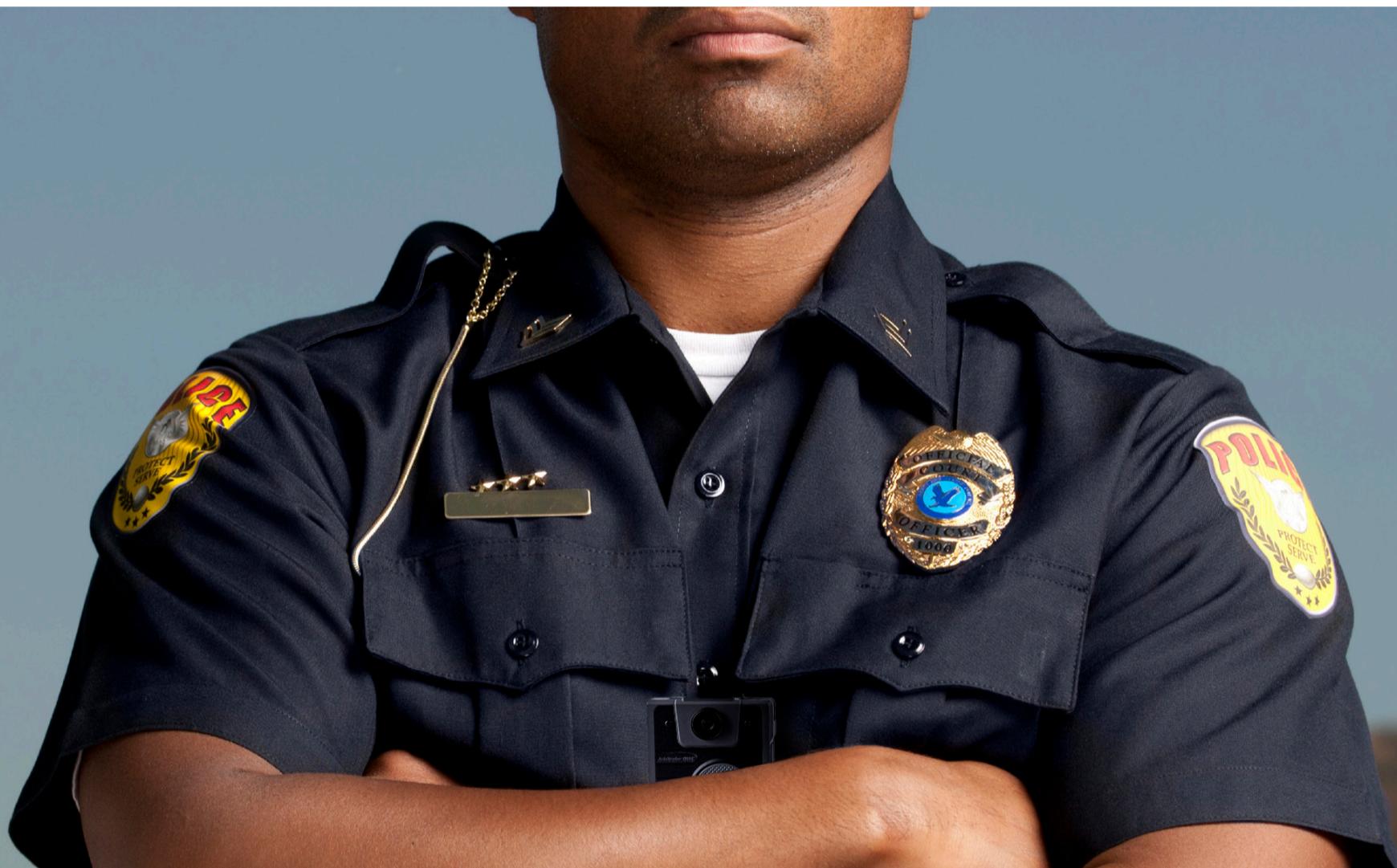


Panasonic Enters the Body Camera Fray

BY SASCHA SEGAN



I'd rather be shot with a Panasonic than a Taser. Wouldn't you?

Driven by recent high-profile police shootings, body cameras are spreading across U.S. police departments. About a third of the 18,000 police forces in the U.S. now use body cams, according to a report from B2B seller Insight that was commissioned by the cross-governmental U.S. Communities organization, and President Obama has requested funding for 50,000 more cameras.

Panasonic's brand-new Arbitrator BWC, released on December 1, is a big name stepping into a market dominated by two other firms, VieVu and Taser. Panasonic says that its advantage comes from being an actual maker of cameras and in having an end-to-end system for data management and storage, which Panasonic has been working on for the past decade with its police dashboard camera systems.

The police body cameras aren't just ruggedized GoPros. Although they record optically stabilized 720p video just like a GoPro, the difference really comes in how the footage is handled once it's recorded, said Panasonic video solutions specialist John Cusick. Videos are encrypted in the camera, and every time they're transferred to another device, they're revalidated. Once they're transferred from the camera—either wirelessly, or by dropping them into a charging cradle—they can only be viewed in special software that logs every view and edit action, keeping previous versions intact.

“We're very cognizant of that chain of custody, that integrity,” Cusick said. “If it ever gets to court, if it gets challenged, we've done the job of documenting at the bit level the security of the file.”

Panasonic also sells a complete system including both body cameras and the more common dash cameras, with footage that can be stored in the same Microsoft Azure-powered government cloud and viewed with the same Windows software.

In the future, body cameras may be combined with facial recognition software, although Panasonic didn't explicitly make the connection. The company showed us—separately, mind you—a facial recognition system called FacePro, which recognizes suspects in real time. It's currently being marketed to companies and universities that want to watch for known thieves or disgruntled employees, but I can see how it could be combined with body cameras down the line.

DATAPOCALYPSE

The proliferation of cameras is making data storage and management a major issue for police departments. In Harrison, New Jersey, cops spend three-fifths of their day looking at and managing digital evidence, Sergeant Dave Doyle of the Harrison Police Department said.



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Here's how it works out. Each camera captures about 1GB per hour. (The cameras typically carry 32GB SD cards.) Data retention policies mean that departments need to keep data anywhere from six months to seven years, according to Joe Nigro, digital property custodian for the Harrison PD.

How much data gets recorded depends on department policy. The CEO of VieVu, Steve Ward, said that most officers in the field only record 60-90 minutes of video each day, because they only turn the cameras on when there's an incident.

So a smaller city like Harrison, which may have 15 cops on the streets at any one time, would generate at least 15GB per day, or 5.4TB per year. Doyle said his department is set for local storage right now, but demands are only going to continue to grow, and departments are looking at adopting cloud solutions like Microsoft's.

"The greatest concern of police departments moving forward now are servers, cloud storage, who's going to manage this, and whether we have the proper encryption," Doyle said.

MOST COPS LOVE CAMERAS

At the Panasonic event, Joe Giberson, chief of police for Stafford, NJ, sang the cameras' praises. His department doesn't currently use body cameras, but his officers have dash cams that automatically turn on with a car's alert lights, recording speed, position, and video information.

"I wouldn't have a police car out on the street without this system in it," Giberson said.

This is New Jersey, so it's not like the Stafford Township police officers are without controversy; the department is currently embroiled in a lawsuit over whether the town's mayor used the police as a weapon to intimidate a political opponent. But if anything, that makes Giberson's faith in cameras even more telling—





because he sees it as a way to prove that, most of the time, the cops are right. The dash cams have reduced complaints against his cops, because frivolous complaints are less likely to pop up when people know you have video, and they work wonders in certain circumstances.

“In DUI cases, as soon as a defense attorney sees the video, they’re ready to make a deal,” Giberson said.



IT'S ALL ABOUT POLICY

But as I asked the cops and Panasonic experts about body cameras making citizens safer, they kept reverting to one phrase: “It’s about policy.”

They’re right, of course. Cameras aren’t going to fix departments that have deep-seated anti-accountability cultures, although they can certainly help—as was recently shown with the October shooting of Laquan McDonald in Chicago. In a report about a body camera test in Phoenix, Arizona State University researchers found that officers had “low compliance rates for turning on cameras” and were “concerned that the video might be used against them”—even though complaints against officers who wore the cameras went down by 23 percent, and complaints against officers wearing cameras were less likely to be sustained.

As the cameras get more popular, the momentum among good cops may be enough to overcome departments’ fears.

“It’s one of the most important tools that an officer, or a police department, can have,” Giberson said of his dash cams.