for studying how readers take in media messages and mobilize their own claims and counter-claims in response. As such, researchers have begun analyzing user responses to online news. In order to substantively explicate the interpretive process, an analysis must not only explore the online news articles and attached user comments, but it must also integrate those analyses. In exploring studies that have looked at user responses to online media, I categorized them across three degrees of integration of article and comment analysis. At the lowest degree of integration, some researchers wishing to study how the public receives media messages have carried out two separate analyses which independently examine online news articles on a given topic and the user comments attached to those articles without substantial integration. For example, Glenn, Champion, and Spence (2012) found that reader comments on online CBC news articles on weight loss surgeries were less supportive of the surgeries than the voices of the scientific and medical experts found in the articles themselves. These studies can only compare across the two analyses to note if there is a difference between media and audience content. They cannot explore why there is a difference if one is found.

Second, researchers can employ limited integration of article and user comment analyses. Such studies may separate groups of comments by source (e.g., by website) but employ little or no analysis of the content of the articles and how that may influence the comments. By

separating comments by source, these studies can explore the variation in comments across sources or the source's general features such as political leaning (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015) or how 'hard' or 'soft' the news source is (Ksiazek, Peer, & Lessard, 2016). However, such studies cannot differentiate between the news source having a direct influence on their audiences with their general styles of news writing and different websites drawing in different users.

Finally, other studies develop substantial integration in their analysis of news articles and user comments. A common integration tactic within quantitative studies is to use features of the articles and comments, such as frames, as variables for statistical analysis. Holton, Lee, and Coleman (2014) examined "the interplay between frames of health news coverage and resulting public comments" (p. 825) using a quantitative content analysis of online USA news articles about obesity and reader comments on those articles. They concluded that while commenters do not simply repeat the framing of the journalists, their comments are still affected by the journalists' framing in certain ways. For example, the study found that articles that contained a focus on the social causes of obesity were associated with comments with individual-level reactions such as blaming individuals rather than society. The comments were affected by the journalists' framing in that readers seemed to react against the 'social causes' framing by providing anecdotal counter-examples. Alternatively, a qualitative approach can be taken, of which I only found one example (Lancia, 2016). Lancia employed a narrative and dialogical approach that weaved media and user-generated content together to construct a coherent dialogue constituted by a series of claims and counter-claims. The benefit of a qualitative approach is the level of depth that can be achieved in examining the fine details of discourse and how claims develop, disperse, get challenged or refuted, and morph. Overall, these studies suggest that

readers responding online to news articles have the agency to resist media narratives but are also being subtly influenced by how the media portrays people, events, and topics.

An additional question emerges from this literature; are user comments representative of the general public and can findings from studies of user comments be generalized? Studies of the demographics and characteristics of people who comment online suggest that they are not wholly representative of the general public. For example, Kalogeropoulos, Negrodo, Picone, and Nielsen (2017) found that online news commenters are more likely to be male, politically interested partisans, consumers of news in a variety of formats, and users of multiple social media platforms (Barbera & Rivero, 2015). However, some research has suggested that findings from user comment studies may still be generalizable. Giles and Adams (2015) found that an analysis of user-generated online content “elicited similar findings to those obtained via more traditional methods, such as systematic reviews and focus groups” (p. 1).

However, there are noteworthy feedback effects that must be considered before using comments as a measure of public opinion. First, a body of research suggests that user comments can also influence how later readers interpret the original article. Kim (2015) found that user comments on online news influenced audiences’ evaluations of the news source’s credibility. Similarly, Hong and Cameron (2018) found that the consistency of opinion in comment sections influenced research participants’ opinions of corporations involved in news stories and that the number of ‘likes’ on those comments influenced readers’ evaluation of their credibility. Second, prior comments may influence later comments. For example, internet users may be less likely to comment on online forums if they believe they hold a minority view due to fears that they may receive social rejection by voicing dissenting views (Matthes, Knoll, & Sikorski, 2018; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017). Readers’ evaluation of the opinion climate of a forum as hostile to their views

and subsequent self-censorship maintains the appearance of a one-sided opinion climate, a process called the spiral of silence. With similar results, Hsueh, Yogeeswaran, and Malinen (2015) found that research participants that were exposed to prejudiced comments were more likely to post more prejudiced comments themselves.

Given these findings, researchers may cautiously approach social media such as online news comments sections as simultaneously measuring and constructing public opinion. Commenters can be treated as both audiences to the claims of claims-makers in the news and (counter) claims-makers in their own right. With the ability of online news media content analysis to study both social representations and the public's reception of claims in public arenas in a naturalistic, unobtrusive, and non-reactive way, it is useful for constructionist social problems research. These studies show that members of the public can push back against media narratives by posting in news comments sections. The conditions under which audiences are more or less likely to react against media narratives by making comments have only recently been studied. It remains to be seen how readers of news about BWCs react within these public forums. Because most studies of the interaction between commenters and online news articles have been quantitative studies, this thesis, through a qualitative approach, may be able to delve deeper into the nuances of audience interpretation.

Data Collection

For content analyses, the unit of observation describes the elements from which data is obtained (Adler & Clark, 1999). In this study, the unit of observation will be online news articles with linked social media posts or comment sections from two large online news sources published in New York City (see below for justification of this sampling design). While the topic of BWCs is prevalent and widely debated throughout the US, with over 200 jurisdictions having at least

some officers wearing BWCs (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, 2017), the New York City Police Department has one of the longest-running BWC programs of any major city in the US. Considering the concentration of media coverage in New York City, this research will focus on news sources from that city. This will also enable a greater depth of comparative analysis to be achieved. A related advantage of selecting news sources from New York City, directed at a comparatively large readership compared to even other major cities in the USA, is that there are increased chances for variation in the data.

Sampling

Content analysis begins with gathering a body of texts (which may also include audio and visual content) that will make up the study's data. The 'criteria of selection' for a content analysis, analogous to sampling techniques for survey research, are explicit rules for the inclusion and exclusion of texts in the study. According to Berg and Lune (2012, p. 353), these rules "must be sufficiently exhaustive to account for each variation of message content and must be rigidly and consistently applied so that other researchers or readers, looking at the same messages, would obtain the same or comparable results." For this research, I selected New York City-based online news sources with the largest subscriber counts, and further restricted my sample to sources which permit user comments. These sources are the New York Times (NYT) and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). This comparative sample design enables the examination of any potential differences between sources regarding what claims-makers post and how their claims are framed. The NYT and The WSJ can be considered "quality" newspapers (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991), comparable to 'broadsheet' news sources like the Globe and Mail in Canada. The New York Times in particular is known for breaking many stories, and "serves an intermedia agenda-setting function for other news sources", influential among many other news outlets in both the

USA and internationally (Izadi & Saghaye-Biria, 2007). As such, its use allows for a greater likelihood of getting insight into the public's initial reactions to coverage of BWCs. Newspapers are often deemed to have political biases. Indeed, the position of many media scholars is that no source is neutral (Gamson et al., 1992; Gitlin, 1980). According to mediabiasfactcheck.com, an independent media outlet which evaluates news sources for political bias, the NYT is "centre-left" (Media Bias Fact Check, 2016a) and the WSJ is "centre-right" (Media Bias Fact Check, 2016b). This furthers the justification for comparison between these sources. A wider spectrum of positions is more likely to be found than with using one source. Nevertheless, both papers may be considered elite, and it should be noted that more fringe positions are less likely to be represented in the articles as the NYT and WSJ are both mainstream newspapers. Scholars have long argued that messages from the media are hegemonic, supporting the status quo (Best, J., 1991; Gitlin, 1980). However, it is the impact of mainstream news coverage, which represents the claims most commonly presented to the public, that this research focuses on.

My sampling involved selecting articles on nytimes.com and wsj.com containing the keywords "police" and "body camera", found using Google, Factiva, and Proquest to obtain a complete set of all articles published. As this study examines online newspapers, online search services can be used to collect online news articles between a chosen set of dates. News articles between February 2012 and April 2018 were gathered from the chosen newspapers. The length of the sample period is chosen to cover the rise and peak of debates over the use of BWCs by the USA police departments. This period covers important dates during the rise of the police body camera debate in the US, such as August 12, 2013, which marks the federal court decision that ordered the New York Police Department to initiate a BWC pilot programme. Conversations around equipping police with BWCs then rose sharply in 2014 following protests and riots

expressing anger at the police shooting of several Black men in the USA (Eversley & Estepa, 2015). On January 9, 2018, the union representing New York police officers sued the city of New York to stop the release of BWC footage (Da Silva, 2018). Despite this lawsuit, on January 30, 2018, New York City (NYC) announced that it would equip all police officers on patrol with body cameras by the end of 2018 (Cherelus, 2018). The sampling period covers these and other key media events around which many claims about BWCs have been put forward. While the debates over the use of body cameras by law enforcement are ongoing, the concentration of articles dedicated to the topic had substantially tapered by the beginning of 2018. This will allow the study of the ‘natural history’ of BWCs as a solution to the problem of alleged police misconduct and excessive use of force.

After an initial reading of the articles, those not specifically (or only tangentially) about police use of BWCs in NYC and articles that did not have comments were removed. Once the sample of articles was gathered, I turned to collecting the attached online user comments from the articles. Given the number of comments found, a subset was selected through stratified random sampling to get a manageable number of comments for in-depth qualitative analysis. Because some articles had few comments, the first 5 comments and every 10th comment in each article within the dataset were selected for close reading. Additionally, irrelevant comments were removed. This resulted in a primary sample of 43 articles and 506 comments. After coding of this data set was finished and themes were identified, I used key words or phrases associated with those themes to search the entire collection of comments for further examples of the themes to analyze. The appendix lists all news articles used in my analysis in chronological order.

Table 1: Articles and Comments Collected

Source	Number of Articles	Number of Comments	Average Comments per article	Sample (percent of comments)
New York Times	19	4299	226	396 (9%)
Wall Street Journal	24	846	35	110 (13%)
Total	43	5145	120	506 (10%)

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) articles had much fewer comments per article, on average. The requirements for posting comments for each website may explain why the number of WSJ commenters is substantially smaller. The WSJ comment section requires a WSJ membership (The Wall Street Journal, 2008), but the NYT comment section allows people wishing to comment using their existing Facebook or Google accounts or an email address to register a new account for the NYT comment section (New York Times, n.d.). Many people already have Facebook and Google accounts, perhaps making entry into the NYT comment section easier. Additionally, the NYT has made opening more articles for comments a priority (Etim, 2017).

Coding

The analysis for this study is influenced by the qualitative media analysis approach developed by Altheide and Schneider (2013), of which ethnographic content analysis is a component. It is an inductive approach that draws upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999 [1967]). Grounded theory is particularly useful for the analysis of rich data. Len-Rios, Bhandari, and Medvedeva (2014) found that a grounded theory approach is useful for examining online comments on two

news articles about the scientific evidence for the benefits of breastfeeding because of the “richness” of their data, which included “humor, sarcasm, and irony” (p. 785). Grounded theorists suggest using a ‘constant comparative’ method for generating theory in which cases are repeatedly compared against each other. Glaser and Strauss (1999[1967], p. 105) describe the four stages of this method as “(1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory.” The advantage of this approach is that it is systematic and involves deep immersion in the data, thereby improving the reliability and validity of the findings. Another advantage of this approach is its flexibility.

Grounded theory and the constant comparative method can be adapted to constructionist research while, arguably, rejecting Glaser and Strauss’s original stance on objective, neutral and value-free social research (see Charmaz (2008) for an overview of the differences between constructionist grounded theory and the original formulation by Glaser and Strauss). Charmaz (2008, p. 397) argues that “[a] social constructionist approach to grounded theory allows us to address *why* questions while preserving the complexity of social life” (original emphasis). A constructionist grounded theory approach will promote the study of processes involved in the rise of BWC discourses with specific reference to the complexity and context in the USA.

The units of analysis for this research are articles and individual comments. My four research questions listed in the introduction guided my coding. I examined the articles for themes related to overall positions taken, as well as claims-making strategies; the comments were likewise examined for claims-making strategies but were additionally analyzed for themes related to the reception and interpretation of claims. Within the constant comparative method, coding is an iterative procedure that begins with an initial reading of the texts which starts the

process of becoming immersed in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999 [1967]). Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 66) describe coding as “taking raw data and raising it to a conceptual level”. Grounded theorists suggest making frequent notes, or ‘memos’, during all stages of coding and analysis to record ideas and impressions. ‘Open coding’ follows the initial reading and involves labelling the themes found in each unit of analysis. For open coding, the researcher should not limit or pre-select themes and remain open to unexpected or surprising findings (Berg & Lune, 2012). More restricted stages of coding follow. In axial coding, codes are compared with each other and similar codes are combined. The last stage of coding is selective coding. Here, the core ideas are extracted and refined (Berg & Lune, 2012). Each article or comment could bring up multiple issues or claims. During any stage of coding, articles and comments could be given more than one code.

Once coded, themes, patterns, and trends in the codes were identified and examined. The articles and readers’ comments were compared against each other in order to extract similarities and differences in the voices, claims, and themes present. Additionally, news sites were compared to each other, both in terms of content in the articles and content in the reader comments. News publishers have particular editorial voices that attract different kinds of audiences. The multi-year sampling period allows for an analysis of changes over time. While I sought trends and patterns, I attempted to resist what Charmaz (2008, p. 408) describes as “the tendency in objectivist grounded theory to oversimplify, erase differences, overlook variation, and assume neutrality throughout inquiry.” I reached data saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1999[1967]) when my use of this comparative framework ceased to produce novel themes and concepts. Once the sample of 506 comments was fully coded, I used key-words or phrases associated with the themes to search through my entire data set of 5145 comments as a form of

validation and to find demonstrative quotes. I selected excerpts from the articles and comments that were representative of the themes to include and elaborate on in my findings section.

Overall, I sought to produce an explanation of the phenomena under question that gives deference to its complexity, specificity, and diversity.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

As expected, online user comments abound in expressive or figurative language, jokes and humour, implication, references to other events or popular culture, among many other forms of talk that are indirect or non-literal. This makes interpretation and analysis challenging. However, with a careful and cautious approach, it is not impossible. I developed six themes divided into three broad categories that captured much of the diverse discourse I examined. The three categories make use of Joel Best's (1987) model of social problem claims. According to Best, social problem claims are made up of grounds, warrants, and conclusions. I make use of this model to show that, despite operating under quite different constructions of social reality, a diverse collection of commentators can reach agreement on a particular policy or program, in this case, BWCs.

The first category of themes adopts Best's (1987) concept of "Grounds". These themes contain debates about the facts which, in part, justify the call for police body cameras. Best (2017) defines grounds as "assertions of facts" which "argue that the condition exists and offer supporting evidence" (p. 31). According to Best (1987; 2017), types of grounds include typifying examples, statistics, claims of a worsening situation, claims about the range of people affected, and categorizing the problem as a particular type of problem such as crime or disease. The three themes I placed in the grounds category involve debates over the following topics:

- whether there is even a police violence problem to begin with.
- how widespread racial bias is in policing.
- Are the commonly cited cases such as the killing of Michael Brown or Eric Garner instances of excessive police violence?

These debates invoke a variety of causal stories. Best (2017, p. 219) argues that “[d]ifferent causal stories carry different policy implications”. This section will reveal a variety of causal stories. However, later sections will show that, despite differences, they can be used to support the same policy implication, in this case, the use of body cameras by police. On the other hand, other policies brought up in the discourse carry implications that are contradicted by one or more of these causal stories.

Warrants are claims involving values and morality. Claims about conditions, even if widely accepted, do not automatically lead to the conclusion that there is a problem in need of solving. Best (1987, 2017) uses the term warrants to identify statements that justify drawing the conclusion that a condition deserves attention and that something must be done about it. In other words, “warrants argue that the condition identified in the grounds is inconsistent with what we value, and therefore we need to do something about it” (Best, 2017, p. 36). I found four themes in the warrants used to justify or condemn BWCs.

- The privacy/public theme contains discussions of what aspects of ordinary citizens’ lives should be kept private or public.
- Objectivity/bias theme contains discussions of how much cameras can be trusted to provide a reliable record of events during police encounters.
- Transparency contains discussions of the extent to which police organizations and officers have a duty to disclose their actions to the public.
- Accountability contains discussions of what actions police officers should be punished for and how severely they should be punished.

The last category makes use of the ‘conclusions’ component of Best’s model of claims. Commenters argue whether the way body camera programs are being implemented in practice

fails to uphold the desired values. Additionally, some commenters argue whether the focus on PWBCs might lead to the neglect of other police reforms that could contribute to lessening police misconduct such as better screening and training of officers or changing a problematic police culture. Many of the journalists and comment posters also argued for additional reforms to BWC programs that hindered their application in practice. Best (2017, p. 38) notes that “[t]he nature of the conclusion is shaped by the grounds and warrants.” While the conclusion that body cameras may be helpful can be supported by quite different grounds, other kinds of police reforms require a narrower set of grounds to be accepted. Suggestions for other reforms to improve or go beyond BWCs can be grouped into three themes.

- Tying closely with the theme of transparency, there are policy arguments around activating BWCs and releasing BWC video.
- Tying closely with the theme of accountability, there are discussions about the consequences for misconduct and ways to ensure appropriate consequences occur, such as changing who judges incidents and complaints. Many demand independent review boards to oversee investigations of accusations against the police.
- The previous two themes relate to processes that take place after accusations of misconduct have been laid. The last theme includes policies aimed at alleged roots of misconduct such as problems in hiring and training of officers or in police culture.

Social constructionists examine the cultural resources that claims-makers employ during social problem construction (Best, 1991; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Within these themes, journalists and public commenters make use of a multitude of cultural resources, which I also explore in the following sections.

Table 2: Frequency of Theme Categories

Theme Category	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Grounds	16 (84%)	21 (88%)	111 (28%)	25 (23%)
Warrants	19 (100%)	19 (79%)	100 (25%)	12 (11%)
Conclusions	19 (100%)	24 (100%)	158 (40%)	28 (25%)
Other Reforms	13 (74%)	16 (42%)	81 (20%)	7 (6%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

Table 2 shows the number of articles and comments containing at least one theme for each category. The percentages in table 2 are calculated as the number of articles or comments from a news source containing any theme in the category divided by the total number of articles or comments from that news source (listed in the bottom row). Articles and comments can contain multiple themes and themes in more than one category.

Grounds for Police Body Cameras

There is much discussion about the ‘problem’ that equipping police with body cameras purports to solve. Social constructionists write about ‘grounds’, referring to the facts of social problems (Best, J., 1987; 2017). Many commenters believe that there is a problem to solve, but there are disagreements on its exact nature. With the social problem of PWBCs, the primary problems being debated are excessive police use of force and racial bias. The causes of these two problems are also under debate. A noteworthy aspect of these debates is how certain cases are used as examples so frequently that they have become symbolic of those problems. Also of note is the

difference between the articles and comments sections on the topic of grounds. While some articles did not bring up the grounds for BWCs, no article presented claims outright rejecting any of the grounds. On the other hand, numerous comments presented doubts or arguments against the notion that there are problems in policing to solve.

Table 3: Grounds

Ground	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Police violence ¹ Problem	12 (63%)	13 (54%)	62 (15%)	2 (2%)
No police violence problem ¹	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	19 (5%)	10 (9%)
Racial Bias in policing ²	9 (47%)	15 (63%)	22 (6%)	3 (3%)
No Racial Bias ²	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12 (3%)	11 (10%)
Accept Iconic Case	11 (58%)	15 (63%)	10 (3%)	1 (1%)
Reject Iconic Case	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (2%)	1 (1%)
Any Ground(s)	16 (84%)	21 (88%)	111 (28%)	25 (23%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

1. Positions on the police violence problem claim are mutually exclusive with each other.

2. Positions on racial bias in policing are mutually exclusive with each other.

The percentages in tables 3 through 8 are calculated as the number of articles or comments containing the theme in a news source divided by the total number of articles or comments from

that source. This was done to maintain consistency between the tables and allow comparison across tables. Articles and comments can contain multiple themes, such as discussing both police violence and racial bias in policing. However, on a particular debate, such as whether there is a police violence problem or not, a comment was coded only as one or the other. Because there are multiple iconic narratives (see below), a comment could have both acceptance of one case but rejection of another. There is substantial overlap because an article or comment that mentions one ground often mentions the others.

Is there a police violence problem?

A problem needs to exist to justify the roll-out of body-cameras to thousands of police officers. Part of what makes a condition a problem in need of a solution is its frequency. The language claims-makers use can make certain conditions seem more frequent. According to Rachel Best (2010) “the first step in social problem coverage is linking the event to a broader pattern” (p. 78). Best’s research draws on Iyengar’s (1991) typology of media coverage which distinguishes between *thematic* coverage, which portrays events as instances of a pattern of events or trend or part of a larger context, and *episodic* coverage, which focuses on concrete incidents without such reference to external events, structures, or forces. Using thematic framing instead of episodic framing is one way the media differentiates between social problems and situations (Best, 2010). Several of the articles use thematic language, e.g., discussing a “series” or “string” of cases, which implies a police use of force problem (see Fishman, 1978; Duwe, 2005; Kupchik & Bracy, 2009 for further discussion of news media’s tendency to make trends and themes out of events). For example, WSJ journalist Forgey (2017) writes “[Minneapolis] rolled out its body camera program about eight months ago, joining departments around the country seeking greater transparency in policing in the wake of a series of high-profile deaths of young Black male

suspects during encounters with police or in police custody.” Many commenters agree with this description. As can be seen in table three, 64 comments contained suggestions that police violence and killings are a serious problem. Four comments even labelled the killing of civilians by police an “epidemic”.

“Fanning flames when there is no fire”

For any problem claim brought into the public sphere, there is almost always counter-claims to follow and oppose those claims (McCright & Dunlap, 2000). Some users deny that there is a problem to solve in the first place. In response to the NYT article by Ripley (2017), reader Evan Wallace writes,

[t]he authors point out the well-know [sic] psychological principle that people's behavior tends to improve when they are observed. Then, after finding no change in officers' behavior with body cams, they conclude that "these results suggest we should recalibrate our expectations" of cameras' ability to make a “large-scale behavioral change in policing.” Or, applying Occam's Razor, maybe the "problem" with the body-camera study is that there is no widespread, systemic use of excessive force by the police.

Many police spokespersons quoted within articles and supporters of the police in the comments claim that misconduct comprise rare or isolated incidents and are the product of a few “bad apples”. According to Cavender, Gray, and Miller (2010) and Del Rosso (2011), “bad apple” rhetoric is often used by organizations to deny allegations of institutional or systemic problems by scapegoating a few individuals. The NYT writers Perez-pena and Willams (2015), emphasize that “[violent] videos, all involving white officers and Black civilians, ... represent just a tiny fraction of police behavior — those that show respectful, peaceful interactions do not make the 24-hour cable news.” This article later quotes James Pasco, the executive director of the

Fraternal Order of Police, who declares “police officers literally have millions of contacts with citizens every day, and in the vast majority of those interactions, there is no claim of wrongdoing, but that’s not news.” Such comments deny police-involved deaths as a social problem, positing such incidents as merely ‘situations’ which are rationalized as part of police work. Despite the debates over the frequency of excessive use of force by law enforcement, or how frequent is too frequent, holders of different positions can find reasons to support the implementation of body-cameras. Cameras can both exonerate falsely accused officers and substantiate valid claims of excessive force.

Racial Bias Debate

As can be seen in the above comment by Ralphie, the role of race is another point of debate and contention within discussions about warrants for BWCs. First, the role of race is implicitly invoked with frequent reference to the race of those shot by police, who are usually Black, and the race of the involved officers, who are usually White. WSJ writers Elinson, Mahtani, and Bauerlein (2016) describe the rising implementation of body cameras by police officials “as a way to increase transparency and accountability after police killings of black men sparked protests around the country.” Similarly, Goodman (2014) writes in an article for the NYT, “both civil libertarians and many police chiefs have cited [body cameras] as a way to improve relations between citizens and law enforcement, particularly in heavily policed minority communities.” Additionally, there are occasionally more explicit accusations of racial bias in policing in the articles and comments sections. The ruling for a stop-and-frisk discrimination lawsuit against the NYPD is mentioned in multiple articles. This case was centred on the issue of racial bias in street stops by NY police. The case ended with a ruling against the NYPD and a mandate for the initiation of a BWC program in NYC. Of note, none of the articles themselves use the phrases

“racism”, “racial bias”, or “discrimination”. The phrase “racial profiling” occurs in only three articles. Likewise, the word “race” was used in only 3 articles, one of which was also one of the articles with “racial profiling” mentioned.

Commenters took up the racial angle much more vigorously than the articles themselves. Twenty-six of the commenters agreed with the racial bias narrative, often being more explicit in their accusations. However, twenty-four commenters denied the existence of racial bias in policing. The commenters accepting the racial bias narrative used emotionally charged language such as “racist” and “bigot” to describe police officers or those denying racism. Notably, many of the racial bias deniers still want body cameras, but to exonerate falsely accused police officers and provide evidence that no bias exists. Additionally, there are also arguments that, instead of denying the existence of racial disparities, provide rationalizations of those racial disparities.

William Case writes:

The videos demonstrate that the news media can create racial discord by exclusively focusing on incidents involving white police officers and black civilians whole [sic] ignoring the far more numerous incidents that involve white civilians. Studies consistently show that about 70 percent of police homicide victims are white (including Hispanics) while about 30 percent are black. Since blacks make up only about 13 percent of the population, this indicates that blacks make up a disproportionate number of police homicide victims, but the disparity corresponds closely to the racial disparity in the crime rate... (Perez-pena & Williams, 2015)

For this commenter, the implication seems to be that the racial disparity in police homicide victimization results from Black criminality and not racism. Further, he argues that the media is creating the appearance of bias by focusing on White officers killing Black citizens. He is not

alone in either position, with some commenters accusing the media or government administrations of ‘race baiting’. Commenter Arthur Buck accused civil rights activists Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson of such “race baiting” following a fatal shooting of a man by a police officer in Los Angeles (Elinson & Carlton, 2015). In the same article, Eric Nelson makes the claim that there is an entire “race baiting industry” for which the recent shooting is another “unfortunate incident that will be exploited.” Nelson believes that the goal of this race baiting industry is the federalization of state and local police forces. Such conspiracy theories are not uncommon among the articles and commentary examined. The phrase ‘race baiting’ first appears in the early 1900s to refer to the use of racial stereotypes or verbal attacks against a racial group to stir up racial hatred, usually against minorities (Dictionary.com, n.d.). However, conservative politicians and political commenters appropriated the term in the 2010s to accuse activists of using racial issues for political or financial gain or to provoke racial hatred against white people. The comments above provide examples of this new use. This suggests that cultural resources are not rigid and unmoving, nor do they need to be invoked along the same lines as their origins to be effective.

Contested Cases: Debating Landmark and Iconic Narratives

It is illustrative to discuss the events leading up to the explosion in BWC discourse and how those events figure into debates around police misconduct and reform. Constructionist scholars note that claims-makers often take advantage of dramatic events to advance social problem constructions. Several cases are brought up repeatedly within both the articles and comments as events that provided the spark or further impetus for the growth of BWC programs across the country. Such events can be understood as what constructionists call landmark or iconic narratives. First elaborated by Nichols (1997), landmark narratives are stories that come to

“represent and epitomize perceived widespread problems” (Nichols & Nolan, 2004, p. 145), becoming a “definitive exemplar of a social problem” (Nichols 1997 p. 324). Similarly, Spencer (2011) used the term iconic narrative to describe stories that “do not just illustrate [a social] problem, they *symbolize* [emphasis in original] it” (p. 28). Since these narratives come to stand in for a particular social problem, a shift in the public’s understanding, or even rejection, of a narrative can signal a shift in the public’s view of the social problem which it represents.

The most common landmark or iconic narratives include the shooting of Michael Brown, the death of Freddie Gray and Eric Garner, and the protests against police brutality in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, and others. Reference to such cases occurs in 23 of the articles. These references were first used to explain the public demand for BWCs. For example, Goodman (2014) of the NYT states “calls for all officers to wear [body-worn cameras] have grown after the fatal shooting by a white officer [Darren Wilson] of an unarmed black teenager [Michael Brown] in Ferguson, Mo., last month”. Later, after police use of body-worn cameras spread across the US, references to these events are used to explain that proliferation. For example, Bellafante (2016) notes “since the deaths in recent years of Eric Garner on Staten Island and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., many cities have moved to outfit police officers with body cameras in an effort to facilitate greater accountability”. In the case of Michael Brown, the lack of footage of the event, coinciding with highly contradictory testimonies from Officer Wilson and other witnesses, helped drive the push for body cameras as a solution to the problem of unreliable witnesses. Even though these events are cited as part of the narrative of the expansion of BWCs, their details, such as the justifiability of police actions or the innocence of the victims, are hotly debated.

Both the acceptance and rejection of this narrative can be found in the comments. Some comments blamed those killed by police for their own death (e.g., by resisting arrest). NYT reader Rich writes:

1. Michael Brown physically attacked a store owner and stole merchandize [sic] and then attacked a Police Officer. 2. Eric Garner resisted arrest. 3. The young 12 year old boy who had been pointing a pellet gun that looked like a real gun, at people... Cameras won't change behavior of the Police Departments and Cameras won't change behavior of those that the Police Departments are called upon to confront... (Yee & Johnson, 2014)

Michael Brown's death is perhaps one of the most controversial of these cases, being mentioned in 51 comments. The lack of a video record and the numerous and contradictory witness testimonies allowed multiple interpretations to proliferate. However, other commenters used the very fact that the nature of these narratives is debated as grounds for the implementation of body cameras. A reader of the NYT named Bob E writes,

...It's obvious that video is a valuable aid in determining the truth in confrontations like these. The competing "narratives" about what happened in the Michael Brown case is a clear example of this. The convenience store assault and robbery, on video, belie the view that this was a "gentle giant", a "teddy bear", and show him to be an out of control thug. But the lack of video at the confrontation with the police allows completely different narratives to be put forth... (Yee & Johnson, 2014)

This comment expresses a theme found in many of the comments, that both those who believe in systemic problems in policing *and* those who deny them have reasons to support police wearing body cameras. Comments like these show that several incidents of civilians being killed by

police, though the interpretation of the meaning of such events may vary, have entered into the public consciousness and have become landmark or iconic narratives (Spencer, 2011) that represent the issues of police misconduct and police use of body cameras. Since there are multiple iconic cases, a comment could contain acceptance of one narrative, but rejection of another.

Two other oft discussed cases, the chokehold of Eric Garner (mentioned in 41 comments) and the shooting of Walter Scott (mentioned in 42 comments), were used for different purposes. Both cases were filmed by bystanders. The officer who shot a fleeing Walter Scott in the back was indicted on charges of murder only after a witness' video surfaced. This case is used as evidence that camera footage can bring to light wrongdoing and help bring offenders to justice. The police officers involved in the death of Eric Garner were not indicted and this is often used as evidence that more cameras might not reduce cases of excessive use of force. Of note here, just as the jury for the Eric Garner case did not come to the same conclusion as Black Lives Matter activists and many in the Black community, the commenters in my sample disagreed on the justifiability of the police officers' actions caught on video. This issue of the interpretation of camera footage will be highlighted in the later section on the objectivity of cameras.

These debates about police violence, racial bias, and iconic narratives are essentially debates about victimization and so are a victim contest (Holstein & Miller, 1990). Is there someone being victimized and if so, who are they? To many, there is clearly some problem with police use of force and their treatment of Black individuals. The incidents involving Michael Brown and others provide compelling evidence of this problem. To others, there is no systemic problem in policing, either excessive violence or racial bias, and Michael Brown and others were not victims of police misconduct, but rather died as a consequence of their own behaviour. We

see here the usual components of a victim contest: the denial or attribution of responsibility and the subsequent denial or attribution of blameworthiness. However, there is a way in which this case is different from many other victim contests. Holstein and Miller (1990) argue that the construction of a social problem is essentially the construction of victims. Often, a denial of a claim to victimhood usually goes in hand with a denial of a proposed solution to the associated problem. In this case, what the opposing sides on each of these issues have in common is the belief that more cameras will provide the evidence needed to prove their arguments. On the other hand, even in cases where a camera was filming, such as the death of Eric Garner, viewers find non-visible aspects of the event open to interpretation, such as motivations and justifiability. As police departments continue to roll out body-cameras, the hope that camera footage will reveal the same event, with the same interpretation, to all viewers is perhaps naïve.

Warrants

Best (1987; 2017) uses the term warrants to refer to the values and moral concerns invoked by a social problem. Four values come up frequently in discussions about BWCs: transparency, accountability, objectivity, and privacy.

Transparency and accountability

Promoting “transparency and accountability” are the most common justifications for body camera programs found in the articles, usually proclaimed by some representative of the police or the municipal or state government which is implementing a BWC program. That cameras improve transparency and accountability is taken for granted by these spokespeople. How the commenters reading the articles understand the two concepts is revealed in how they use them. Many commenters, but only a few journalists, present arguments that the programs are not sufficiently transparent in practice.

Table 4: Warrants

Warrant	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Transparency/Secrecy	12 (63%)	15 (63%)	44 (11%)	2 (2%)
Accountability	15 (70%)	15 (63%)	37 (9%)	5 (4%)
Objectivity/bias	12 (68%)	4 (21%)	14 (4%)	0 (0%)
Private/Public	10 (53%)	9 (38%)	27 (7%)	6 (5%)
Any Warrant(s)	19 (100%)	19 (79%)	101 (26%)	11 (10%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

A commenter with the username “Tmwwmgkbh” argues,

...It is in the best interest of the police that they record and release their own footage, because if they don't, we will do it for them. It should not take long for police departments across the country to realize that it is much better for all involved to get ahead of the story by releasing relevant footage early and holding wrongdoers accountable than trying to sweep it under the rug. There are simply too many eyes watching these days...The people will not tolerate attempts to conceal evidence of wrongdoing - that is how riots get started. (Lustbader, 2015)

Without actual access to BWC footage, journalists and commenters suggest that the goal of transparency was not being met. Statements from governments and police departments that BWCs are being implemented to increase transparency become not much more than slogans or shallow attempts at appeasing public critics without substantial changes to established police

operations. Fox (2007) argues that transparency can be either ‘fuzzy’ or ‘clear’. Fuzzy transparency only provides the appearance of being transparent, but actual access to information is impeded by barriers of some form. Clear transparency on the other hand provides reliable and accessible information.

Brucato (2015) notes that citizens have been trying to make police actions transparent since at least the early 1990s, but he also argues that this transparency has not resulted in substantial increases in police accountability since then either. Many commenters likewise argue that there is a disjuncture between transparency and accountability. Some believe that the mere presence of cameras will not reduce police brutality or misconduct. Within the discourse of accountability, I found two related but distinct uses of accountability: “accountability to” and “accountability for”. Many commenters talk of a need to ensure that police are held accountable *for* misconduct. This is usually spoken of in terms of consequence, i.e. punishment, for wrongdoings. Then, commenters talk of a need of some agent or agency to which the police are accountable *to*. This usually takes the form of some independent or third-party form of oversight. The two uses of accountability indicate an implicit understanding of multiple types of justice, which seem to correspond to the differences between substantive and procedural fairness. Being held accountable for misconduct is a form of substantive justice, the right outcome being obtained (Solum, 2004). Being accountable to an oversight agency is a form of procedural justice, which arises from a system and its procedures being fair and reasonable (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

The ideas of transparency and accountability had a significant impact on the conclusions people drew about BWCs; for example, what kinds of policies or strategies they supported. They claim that cameras (visibility) are not enough, that other changes are necessary. They argue the

camera programs do not change, for example, the lack of accountability (usually presented in the form of punishments or firings for ‘bad cops’) or a problematic police culture or systemic issues in policing such as racism, aggression, ‘us vs them’ mentalities, militarization, nor do they change or improve inadequate training. I will discuss these conclusions further in the prognosis section of this chapter.

Finding the Truth: Objectivity of Cameras

Many of the articles and comments talk about declining trust in police and strained police-community relations. A number of comments accuse police of being habitual liars. The demand for cameras reflects this growing distrust in the police. Many of the article authors and commenters express the belief that cameras will be much more trustworthy than the police officers involved in incidents in determining the truth of what happened. However, there is debate over how much more trustworthy camera footage is. In these discussions, objectivity or impartiality is taken as a core feature needed to be trusted with determining the truth. One of the largest differences between the two newspapers related to this discussion of potential bias in interpreting camera footage. Six of the NYT articles presented the position that camera footage can be biased, and the only WSJ article to mention video bias regarded the use of artificial intelligence to analyze footage and potential biases arising from the data-sets fed into their algorithms.

Additionally, articles dated 2012 to 2014, around the beginning of the rise in body-camera discourse in the USA, are more optimistic about the potential effectiveness of BWCs, compared to articles in subsequent years. The years 2016 and 2017 saw several articles making claims about the drawbacks or limitations of body cameras. NYT opinion writer Neil Franklin (2013) describes body cameras programs as “objective, transparent monitoring system[s]”.

Similarly, NYT writers Apuzzo and Williams (2015) projected that digital video would become a “go-to source of impartial evidence in much the same way that DNA did in the 1990s.”

Table 5: Objectivity of Cameras

Position	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Footage is objective ¹	8 (42%)	3 (13%)	8 (2%)	0 (0%)
Footage (or interpretation) can be biased ¹	4 (21%)	1 (4%)	6 (2%)	0 (0%)
Any Objectivity-bias theme(s)	12 (68%)	4 (21%)	14 (4%)	0 (0%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

1. Positions on the objectivity of cameras are mutually exclusive with each other.

Reader Scot S, reflecting this optimism, comments on a similarly hopeful NYT opinion article by La Vigne (2013):

Indisputable evidence of an interaction using an honest, accurate, unbiased recording does seem preferable to recollection after the fact and conflicting accounts... It could help clean up police misconduct and lead to swift, accurate justice for those committing a crime and be useful as a teaching tool.

Though this commenter describes video evidence as ‘indisputable’, the cases of Walter Scott and Eric Garner mentioned earlier show that events captured by a recording are actually quite disputable. Still, as commenters like Scot S suggests, cameras are likely more reliable than the recollections of eyewitnesses which are notoriously prone to inaccuracy (Albright, 2017).

Doubts

More recently, doubts about the technology become more prominent in the articles as potential bias begins to be more thoroughly examined. An NYT feature article by Williams, Thomas, Jacoby, and Cave (2016) explores the biases involved in interpreting video footage found in the research of Dr. Stoughton, a law professor at the University of South Carolina. The article presents several videos used in Dr. Stoughton's study on how viewers interpret body camera footage to illustrate his findings. Dr. Stoughton says his results show that, first, body camera footage can be interpreted quite differently by different people. These interpretations can vary on aspects of the video from the subjective, such as how threatening a suspect appeared, to the more objective, such as if the suspect was reaching for the officer's gun. Second, he found evidence that such interpretations were correlated with aspects of personal background such as race and prior attitudes towards the police. A later NYT article by Bosman, Smith, and Wines (2017) notes that juries are also not finding camera footage as clear in determining truth as some had thought.

As articles express skepticism or bring up the putative negatives of the cameras, commenters respond in two ways. Some readers comment that they hadn't considered the negatives and will now take them into consideration after being informed. For example, Phil Reagan writes in response to Williams et al.'s (2017) article of Professor Stoughton's research, "The concept of camera bias was not in my vocabulary. Now it is. I will consider this the next time I see a news report showing police body camera footage." Others reject the critiques of cameras.

Maintaining optimism

Some readers come to the defence of cameras in response to articles holding negative views or highlighting drawbacks. One such reader, JRS, replies to the critiques in the Williams et al. (2017) article with the suggestion that there are no better alternatives:

Cameras will be far from perfect, no matter where they are located. But they provide an objective vision that hopefully will be of value in the majority of cases. When they are hard to interpret, that should be recognized. At least it should be clearer if someone was running toward or away from the police when shots were fired.

Others argued that critical articles are unfairly trying to sway public opinion against police body cameras. For instance, Baldwin, also replying to Williams et al. (2017), claims,

[a camera] is better than nothing. You can tell that [the authors of the article] are trying to make [the idea of a BWC program] seems [sic] like something it's not.

Similarly, RSY rebukes Dr. Stoughton, who was cited in Williams et al. (2017), on his research on camera bias:

What I mistrust most of all is the professor's efforts to minimize the effectiveness or trustworthiness of body cameras/dash cams when the evidence is in that they capture interactions we could not have seen without them. All body camera evidence takes place in a context that is missing from the artificiality of these simulated interactions...

These commenters show a willingness to reject the expertise of Dr. Stoughton. This is potentially related to the public's declining trust in science since the 1970s (Gauchat, 2012). Additionally, commenters might hold on to optimism about cameras because they feel there are no better alternatives. Impartiality or lack of bias is needed for a sense of procedural fairness (Sunshine &

Tyler, 2003). However, commenters are able to recognize degrees of impartiality. Commenters largely agree that even if camera footage can occasionally be ambiguous, misleading, or open to interpretation, cameras can be trusted more than people. The desire for a form of evidence more reliable than testimony drives the demand for the implementation of BWCs.

Privacy, Security, and Public Space

In contrast to the theme of transparency, some articles evidenced debates about privacy. In general, privacy is often contrasted with security or safety (Friedewald, Burgess, Čas, Bellanova, & Peissl, 2017). Linked with discussions of privacy were also notions of what is or is not ‘public’. Within the articles, most of the articles bringing up privacy brought it up as a concern about violations of people’s rights to privacy. Only a few articles gave defences as to why body-cameras do not pose a danger to privacy. The comments, however, were more evenly split on the issue of privacy. The arguments defending cameras against privacy concerns can be split into two categories: that people with nothing to hide have nothing to fear or that people have no expectation of privacy, either because of where BWCs tend to film or because of a societal context of extensive surveillance. Articles and comments sometimes contained both arguments.

Table 6: Privacy Positions

Position	NYT Articles	WSJ Articles	NYT Comments	WSJ Comments
Privacy concerns	12 (63%)	9 (38%)	15 (4%)	4 (4%)
Privacy Rejection ^a	5 (26%)	2 (8%)	13 (3%)	2 (2%)
Nothing to hide	2 (11%)	2 (8%)	7 (2%)	1 (1%)
No expectation of privacy	4 (21%)	1 (4%)	8 (2%)	2 (2%)

Any Private-Public theme(s)	12 (63%)	10 (42%)	27 (7%)	6 (5%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

- a. The privacy rejection theme represents an item containing the nothing to hide theme, the no expectation of privacy theme, or both.

Privacy advocates

Of the commenters speaking on privacy issues, roughly half defend privacy, arguing that BWCs violate privacy rights. Some of these commenters made pop culture references to George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. For example, Big Brother, the leader of the totalitarian state in the novel whose name has become a symbol of oppressive authority, is mentioned 21 times in the comments sections. The user Marieizm writes the following below a NYT article (Williams, 2015):

...Cameras keep no one safe! Instead, they invade our privacy and our reasonable expectation [of] anonymity while in public spaces. People calling for cameras seem to forget that the televised Civil Rights marches kept no officer from hosing and sending in attack dogs. In addition to the recent recordings of Rodney King, Eric Gardner et al. that has yet, if ever, produce[d] justice. Big Brother will not save us. We have to save ourselves and demand justice in all areas of our lives.

The privacy advocates often implicitly or explicitly revealed deep distrust in governments and its agents. This aligns with previous research which finds that trust in an institution such as a government agency is a key variable determining support for the corresponding institution's surveillance (Nakhaie & de Lint, 2013; Friedewald et al., 2017).

Nothing to Hide

The journalists and commenters who rejected privacy concerns primarily used two types of arguments: the first, the ‘nothing to hide’ argument, is directed at the targets of surveillance. The second, the ‘no expectation of privacy’ argument, is directed at the context of surveillance, either focusing on the specific location of recording (public spaces) or the overall context of the current era (a society of widespread surveillance). Among the sampled articles and comments, many invoked a ‘nothing to hide, nothing to fear’ type of argument, which holds that only those who have engaged in misconduct and wish to hide that misconduct should be concerned with surveillance and visibility. The phrase ‘nothing to hide’ is used several times both in this data set and frequently in popular discourse (Solove, 2007). It is even the username selected by one of the commenters. This indicates that the phrase is another cultural resource used to ease communication by employing familiar concepts. For example, NYT reader Mike argues:

On the topic of recording police behavior on video: Police who are acting appropriately and professionally should have nothing to hide. It is our civil right to record police interactions in public places. Whether or not filming police is seen as inflammatory is beside the point. It is legal and helps protect citizens from violent encounters with law enforcement. Voluntarily giving up the right to practice citizen journalism is just like giving up any 4th amendment right. Keep the cameras rolling. (Perez-pena & Williams, 2015)

This type of argument focuses on the nature of the people being recorded by a surveillance system, specifically, whether they are guilty or innocent of any wrongdoings. Some commenters often also invert the well-known phrase “nothing to hide, nothing to fear” to conclude that if police officers have something to fear about BWCs, they must have something to hide.

No expectation of Privacy: Public Spaces & Privacy as forsaken

Some argue that, since police officers mostly work in public spaces where there is not an expectation of privacy, there are no privacy violations when capturing video in public. However, commenters express concerns with BWCs used in private homes. A user named jfx argues:

If the police are in public space, then any video contents could be considered public information, but a different standard seems appropriate for situations and locations that police access only because they are police officers. If police enter your house due to a warrant, an accident, or you invite them in for some reason, that isn't the same as inviting the public to see inside your house. (Williams, 2015)

Comments like these can be considered to have a contextual view of privacy. BWCs do not inherently violate privacy, but rather the specifics of time and place in their use can produce violations of people's privacy.

Some extend this concept of expectation of privacy to argue that no one should realistically expect privacy in most areas of life. A number of commenters talk about privacy as if it is an impossibility in the modern world. They argue that, since so much is already public in the modern world, the publicity brought by BWCs is nothing noteworthy. For example, NYT reader 'br', invoking both this mindset, comments on an article by Williams (2015),

This reminds me of the hubbub that erupted early in the Internet age, 15 years or so ago, when court clerks started putting dockets and other public records online. People were shocked: Going to the courthouse is one thing, but we shouldn't make it overly accessible. Now, any courthouse that doesn't put its records online is seen as something from the Stone Age. Like it or not, we live in a world where everything we do is subject

to being videotaped and posted on the Internet, whether it be from a cop's camera or a bystander's smartphone. This is no different. Ten years from now, we're going to look back on this and wonder what all the fuss was about...

This comment, and those similar to it, reflect what James (2014) identified as the “privacy mindset” she labels “privacy as forsaken” (p. 37), which takes transparency and visibility as an unavoidable reality. This mindset presumes that privacy is impossible, or at least practically unattainable, in our modern, mediatized, high-information world. People who have this mindset thus often do little to protect privacy, which they perceive as a largely fruitless effort.

Prognosis: Are cameras enough?

Best's (1987; 2017) third component of constructing a social problem is finding a conclusion. A conclusion provides a prognosis, the solution for the problem described by grounds and warrants. Accordingly, the grounds and warrants accepted by journalists and readers had substantial implications for whether they accepted body cameras as a solution to a problem or not, and also if they believed solutions beyond just placing cameras on police officers are needed. A majority of journalists wrote positively about BWCs. Similarly, a majority of the commenters who gave opinions about BWCs wrote supportive comments. The journalists who wrote critical articles were usually primarily concerned about privacy. They accepted that a problem existed within policing but argued that the privacy issues associated with BWCs are too substantial.

Table 7: Conclusions about BWCs

Conclusion	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Pro-BWC ¹	10 (52%)	14 (58%)	104 (26%)	12 (11%)

Mixed ¹	7 (37%)	8 (33%)	32 (8%)	5 (4%)
Anti-BWC ¹	2 (11%)	2 (8%)	22 (6%)	11 (10%)
Has BWC position	19 (100%)	24 (100%)	158 (40%)	28 (25%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

1. BWC Conclusions were mutually exclusive.

While some of the critical commenters also had privacy concerns, many rejected the use of BWCs because they believed that there was no police problem in need of solving. Still, some who argued against claims about problems of racial bias or excessive use of force in policing supported BWCs as a tool to exonerate falsely accused officers.

Table 8: Proposals for Other or Additional Solutions

Other/additional Solution	# of NYT Articles	# of WSJ Articles	# of NYT Comments	# of WSJ Comments
Mandatory or automatic camera activation	2 (11%)	4 (17%)	20 (5%)	0 (0%)
Mandatory release of video	8 (42%)	11 (46%)	7 (2%)	1 (1%)
Harsher/more frequent punishment	4 (21%)	2 (8%)	23 (6%)	3 (3%)
Independent Oversight	6 (32%)	4 (17%)	8 (2%)	1 (1%)
Better Screening or Training	4 (21%)	7 (%)	21 (5%)	3 (3%)
Fixing problematic police culture	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	19 (5%)	2 (2%)
Proposes other/additional solution(s)	13 (74%)	16 (42%)	81 (20%)	7 (6%)
Total articles or comments	19	24	396	110

Spector and Kitsuse (1987 [1977]) note that claims-makers can become dissatisfied with an institution's response to their demands. Consequently, "assertions about the inadequacy, inefficacy, or injustice, of the procedures [instituted in response to problem claims] may themselves become the conditions around which new social problems activities are organized" (pp. 151-152). In such a situation, claims-makers target "organizational procedures and methods of dealing with clients and their complaints" (p. 152) with new claims of problematic conditions. These claims are aimed at producing additional changes such as "a renegotiation of procedures, reform of existing practices, dismissal of a high-level administrator, and possibly the establishment of a new, more specialized agency" (p. 152). Many of the journalists and commenters in the sample suggest that the mere presence of body cameras will not be enough to achieve the desired amount of transparency and accountability. They suggest types of additional policies or strategies that need to be implemented, policies around access to body-camera footage, the creation or empowerment of third-party oversight agencies, increasing the punishment for misconduct, better policies around the recruitment and training of police officers, and fixing a problematic police culture.

Access to Footage: Transparency as Accountability to the Public

Some journalists and commenters argue that transparency will not be attained until the public can see the footage related to complaints. First, body camera footage needs to exist if it is to be released to the public. They point to incidents of cameras being turned off during key moments and cities or police chiefs refusing to release or allow access to footage. For example, the commenter Norteno writes:

...The police in Albuquerque have been equipped with cameras for a considerable time now. They have become very adept at turning the cameras off, never turning them on, or

covering them during interactions with citizens. On the few occasions when there has apparently been video recorded, the chief of police usually says that no video is recoverable, or refuses to release the video. Why? Because they continue to cover up their actions... (Franklin, 2013)

Many comments and some of the articles contain demands for either policies that mandate officers to turn on the cameras, with potential consequences for failure to do so, or the cameras be programmed to automatically activate when an officer's gun is pulled from its holster.

Further, even when BWC footage has captured an incident, many argue that the police are hiding footage from the public by failing to release it. For example, commenter Billyj criticizes the actions of police departments in the NYT article by Apuzzo and Williams (2015),

While it is exciting that many more departments are moving towards using body cameras the next battle will be access to the footage. There are a few states that are already moving to restrict access to the footage based on the police department's discretion. The video evidence is useless if the police departments refuse to release [or] cover up officer misconduct. Videos taken with phones by ordinary citizens, while imperfect, allow for more transparency. The issue runs much deeper than just easy accountability. It is the us versus them mentality that police forces across the country have. We need more transparency, more accountability and more community engagement with the police as a whole. With out [sic] these things there will not be real trust in our police force anytime soon.

Commenters like the two above express a desire for clear transparency from institutions they perceive as often providing fuzzy transparency. Accordingly, mandatory or automatic activation

of BWCs and mandatory release of BWC footage are among the most common policy suggestions. Release of the footage is particularly relevant to journalists, who have a desire, perhaps even a duty, to obtain material they can publish which will garner readership. This is perhaps why the release of BWC footage is the most frequently made policy suggestion within the news articles themselves.

Neglect of Other Solutions

Some of the articles and comments argue that there can be other police reforms that can ameliorate these same problems. Additionally, some believe that BWCs are not enough or do not solve the core problems at the root of the issues above. A few even argue that the focus on body cameras as the main response to criticism has led to a neglect of other, perhaps more impactful, solutions. Many of the comments and some of the articles referred to the need to implement changes outside of cameras such as implementing third-party oversight agencies, increasing or implementing harsher punishments for misconduct, better police training or vetting of incoming officers, having harsher or more punishments for offending officers, and changing police culture. Some of these comments argued that the focus on cameras distracts what they feel are other important components of reducing police deviance, perhaps even the core problem. However, most wanted the following changes in addition to cameras, rather than opposed to them.

Punishment: Accountability for Misconduct

Many commenters and some journalists believe a lack of proper punishment for misbehaving officers is part of the problem. They point to cases where police officers who killed civilians in ways perceived as unjustified were not indicted, convicted, or removed from policing duties. In reply to a NYT article by Ripley (2017) about a randomized BWC trial in Washington DC, which showed little change in cases of police use of force, the user Getoffmylawn writes:

Cameras make no difference if the probability of punishment is too small. A continuous stream thus far of officers being acquitted of the most serious charges will underscore that possibility. Even large municipal cash settlements won't do it - those guilty of serious infractions must face serious, personal consequences. This tells us the key to changing undesirable behaviors lies in oversight, fair adjudication and, if necessary, punishment, not technology.

More punishment is the most frequent suggestion amongst the comments. The desire for greater punishments is driven by the goal of accountability for misbehaviour mentioned in the warrants section above. These critics believe that the punishment will serve as a deterrent to other officers and get problematic officers out of police work. Without being consistently held accountable for their improper actions captured by BWCs, these commenters believe that police officers will continue to act without restraint.

Third-party Oversight: Accountability to Another Agency

Some of the commenters who argue that officers need to face punishments more often or more harshly also criticized the procedures that they feel are letting problem officers go without punishment. They note that in many jurisdictions, claims of police misconduct are investigated internally within the police department. Many commenters are skeptical of the police's ability to fairly investigate misconduct within their own forces. Accordingly, they demand that investigation of claims of misconduct ought to be handled by an external oversight agency. For example, a user named JEG writes,

...The police have set themselves in opposition to the public, and belatedly the public has awakened to this problem. Corrective action must come from accountability, including: civilian review boards with the power to independently discipline officers, district attorneys

to hold police to account, a willingness of judges to rein in police excesses, and federal oversight through the Department of Justice. (Apuzzo & Williams, 2018)

As shown above, commenters also note that even when existing oversight agencies investigate claims of misconduct, they are often not empowered to prescribe punishments to officers they find guilty. Police departments' accountability to something other than themselves is the other form of accountability I mentioned in the warrants section. It drives demand for not only the power to investigate the police but also enact sanctions.

Ananny and Crawford (2018) propose that transparency might not always lead to accountability. They argue that transparency that is “disconnected from power” (p. 978) is unlikely to lead to accountability. Citing Heald (2006), Ananny and Crawford reason that

[i]f transparency has no meaningful effects, then the idea of transparency can lose its purpose. If corrupt practices continue after they have been made transparent, “public knowledge arising from greater transparency may lead to more cynicism, indeed perhaps to wider corruption.” Visibility carries risks for the goal of accountability if there is no system ready and “capable of processing, digesting, and using the information” to create change (Heald, 2006: 35–37). Transparency can reveal corruption and power asymmetries in ways intended to shame those responsible and compel them to action, but this assumes that those being shamed are vulnerable to public exposure. (p. 978)

As Ananny and Crawford (2007) and Heald (2006) predicted, commenters have shown increased cynicism as cameras, either those on police officer uniforms or held by civilians, continue to capture questionable police behaviour that goes unpunished. Fox (2007) argues that the concept of accountability can be split up into two types, ‘soft’ and ‘hard’. Soft accountability consists of

the ability to investigate and find answers to questions the public has about an institution's structure, decisions, and behaviour. Hard accountability consists of the capacity to sanction or compensate. Fox argues that transparency can support soft accountability, providing evidence to investigations that can inform the public of misbehaviour, but transparency does not in of itself promote hard accountability. The commenters calling for external investigations and increased punishments in addition to BWCs seem to agree that transparency is not enough.

Recruitment & Training

The above sections reveal proposals about what to do after an incident occurs. This section and the next show suggestions that aspects of police departments may contribute to increased police misconduct. Many commenters and a few journalists argued that the training of police needed to be changed. They argue that either police training is inadequate, for example, not including enough or any training of de-escalation tactics, or that police are actually trained to be aggressive or even violent. Commenter Bill Randle expresses both positions:

...There is a serious problem across our nation with poor and inadequate training of police officers that has lead [sic] to thousands of innocent or unarmed people being shot by police when they didn't pose a significant threat. Instead of being trained to DEESCALATE conflict and confrontations, most police departments train their officers to immediately employ overwhelming force to subdue and neutralize "suspects," even if it violates the suspects [sic] civil rights. The emphasis is on screaming while applying maximum force and violence instead of projecting poise and calm and seeking to defuse tension... (Williams et al., 2015)

A few commenters argue that, because police officers are given broad authority to use force, the police force can be very attractive to people who wish to exert authority or inflict violence onto

others. As such, police departments need to screen applicants well enough to filter out potential officers likely to commit misconduct. For example, Steve writes,

The discussion goes even deeper than training. It is recruiting. Cops will hire anybody, and I mean ANYBODY. The cursory (and laughable) psychological pre-screening would pass Genghis Khan. A certain element is attracted to having a gun and a badge - the ultimate street authority. The police departments nationwide are filled with these types. Estimates are as high as 25%. They are psychos, time bombs waiting to go off. Citizens killed by police are the tip of the iceberg. Much more bad policing goes on way below that threshold. (Bosman, 2017)

Some of these commenters argue that BWCs will not change behaviour. BWCs can only capture evidence that helps remove perpetrators of misconduct from the police force after the act. It is pre-emptive actions, like better screening and training of police officers, that will create change.

Discussing Police Culture: The Blue Wall of Silence

Many of the commenters argue that there are deep, systemic problems in the culture of police officers. This marks one of the most substantial differences between the articles and the comments. For instance, the ‘blue wall of silence’, while only mentioned once in one article, is referred to in 35 comments. Popularized in the 1980s following a series of investigations into police corruption, the term refers to police officers’ refusal to report on fellow officers for misconduct due to a sense of in-group loyalty or fear of ostracization (Chin & Wells, 1998). This concept has become embedded in the public consciousness and rises up frequently in police misconduct discourse as a cultural resource. NYT commenter Andrew Kennelly gives his own interpretation of the problem in policing which closely matches academic discussion of the blue wall:

...those in law enforcement, even the good ones, seem to have an intense desire to protect the bad ones. They lie and fabricate reports to protect their "brothers and sisters", they look the other way when they see misconduct, and in the very rare cases where an officers [sic] step forward to report misconduct, they will find themselves ostracized or worse... (Perez-Pena & Williams, 2015)

Some of the commenters are hopeful that body cameras will help tear down the blue wall. For example, user Honolulu argues that

...the [police's] culture needs to change. But what will cause the culture to change? The complaints by blacks and other minorities over the decades have been ignored and dismissed. It's the videos corroborating the civilians' claims and contradicting the police versions that are putting pressure on the police and their bosses to change. While the cameras will not always unequivocally show what really happened, they will do so often enough to break down the blue wall of silence that has protected cops so far. (Perez-Pena & Williams, 2015)

However, some fear that the blue wall will inhibit the transparency that could potentially be gained by body cameras. NYT reader Richard A. Petro argues that

...The "body cameras" may help but, I can almost guarantee, they too will be circumvented (The camera "broke" or "fell off" or was "blocked" inadvertently) especially if they are used as a means to convict an officer of misconduct... (Lustbader, 2015)

The last several sections reveal that many people believe that the problems in the police are deeper than what cameras alone can solve. The other issues mentioned, lack of punishments, lack

of clear transparency, lack of hard accountability, and aggressive training, are also often connected back to a sense that there is a deeply corrupt system extending across the police and the courts. This leads some commenters to argue for a complete rethinking of the criminal justice system. This also leads some to intense cynicism, a lack of hope that change is possible.

Reflecting both a radical attitude and cynicism, commenter Rennie argues that

[t]here will be many more [police shootings], paying attention or not, cameras or not.

Without accountability for everyone, which is not the status quo, paying attention is moot. So are cameras, turned off or on. Americans must rethink about the systems they erect, the underlying moral assumptions that should justify these systems, and consequences for not managing and making them accountable for the purpose in which they theoretically exist... (Bosman, 2017)

As many researchers have noted, mainstream news media tends to ignore systemic explanations of social problems (Zhang, Jin, Stewart, & Porter, 2016). The commenters above, by bringing focus on to the systemic cultural issues that the news articles have neglected, show that the public can still employ framing that mainstream media ignores.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

News audiences create diverse and nuanced interpretations of what they see in the media. As has been shown, given concepts such as transparency and accountability, commenters can generate their own definitions, critically appraise how claims-makers in the media make use of those concepts, and articulate their own ideas of what would satisfy their own conceptions.

Consequently, policy-makers should take care against using phrases such as “transparency and accountability” as mere slogans. Members of the public have complex understandings of these concepts and are unlikely to accept their use without meeting their expectations. Additionally, a policy can become popular even if there is wide public disagreement over the problem being solved as long as most of the “sides” can feel that the policy will support their own interpretation. The details of body camera use, such as the policies associated with their use, are often debated, but very few argued against body cameras entirely.

There is support for a limited agenda-setting effect. There seems to be a relationship between themes in articles and themes in comments. For example, discussions of potential bias in body camera footage in the comments sections were largely isolated to the articles where the authors brought up bias. Transparency and accountability themes each seem related to more of the same theme in comments. Supporting the notion that the underlying message of media is hegemonic (Best, J., 1991; Gitlin, 1980), the media avoided claims of deep systemic problems in policing. Articles were often fairly monocausal in their explanations which supports Stallings’ (1990) argument that media prefer monocausal explanations (see Best, J., 1991 for a counterexample). While the individual comments had varying degrees of complexity in their explanations, as a collective they presented a much more complex view of BWCs and policing in general. However, this varied by website. There was no discussion of the objectivity of body

camera footage in the sample from the WSJ comment sections. Additionally, the commenters provided examples of the use of cultural resources in their conversations. Pop culture elements such as the novel 1984 and its ‘big brother’ are used as metaphors to quickly convey ideas about surveillance and authoritarianism because of the public’s familiarity with the novel. The ‘blue wall of silence’ is another metaphor that, because it is also part of the cultural lexicon, can be used as a linguistic shortcut that invokes ideas about problems in the culture of policing which protect those engaged in misconduct. There is also evidence that aspects of the BWC discourse are being turned into cultural resources. An online commenter need not say much more than the name ‘Michael Brown’ to start a debate.

The findings of this study are relevant to those interested in maintaining or improving public confidence in the police. As noted by previous scholars, police legitimacy is greatly influenced by the public’s perception of procedural justice (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This thesis suggests that the public has complex, nuanced understandings of procedural justice. Many members of the public are keenly attuned to any potential bias or corruption. Some have become quite cynical about any notion of police reform. The concept of dialogical legitimacy (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012) may provide an avenue for improved police-community relations. As the name ‘dialogical legitimacy’ suggests, Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) argue that an institution’s dialogue and engagement with the public is a core component of its legitimacy. This proposition, with additional support from the findings of this thesis, suggest that continued strain and conflict between the police and communities is likely to continue if they are not able to reach a greater level of consensus on issues such as the reasonable use of force, the appropriate level of transparency, what constitutes meaningful accountability or, at a deeper level, what even is the proper role of the police in society.

Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

I drew the sample used in this study from only two news websites. This non-representative sample limits the generalizability of this study's findings; Since prior research has found that individual websites might develop their own particular subcultures and styles of discourse, other websites' comment sections might give different results. Alternatively, research can examine discourse in other countries. Canada, for example, is home to similar discussions about policing, use of force, race, and body cameras. Additionally, one of the drawbacks of interpretative research methods is that text is often ambiguous, and I could not contact the authors for their corroboration of a particular interpretation. On the other hand, the controversial nature of the research topic might have led to other forms of uncertainty if I attempted to contact and interview participants. Additionally, it has come to light that Russia has been exploiting racial and ideological tensions in the USA through social media since at least the 2016 election (Lockhart, 2018). Both university research teams and intelligence agencies have revealed an extensive campaign of Russian agents sowing discord on websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube. This is a worrying development that will have impacts far beyond the research of social attitudes online.

The results and limitations of this study provide directions for future research. The issue of Russian disinformation agents is pressing, and researchers are developing methods, such as machine learning, to identify their online accounts (Im, et al., 2020). If the problem of intentional mass disinformation can be addressed, quantitative analysis could further explore the relationship between news articles and comments. For example, one can look for statistical associations between themes in the articles and themes in the comments. Future studies could also benefit from examining articles and comments from a larger number of source websites for better

generalizability and further explore the diversity in the discourse. Future research can examine commenter interactions with each other in greater depth and detail. Many of the comments were in reply to other comments and so, a collection of comments can be used for conversation and discourse analyses. However, content analyses, either quantitative or qualitative, must also attend to the danger of misinterpretation. Interview or focus group research could examine the active interpretation process between a reader reading an article and commenting on the subsequent comment section. Prior research on public attitudes towards BWCs usually relied on surveys. Surveys remain one of the best ways to find out accurate estimates of population-level features. Future surveys should take care to allow for the diversity of beliefs around BWCs.

The issues raised by the journalists and the commenters are ongoing. Six years after Eric Garner died while held in a chokehold by a police officer, a Black man named George Floyd died on the 25th of May 2020 after a White police officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. A viral bystander video of the encounter triggered renewed protests against anti-Black racism and police tactics. All four officers involved in the encounter had body cameras on. Now, Black Lives Matter and other activists have a new rallying cry, “defund the police”. Dissatisfaction with the police has reached such a breaking point, some activists want to abolish them entirely. This seems to be a new chapter in the story of police-community relations. This development would likely not surprise the critics who said that body cameras alone would not be enough to address the problems they see in policing. Given ongoing developments and the rapid rate of change in public attitudes, scholars must continue researching public discourse and police-community relations.

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Appendix: Data Sources in Chronological Order, by Newspaper

The New York Times

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