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Integrating Technology into Law Enforcement

Technology and law enforcement share an interesting and complex relationship. In an age in which cameras can be found practically anywhere, it’s a rare occasion when a newsworthy event occurs without some form of video documentation. Law enforcement is increasingly being pressured to integrate camera technology in various ways, including the providing of mandatory uniform cameras for police officers and establishing a camera presence in the America’s federal court system. While the majority of US citizens are in favor of these changes, there are many police and courtroom professionals in opposition. This essay will identify and provide analysis and comparisons regarding each of these issues, while identifying differences and similarities between the willingness of law enforcement officers and Supreme Court Justices to provide significant amounts of transparency to the American public.

Police departments nationwide are increasingly equipping their police officers with uniform-mounted camera devices. Josh Sanburn attributes the 70% increase to the recent shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, a case lacking in video evidence. In his article “Badge, Gun… Camera?,” Sanburn cites experts as stating “more than 5,000 of the nation’s 18,000 police departments are now using or testing the devices.” Proponents of this initiative agree that through incorporating modern technology, police officers are repairing a community distrust that has accumulated over the past several years. With “amateur” and internet journalism becoming an increasingly prominent perspective in today’s media, the police have involuntarily shed a layer of protection, in that anything they do can be caught on camera. Supporters of uniform cameras also believe that they will protect officers in day-to-day interactions by protecting them from being wrongfully accused of misconduct, while ensuring police accountability in extreme scenarios by eliminating gray areas.

With controversial incidents that involve law enforcement officers receiving heavy amounts of attention from the media, it’s easy for both police officials and civilians to see and understand the benefits of integrating camera technology into standard police procedures. On the other hand, a much more reluctant Supreme Court of the United States is facing increasing pressure from Congress and the media to permit the same technology in federal courtrooms. This is a debate that has been alive for decades, and has resulted in the creation of several laws in each of the 50 states that allow for the presence of cameras in at least some level of the state court systems. A majority of journalists and civilians are in favor of provisions regarding the presence of cameras in courtrooms, praising its potential to educate the public about the judicial system. Members of the Supreme Court have a far-less progressive state of mind, however. Many judges oppose the transparent courtroom, in fear that it would compromise the integrity of the trial process. Opponents fear that cameras have the potential to eliminate the anonymity of judges, mislead the public through audio and visual manipulation, increase the risk for comments to be taken out of context, and alter the behavior of those being filmed. There are many theories as to why Justices are so reluctant to these changes. In her article “Moving Beyond Cameras in the Courtroom: Technology, the Media, and the Supreme Court,” Mary-Rose Papandrea asserts that many believe that Justices simply don’t understand and are hostile towards new technology. The Supreme Court’s unwillingness to accept modern communication technology can be traced back to an amendment to the Code of Conduct for federal judges from 1972, which prohibited recordings and photographs within the court room. Papandrea concludes that Justices are capable of understanding and appreciating technology, but are cautious towards disrupting and complicating a functional judicial system.

When comparing the two issues, it’s relatively difficult to distinguish the differences between them. Police departments nationwide are embracing the benefits of incorporating cameras into standard police procedure. Likewise, state court systems are integrating cameras into courtrooms, with some restrictions. Yet the Supreme Court still remains reluctant to modernize into a transparent system. Perhaps it will take a significant incident to catalyze a change in the mindsets of federal judges, or another generation. It is crucial for national and state governments to understand the importance of integrating commonly used technologies into their agenda. This eliminates public distrust by providing citizens the rights to a transparent system.

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