

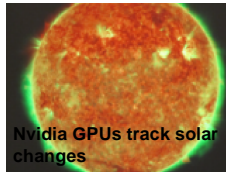
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Cops and cameras in the digital age

DAVID GOMEZ | Thu 23rd Sep 2010, 03:00 pm

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Camera [technology](#)

is an everyday part of life. It is affordable and it is more portable than ever. And if you haven't already noticed, there are cameras everywhere.

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Video cameras are on light posts in cities across America creeping people out. Hidden digital [cameras](#) are taking people's picture without them knowing.

Sure, it sounds like Orwell's worst nightmare come to life. Everywhere you go, someone could be watching you. It could be a totalitarian government, or it could be some pervert.

In some cases though, cameras could actually help make the world a better place.

Some sectors of society actually benefit from the widespread use of cameras. We've seen in sports how cameras can guarantee that referees follow the guidelines that define their profession. It makes their jobs easier.

The cameras usually force the referees to do their jobs better because they know they are being watched by the people who will call for their heads if they screw up.

I think that cameras could have the same effect on police officers.

I know that cameras make most cops nervous because of the Rodney King fiasco. Since then cops haven't been big fans of having their actions recorded. After all who wants to be caught violating the rules on tape?

Right now there is only a small group of people who feel video cameras are a valuable tool in law enforcement.

The **Cato Institute** is hoping that will change. Based on their reasoning, it's quite shocking that there are not more people in America backing the adoption of video cameras as a standard piece of law enforcement equipment.

In a Cato Institute [video piece on cops and cameras](#), they point out that citizens have a right to use cameras to keep the job [performance](#) of police officers in check.

It is also suggested that cameras are such a useful technology that it is about time that law enforcement is required to wear video recording systems as a standard piece of equipment. Video cameras certainly are more durable and portable these days.

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In the piece, legal policy analyst for the Cato Institute David Rittgers talks about how there is not much difference between a home invasion and a police raid.

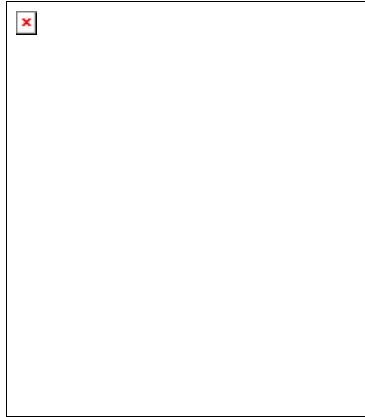
"The technical difference between a SWAT raid and a home invasion is razor thin, and there is no reason to not roll tape when police kick in a door." Rittgers said.

That's also what we hear from police chiefs in the press conferences they hold when one of their guys accidentally wounds or kills someone. By this point the public should know that police raids are high stress situations, with no room for mistakes. Mistakes can be fatal.

Unfortunately there have been violent encounters in the news recently where police have harmed, and in some cases even killed people in the same intense situations.

There is the tragic [Aiyana Jones](#) incident in Detroit where a young girl was killed during a police raid. A bullet that was fired into the house during the height of the raid hit the girl and killed while she lay sleeping.

And then there is the [University of Maryland student](#) who gets savagely beaten by Prince George's County police for basically being full of joy that Maryland beat Duke in a basketball game. He was skipping down the street and police had to stop him and confront him for inciting a riot.



The best part about the Maryland beating case is the part where the video camera footage from the street camera, where the student is beaten, was tampered with.

Somehow the footage just went [missing](#) for a while.

These are just two examples of situations where there have been disputes about what happened during police encounters. In both cases police conduct was very questionable and people were harmed because of it. An abundance of video footage could have helped clarify the actions of all parties involved.

And that is the idea behind the push to make video a requirement for law enforcement. There should be greater transparency in law enforcement. We have the video technology to make it easy.

But cops all over the country are quite hostile to the idea of citizens using their streamlined capture [devices](#) to document their encounters with police. And the video requirement for police idea is only talk at this point.

What does it take for this important technology issue to get some mainstream attention? Pissed off photographers certainly help the cause.

Among the best journalistic documentations of the problems that cops have with cameras is the [blog Photography is Not a Crime](#).

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The site's owner Carlos Miller is a photojournalist and an advocate of free speech. He has had several altercations with Miami, Florida police officers because he chose to exercise his First Amendment right to take pictures in order to perform his job.

He wanted to document his legal struggles with cops so he started a blog. He soon found himself writing about the legal struggles of other camera enthusiasts. There were other people all around the country who were being harassed and arrested for simply taking pictures and shooting video in public places.

In all of the cases Miller writes about there are common themes present with police.

There are many instances where police blatantly disregard people's rights to photograph and shoot video. Either because they don't care about what rights people have, or because they have no clear understanding of what the law says about citizens' right to use cameras to record public servants like police officers.

However, thanks to the hard work of the [online](#) photography community this crucial civil liberties issue finally received attention from the media. Miller was recently on the HDNet program World Report to bring attention to the issues law enforcement has with cameras.

Concerned citizens should be viewed as a useful way to limit the power of law enforcement officers.

Right now most public officials and police officers seem to have nothing but contempt for people who choose to exercise their right to use cameras to keep police on their toes.

Video cameras could help cops do their jobs more efficiently, just like referees.

This is a technology issue that won't be going away soon. The more violent screw ups that happen, the more pressure there will be for transparency through video cameras.

As they say video footage is an honest witness.

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