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Violence, videotapes and police

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This all started with Rodney King.

More to the point, it started with a plumber named George Holliday. Had he not been video recording from his balcony, that night in 1991 might have been business as usual for L.A. police who struck King, a harmless drunk, 50 times with their batons, breaking his leg, his cheekbone and his skull. Had Holliday not captured video proof to the contrary, they might have gotten away with some lame excuse: oops, he slipped on the stairs.

But thanks to Holliday's camera, we all knew better.

Twenty years latter, cameras have become ubiquitous. They have captured entertainer meltdowns, crashes, tasings, deaths and a seemingly endless carnival of police misbehavior: questionable beatings, controversial shootings and unprovoked violence by those we hire to protect and to serve.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many police now identify cameras as the enemy.

Last week, news photographer Phil Datz was arrested on Long Island for videotaping a police action on a public street. In June, a man named Narces Benoit said Miami Beach Police pulled him from his car by his hair, handcuffed him and stomped his cellphone (which police deny) after he used it to record video of a fatal police shooting. In May, a woman named Emily Good was arrested for recording a traffic stop from her own front yard in Rochester, NY. In March, a Las Vegas man was beaten and arrested for videotaping police from his own driveway. In March of last year, a motorcyclist was arrested for recording his own traffic stop on a Maryland highway.

According to a 2010 report on the technology blog Gizmodo, at least three states have made it illegal to record an on-duty officer. Other states use existing wiretapping laws to support their arrests, a novel and selective interpretation of those statutes. What makes it novel is that such laws are typically invoked when telephone conversations are recorded; they require that both parties are aware of, and approve, the recording. What makes it selective is that one never hears of people being roughed up and arrested for recording videos that flatter the police.

The only thing more outrageous than the behavior is the excuses used to justify it. One of the cops in Rochester claimed, obviously for the benefit of the camera, that he did not feel "safe" with Emily Good recording him. Miami Beach Police claimed they confiscated videos only to safeguard the evidence.

Oh, please.

That stench you smell is the reek of official hypocrisy. Because the same police who so violently and vividly resist being recorded in the performance of their duties have no compunction about using the same technology against you and me, from the speed camera that catches you when you go flying through the school zone to the new gizmo that reads your license plate and checks for warrants

If it is OK for police to use cameras to catch us in our misdeeds, why is it not OK for us to use cameras to catch police in theirs?

There is something chilling and totalitarian about this insistence that cops have the right to do as they wish without what amounts to public oversight. What is it they fear? After all, the officer who is being videotaped can protect himself by doing one simple thing:

His job.

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