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OUR VIEW

Videos continue to show body cameras carry powerful messages

The law enforcement body camera debate never seems to cease. We wrote back in April that video technology is everywhere in American public life, and it was bound to be part of policing in the future.

We still think that’s the ultimate route.

But the Oregon Legislature put the cart in front of the horse. Police chiefs in small cities like Hermiston and Pendleton, who were already using the technology or about ready to try it, have had second thoughts because of the cost. Some of the state regulations are unnecessarily burdensome, but we do think it’s important that cops have their cameras on during all interactions with the public. Serious questions about anonymity and right to privacy do then exist, and we imagine it will be extremely rare that the video would ever see public eyes — maybe once or twice in a cop’s career, if that. But if it should become public concern, that video must be public record.

In Oregon right now, that might not be the case.

In just the last few weeks, two more videos have surfaced that show how increasingly important body cameras are.

The first, in Texas, is a simple dash cam video, common technology in most police departments across the country. But what it shows is difficult to watch. The officer seems unnecessarily combative after pulling over a black woman for changing lanes without a signal. After expressing displeasure for being pulled over, she is soon pulled from the car and shot with a Taser, though she had no weapons and was not violent toward the officer. The woman, Sandra Bland, was later found dead in her jail cell. Coroner’s report: suicide.

Another, in Cincinnati, shows a campus cop doing his job well and then making a fatal error.

He pulls over a driver for not having a license plate. He finds a pint of gin at the driver’s feet. The

driver is evasive when asked to produce his ID. But there seems to be no escalation from the officer, who calmly repeats his commands.

That has to be frustrating, and police officers deal with such people over and over again in the course of a shift and a career. But this encounter turned deadly just moments later when the man tried to start the car and the officer shot him in the head, killing him. The officer claimed initially that the man was trying to run him over with the car, but the body cam clearly shows that’s not the case. The officer was fired and charged with murder shortly after the video was released.

These videos make us cringe. And each one that is released should remind us how powerful they can be to move public opinion and, we hope, improve policing.

It bears repeating: police officers up and down the line are some of the best men and women we have in this country. But even they can benefit from a close eye on their work and the understanding that as employees outfitted and armed by the government, they must be held accountable for their actions. The faster bad apples are removed, the healthier the rest of the bunch is.

Hermiston police chief Jason Edmiston told the *East Oregonian* that policing is not a black-and-white job, it’s all shades of gray. And he worries that the nuance of the job does not come through on just a few moments of video. He and Pendleton chief Stuart Roberts worry about the cost and the labor needed to make sure the video collection and dissemination is done in accordance with state laws.

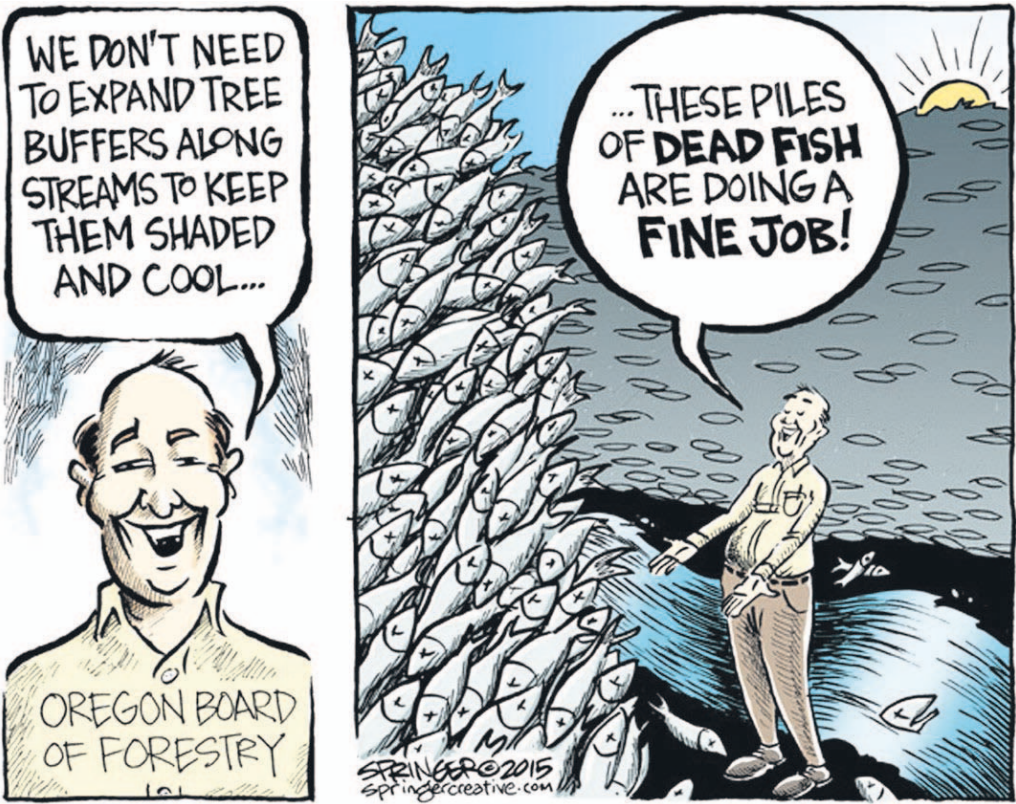
It’s understandable. Certainly, it’s an insanely difficult and complicated job. But video can actually cut through the complications pretty darn well. It can capture in black and white when police officers screw up. The more they are in use, though, the cameras could actually help show that serious errors are becoming more rare.

Cameras on cops are important for the public and police.

Unsigned editorials are the opinion of the East Oregonian editorial board of Publisher Kathryn Brown, Managing Editor Daniel Wattenburger, and Opinion Page Editor Tim Trainor. Other columns, letters and cartoons on this page express the opinions of the authors and not necessarily that of the East Oregonian.

LETTERS POLICY

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OTHER VIEWS

Guns and the two Americas

The waves of mass shootings continue to roll over the United States like surf on the ship of state’s prow. Every few weeks now we get hit with a jolt of cold water. We shake and shudder, and then brace ourselves for the next one.

So we beat on — a nation whose people are 20 times more likely to die of gun violence than those of most other developed countries. The only thing extraordinary about mass shootings in America is how ordinary the killing grounds are — elementary schools, high schools, colleges, military recruitment centers, theaters, parks, churches.

Is no place safe? Actually, several places are. You want protection in a country that allows a deranged man to get an assault weapon to hunt down innocent people in a public space? Go to the airport — that bubble of gun-free security. Or go to a major league baseball game, or a stadium in the National Football League.

Our big league venues may be engaging only in security theater, as critics assert, but their owners don’t think so. They now mandate metal detectors to snag weapons, and most of them even ban off-duty cops from bringing guns to the games.

Nationwide, if you want to lessen your chances of getting shot, stay out of the South. The South is the most violent region in the United States and also the place with the highest rate of gun ownership. More guns, easily obtained by the mentally ill, religious fanatics and anti-government extremists, mean more gun deaths.

Better to go to a city or state with gun restrictions, at least if you’re playing the odds. Most of the states with tighter gun laws have fewer gun deaths.

That’s one America, the slightly safer one. It includes government gun-screened zones like airports, courthouses and many high schools. But more significantly, it also covers property used by our most popular obsession, pro football — the free market at work.

The other America is an open-fire zone, backed by politicians who think it should be even more crowded with average people parading around with lethal weapons. Just after the tragedy in a Louisiana theater a week ago — a shooting by a hate-filled man who was able to legally obtain a gun despite a history of mental illness — Rick Perry called gun-free zones a bad idea.

In his view, echoing that of the fanatics who own the Republican Party by intimidation, everyone should be armed, everywhere. Once a shooting starts, the bad guy with the gun will be killed by the good guy with the gun, somehow able to get a draw on the shooter in a darkened theater or behind a pew in church.



TIMOTHY EGAN
Comment

This scenario almost never happens. The logic is nonsense, the odds of a perfectly timed counter-killer getting the drop on the evil killer unlikely. And even when such a situation does happen, as in the Tucson shooting of 2011, the armed citizen who jumps into the melee can pose a mortal threat to others. In Tucson, an innocent person came within seconds of getting shot by an armed bystander who wasn’t sure whom to shoot.

Most gun-free zones, like the theater in Lafayette, Louisiana, are not gun-free at all. They have no metal detectors or screening — that would cost too much, the theater owners claim. Gun-free is a suggestion, and therefore a misnomer. Eventually, the more prosperous theaters in better communities will pay for metal detectors, further setting apart the two Americas in our age of mass shootings.

The Mall of America — more than 500 stores in 4 miles of retail space, drawing 40 million annual visitors to a climate-controlled part of Minnesota — is trying to be a gun-free zone. “Guns are banned on these premises” is the mall’s official policy.

If the mall took up Rick Perry’s suggestion, shoppers could roam among the chain stores packing heat, ready for a shootout.

The owners of that vast operation, similar to those who stage concerts and pro sports, think otherwise. The mall has a security force of more than 100 people. Yeah — I hear the joke about the feckless mall cops. But the Mall of America trusts them more than well-armed shoppers to protect people, as they should.

Surprising though it may seem, gun ownership is declining overall in the United States. We are still awash with weapons — nearly a third of all American households have an adult with a gun. But that’s down from nearly half of all households in 1973.

What we’re moving toward, then, are regions that are safer than others, and public spaces that are safer than others, led by private enterprise, shunning the gun crazies who want everyone armed. The new reality comes with the inconvenience and hassle of screening and pat-downs similar to the routines at airports — enforced gun-free zones, not mere suggestions.

As a way to make everyday life seem less frightening, the new reality is absurd. But that’s the cost, apparently, of an extreme interpretation of a constitutional amendment designed to fend off British tyranny, a freedom that has become a tyranny in itself.

■

Timothy Egan worked for 18 years as a writer for The New York Times, first as the Pacific Northwest correspondent, then as a national enterprise reporter.

What we are moving toward are regions that are safer than others, led by private enterprise, shunning gun crazies who want everyone armed.

Trust scientists, not activists on issues

There are continued articles about marijuana and GMO labeling. Both views are about products we consume. As a wheat farmer I’m very concerned about how much science is not readily known.

We, as farmers, are very aware of the current science that relates to pesticides and the varieties that are developed for wheat. They have changed much over my lifetime and we as producers are very dependent upon the latest research that is being done. When we study chemistry we learn some about what scientists do.

It seems that leaders of some groups look for issues that will enable them to be a spokesman for others while looking for money and power. This has resulted in political bills such as Ballot Measure 92 in Oregon, which was defeated after much money was spent in the last legislature. In the meantime, the U.S. House has just recently passed a bill called the

“Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015 (HR 1599).” This bill creates a federal standard for the voluntary labeling of foods, which can counter state and local laws.

All this activism makes me nervous, as I believe that our current scientists are fully full-time working at it and know what they are doing. Just believe them.

Donald Peterson
Pendleton

Council created crisis to get taxpayer money

The first thing politicians do is create a crisis, then ask for more money. The Pendleton City Council made no effort to cut anything in this year’s budget. They knew long before they approved the budget that the city’s priorities needed to be changed. Are we to believe that we had to pay consultants to tell us that some of our water and sewer lines are 100 years old? In addition, I guess we had to pay another consultant to tell us our roads need repairs. Don’t we have two city engineers

for this?

On another matter, it seems as some on the city council do not want input from anyone, except someone who agrees with them at council meetings. Council President Neil Brown and Councilman Al Plute want me to go to the city staff before talking to the council.

Even the San Francisco City Council lets Fox News speak at its meetings.

Rex J. Morehouse
Pendleton

Starkey Forest essential to science

Since it was founded for research purposes in 1940, much has been said about the Starkey Experimental Forest & Range in the Blue Mountains near La Grande.

It has not ignored controversy in its research. Indeed, ongoing research on motorized and non-motorized access to our public lands, road densities, and the response of elk to these human

activities has stirred up a hornet’s nest in some circles.

Groups such as Backcountry Hunters & Anglers appreciate Starkey’s science-based approach to the management of our national forests and we strongly support its continuing efforts.

Our members know that those of us who generally avoid motorized areas to hunt elk have better success rates. These areas also represent the best of the backcountry solitude we seek and want to hand down to the next generation.

While access is essential, we strongly urge land managers at the USFS to reduce road redundancies where possible as they consider revision plans for the Blue Mountain forests.

Motorized travel in our forests must be compatible with the needs of wildlife and the health of the habitat. There is a place for motorized use as well as a place for non-motorized. We urge ATV users to stay on designated trails and avoid illegal cross country travel.

New Starkey research into

the mule deer population decline is also welcome news. And new research into the impact of predators such as bear and cougar can’t and won’t be ignored at Starkey and could have a major impact on hunters.

Research is never perfect, but the bottom line is Starkey is adding value to our public lands by providing a roadmap for their best use by all groups. We thank them for their efforts.

Brian Jennings, outreach coordinator
Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
Bend

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