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Between confrontation and mutual non-interference: Interactional (dis)alignment in openings of encounters between police and copwatchers

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Abstract

The proliferation of smartphone cameras and other portable recording devices has enabled the rise of so-called ‘copwatching’, people filming police-citizen encounters with the primary aim of increasing police accountability. Interactions between copwatchers and police officers generally take place under conditions of mutual mistrust and regularly lead to heated arguments over the recording activity and its precise modalities. Using conversation analysis, this article examines video recordings of encounters between police and copwatchers, focusing on how disalignment concerning the recording activity regularly manifests between them already during the opening phases of their interactions. We describe the interactional work that goes into organizing the pre-beginning and opening phases of these encounters and take stock of actions that recurrently engender disagreement and contention between law enforcement officers and videographers. Data come from recordings made by copwatchers and police officers’ body-worn cameras during public police operations in the US and the UK. (Conversation analysis, openings, police, copwatching, video recording, disalignment, disagreement)

Introduction and background

The ubiquity of smartphone cameras and other commercially available recording devices has enabled the rise of so-called ‘copwatching’. Individuals and groups engaged in copwatching observe, document, and on occasion intervene in police activities in public, creating video recordings of their actions and sharing them on social media. Copwatchers primarily understand the activity as a method for increasing police visibility and, thereby, accountability through the independent (i.e. non-state-controlled) documentation and publicization of police (mis)conduct, especially as regards the use of force (Goldsmith 2010; Kelly 2014; Farmer 2016; Simonson 2016; Walker & Archbold 2019). For many, the intended aim of this kind



of citizen-driven monitoring and exposure of police misconduct is to effect positive changes in policing by preventing future abuses of power.

The existence of copwatching points to deeper issues in police-community trust. Copwatchers' task of 'watching the watchers' is premised on citizens' doubts as to whether police actions are always justified or legitimate (Wall & Linnemann 2014:142; see also Farmer 2016:106–109; Simonson 2016). Individuals' motivations for copwatching include negative experiences with police (both personal and vicarious), unjust (racial/ethnic) targeting, as well as principled commitments to political stances, social justice activism, or legal consciousness (Farmer 2016:ch. 4).¹ This form of video-activism has been identified as a paradigmatic form of 'sousveillance' (Mann, Nolan, & Wellman 2003), a concept which has been researched largely in terms of the subversion of power and authority in police relations with citizens and communities (Newell 2020).

Drawing on ethnographic, interview-, and survey-based methodologies, criminologists have documented the (perceived) impact of bystander video on police work (e.g. Sandhu & Haggerty 2015; Farmer 2016; Sandhu 2016; Newell 2019). Officers cite both practical and 'information political' problems with such video recordings (Newell 2019). As for their practical impact, many officers express concerns about having filming bystanders on the scene, worrying about a possible 'los[s of] control of the immediate interaction and incident response' (Newell 2019:68). Above all, these worries relate to bystander interference and associated safety-related concerns. The sheer presence of bystanders, and the need to monitor them, can therefore be experienced as a distraction from already tense situations. Such diversions are perceived as a safety hazard in their own right and may affect officers' ability to do their job properly (Newell 2019:68–69). Officers also report worries about the inflammatory effect that (filming) bystanders may have in engaging with suspects, witnesses, or others on the scene (Newell 2019), provoking defensive, disrespectful, and even outright hostile behavior (Huey, Walby, & Doyle 2006:155–56; Farmer 2016; Sandhu & Haggerty 2017:83). Some officers also bemoan that copwatching embodies a general suspicion of misconduct that is, in their view, unwarranted, while others voice concerns that it can lead to increased self-awareness, self-monitoring, and double-thinking (Farmer 2016:102), which may hinder quick decision-making, especially in tense situations that may turn violent or involve the use of force (Brown 2016).

Another major source of reservations amongst police officers about bystander video relates to their reputational effects and 'information politics' (Newell 2019:61). They especially lament the loss of control over the dissemination of the footage and the potential for a (deliberate) misrepresentation of police work in it (e.g. through selective editing and partisan framing). These concerns intermingle with a dominant belief within the police force that the general public does not understand police work (very well) anyway, which, if compounded by the partial and decontextualized character of bystander video, may potentially reinforce or increase negative attitudes towards the police in the court of public opinion (Goldsmith 2010:931; Wall & Linnemann 2014:139; Farmer 2016:71–72; Newell 2019:70).² Regarding copwatcher videos in particular—which often feature heated arguments about the ethics and legality of recording³—officers worry that citizens who watch these

videos may become convinced that they know how laws are to be enforced and, if approached by police, attempt to hold ‘street court’ rather than cooperating (Farmer 2016:68–69), thus feeding back into the practical considerations reviewed above.

In sum, studies suggest that copwatchers and police regard one another with a degree of mistrust. The activity of copwatching itself embodies a suspicion of the police and a desire to expose and correct problems in policing. And since ‘[t]rust is intertwined with willingness to cooperate’ (Farmer 2016:108), officers trying to deal with copwatchers face the practical problem of how to interact with someone who may not only be leery of the police and reluctant to engage with them (see also Llewellyn & Burrow 2008; Mondada 2022) but also unwilling to cooperate. Similarly, the (reported) experience of law enforcement is characterized by distrust and reservations. We therefore take these encounters to be predisposed to disalignment (see Stivers 2008). Yet, given that prior research is mostly based on interviews or surveys, just how such disalignment manifests interactionally, how it is ‘accountably talked [and acted] into being’ (Heritage 1984:290) through local sequences of actions, is less well understood (though see Kidwell 2018; Raymond, Jungleib, Zimmerman, & Jones 2022; Raymond, Chen, & Whitehead 2023; Buscariolli 2023a,b for other kinds of police-citizen encounters). Indeed, prior research on copwatching has recognized the need to ‘analyze and evaluate actual citizen-generated videos of police-public encounters’ (Farmer 2016:161) to better understand the interactional dynamics between them (see also Newell 2019:73).

The present article addresses this issue by using conversation analysis to examine how (dis)alignment concerning the recording activity emerges interactionally during the early moments of actual, real-life encounters between law enforcement officers (LEOs) and copwatching videographers (VGs). Our reasons for this particular focus are twofold. First, we can draw on a substantial amount of prior research about conversational openings, which has particular analytic payoffs. As pointed out by Schegloff (2005:464), ‘the accumulation of past work on conversational openings [has the benefit] that we know enough about that environment to use it as a sort of “culture medium” in which to examine other things’. And second, among these ‘other things’ that may be examined at this specific interactional juncture, matters of (dis)alignment are particularly salient for the setting under examination. As was observed by Kidwell (2018:292) in her study of police-citizen interactions:

[t]he early moments of interaction are an especially perspicuous site for examining alignment issues ... How participants make their way into interaction, and what they establish as the business of the interaction as a product of events prior to the actual initiation of interaction, conveys something about participants’ stance toward that business, their relationship to one another, and the tenor of the interaction to come.

As we hope to show, the particular alignments taken up by police officers and copwatching videographers in the course of entering and opening these encounters are rather distinct from a participation perspective. In what follows, we focus

specifically on LEO-initiated openings ($n = 175$) and describe the typical scenarios found in our database of recordings (see below). Our central aim is to provide a descriptive overview of how these parties organize the beginning of their encounters, with special attention to how they orient to and deal with matters of (dis)alignment between their projects. We conclude with a discussion of our findings with regard to how LEOs deal with 'sousveillance'-in-action.

Data and methods

Data for this study come from the Videography and Law Enforcement Database (VALED), which consists of video recordings of 155 episodes of police activity (~thirty hours) in public areas of the US and UK. These videos feature a variety of legal encounters ranging from the mundane (traffic stops, noise complaints, welfare checks) to the grievous (medical emergencies, raids, shootings) and were captured by a mixture of citizen recordings (copwatchers, bystanders, suspects, and independent journalists) and police body-worn cameras. Recordings made at 'mass events' involving substantial numbers of participants and situations where the videographer provoked interactions (e.g. by filming government premises or entering a public building) to create conflict with security/law enforcement (so-called First Amendment audits) were systematically excluded. VALED was compiled by the authors based on opportunistic collection and snowball sampling (in part via automatic algorithmic recommendation) of YouTube, Reddit, and other sites showing publicly available video of police operations. Videos were screened for initial interest based on title (e.g. titles such as "Manchester Police block filming and try to arrest me"), mouse-over previews, and other indications of potential relevance, such as the video being shot from a distance with officers huddled. Efforts were made to balance provenance of video between US ($n = 83$) and UK ($n = 72$) and type of legal encounter, so that any one form did not come to dominate. Videos were included in VALED if they (a) were a largely unedited video that preserved continuous footage of relevant interactional exchanges, and where (b) the act of recording was treated as problematic in some way. Because of this latter criterion, the typical VALED recording features arguments between police and copwatchers. For the present analysis, we excluded seventeen recordings in which the VG was also the suspect/detainee.

We systematically inspected VALED for all recorded openings between LEOs and VGs ($n = 234$), which we then narrowed down to only LEO-initiated openings in encounters between LEOs and filming bystanders/copwatchers ($n = 175$). Note that some videos contain more than one opening (e.g. if back up officers arrive on a scene and begin to engage with the VG), wherefore the overall number of openings is greater than the number of recordings. Openings were operationalized as a first verbal act aimed at transitioning from an unfocused encounter into a jointly focused interaction (Goffman 1963). We analyzed these openings using conversation analysis (Hoey & Kendrick 2018). Transcripts follow Jeffersonian (2004) conventions for verbal/vocal behavior and Mondada (2019) for visible behavior. All identifying information has been pseudonymized in the transcripts and associated images. Ethical approval for data processing and publishing was received from the

Ethical Committee Research of the Faculty of the Humanities at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (ETCO21.45).

Analysis

We present our findings starting with the pre-beginning activities that set the stage for this particular kind of legal encounter. We then show how LEOs have the choice between relatively minimal routine openings and more substantial ones. In the remainder of our analysis, we detail recurrent LEO actions, which we divide into more direct (recording obstructions, recording interdictions, departure directives) and indirect methods for problematizing the VG's recording activity (account solicitations, offers of assistance, relocation requests).

Pre-beginnings

Openings, whether by telephone or face-to-face, are typically preceded by a pre-beginning phase (Schegloff 1979; Whalen & Zimmerman 1987; Zimmerman 1992; Mondada 2009; De Stefani & Mondada 2018; Kidwell 2018), where participants undertake a range of actions to establish the conditions needed for entry into focused interaction. In co-present encounters in public, this typically involves the movement and positioning of bodies in space so as to achieve coordinated establishment of an interactional space (Mondada 2009). In encounters between police and copwatchers, however, pre-beginning activities usually take on a different shape. Rather than preparing the grounds for, and projecting the start of, focused interaction, copwatchers generally prioritize avoiding interaction with police (see also Llewellyn & Burrow 2008; Mondada 2022) in favor of documenting/recording police activity.⁴ These practices produce a peculiar interactional configuration that renders the openings of these encounters distinct from many others (cf. Pillet-Shore 2018 for an overview). As we show below, VGs' pre-beginning activities propose an asymmetric participation framework (Goodwin 2007) that only obliquely enables focused interaction between the parties.

Videographer approach and positioning. While the ways in which LEOs and VGs come into co-presence may vary, the prototypical case in our data consists of LEOs being engaged in an operation in public (traffic stop, welfare check, etc.) and the VG walking up to the scene. VGs sometimes actively seek out such occasions to record the police (e.g. by listening to police radio and following a call), but these occasions can also be more opportunistic or serendipitous in nature (e.g. VGs incidentally spot LEOs-in-action and decide to start filming then and there). We also find a mixture of these, as when VGs do a daily round in their neighborhood (Huey et al. 2006:152) or visit places to film whatever 'remarkable sightings' they come across. As they approach, VGs typically (try to) adopt a fairly stationary position that allows them to capture police activity on camera (i.e. a practically purposive visual angle), while also maintaining some distance from the scene itself, usually around three to ten meters away (see also Huey et al. 2006:153). The following images from a video shot by a copwatcher in California illustrate this kind of orbiting approach and border positioning.

(1) VALED_050, 00:00-00:17 (California, USA)



Figure 1. Typical VG approach and positioning: VG approaches scene with pre-present LEO and detainee (IA, direction marked by arrows and feet); VG walks toward circled area, which is some distance from the scene of interest (IB–IC); VG positions self and aims camera at scene (ID).

This kind of approach and positioning is an integral component of VGs doing ‘being an uninvolved observer’ (see Garfinkel & Sacks 1970). By adopting a stationary position near the border of police activity, VGs make themselves a relatively enduring feature of the scene and become recognizable as ‘bystanders’ rather than ‘passers-by’ (cf. Goffman 1979:8, 10). Moreover, by coming to the scene camera in hand, they display the opposite of the ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman 1963) that strangers ordinarily owe one another in public (Hirschauer 2005). At the same time, by remaining on the borderlands of the scene, they present themselves as mere ‘onlookers’ who, while recognizably monitoring (and recording) the ongoing operation, do not seek to physically interfere with it. This kind of self-positioning accommodates officers’ concerns around safety and interference—which are bound up with spatial proximity (Huey et al. 2006:156; Newell 2019:69)—and can thus be understood as an aligning move on part of the VGs. It projects no physical interference with the ongoing operation and allows LEOs to treat them just like any other uninvolved bystanders.

Though seemingly trivial, it is important to register that maintaining distance from a dynamic scene may require active ‘work’. In the following case (Figure 2), a VG has approached the scene of an arrest and assumed a stationary position at some distance from two LEOs and the suspect (Figure 2A). When the LEOs begin to move the suspect towards a wall, and in the direction of the VG (Figure 2B), the VG responds by moving out of their way to the other side of the street (Figures 2C–D) and repositioning himself there (Figures 2E–F). Notably, he initiates this repositioning on his own accord, thereby displaying a sensitivity to being potentially ‘in the way’. So, by moving ‘out of the way’, he works to avoid a possible involvement in the operation (cf. Hirschauer 2005:51), while also maintaining a visual angle that allows him to continue capturing the scene (Figures 2D–F).

(2) VALED_114, 00:50-00:59 (Midlands, UK)

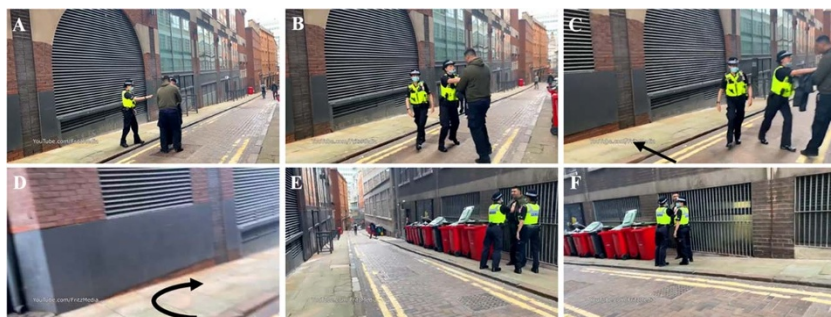


Figure 2. VG moving 'out of the way' of an arrest. Arrows in C–D mark the VG's movement and repositioning.

Another part of doing 'being an uninvolved observer' is seen in how VGs typically remain silent during their approach and positioning.⁵ Where they do produce talk, this often serves to provide commentary for the virtual/future audience and is done at a volume that prevents it from being hearable as addressing the LEO(s) (cf. Goffman 1964:136). While such sustained silence renders their approach and co-presence recognizably distinct from other kinds of social encounters (Kendon 1990; Mondada 2009, 2022; Hoey 2023; see Pillet-Shore 2018 for an overview), their silence is akin to how strangers in elevators have 'undoing presence' as one of their practical tasks in enacting mutual indifference (Hirschauer 2005:61). But whereas elevator riders' silence is coupled with gaze avoidance, VGs' silence is notably paired with targeted recording/monitoring of others. As such, VG approaches are recognizable as approaches-for-observation rather than approaches-for-interaction: they prioritize monitoring/recording police activity, project no physical interference with it, and display limited (if any) availability for, or interest in, interaction with the LEOs.

Sighting. A second key element of the pre-beginning phase and another precondition for interaction consists in the parties becoming mutually aware of one another. In encounters between LEOs and copwatchers, this process is typically characterized by a structural asymmetry which shapes the emerging participation framework. Whereas copwatchers will already have spotted LEOs-in-action when they come to a scene and begin recording, LEOs are often initially unaware of their presence, typically sighting them only in the course of monitoring their surroundings (Farmer 2016:97; Brown 2016:303). This asymmetry rests, in part, on 'an important operational attribute of modern Western-style policing' (Goldsmith 2010:915), namely, the visibility of police personnel: officers in recognizable uniforms, often conspicuously positioned in public areas, driving around in marked vehicles. It also emerges via the relative undetectability of the VG, who often approaches scenes of police activity in silence. This is seen in [extract \(3\)](#) below. Here, two LEOs are engaged in a traffic stop at night: LEO1 has just started searching the driver's car and LEO2 is there as backup. The transcript begins when LEO2 summons LEO1 to inform him of someone approaching them from the rear side. The recorded footage is from LEO1's body-worn camera (BWC).

(3) VALED_130, 06:09-06:20 (Maryland, USA)

1 LEO2: ()

2 LEO1: Yo_

3 (0.3)

4 LEO2: I 'unno what this guy's doin'.&(0.2) ()

leo1 &walks to rear end of car
begins to approach VG->>

5 (1.1)

6 LEO1: ((activates radio)) (0.4) forty one oh five.#

fig #3

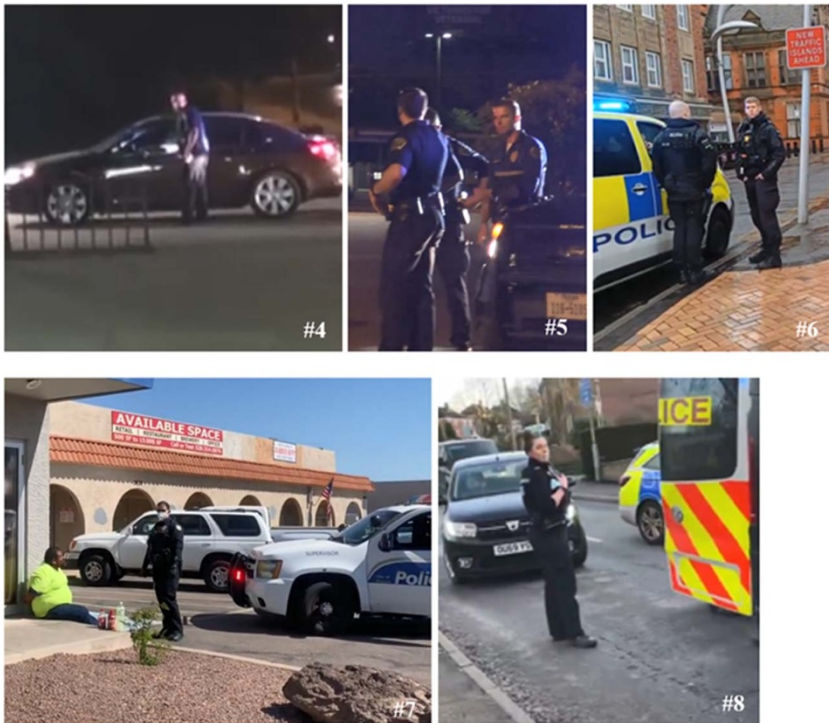
7 (ocean king,) another=u:h (0.2) person's walking up on

8 us °now°.



Figure 3. Approaching person (circled) is spotted by LEO2 (dotted line) and approached by LEO1 (footsteps and solid line).

This extract shows how spotting can happen early, while the VG is still approaching the scene. More commonly, it happens later, after the VG has come to a stationary position (see Figure 1D). LEOs often spot the VG as part of their general apperception and monitoring of the scene, but their noticings may also be occasioned by VG movement, by audible talk that VGs produce for their recording, or by suspects' orientations towards them. To the VG (and the outside observer), it may not always be transparent if and when they have been spotted. Occasionally, however, their sightings are recognizable as sudden bodily-visual (re)orientations towards the VG (e.g. redirections of gaze, lateral head turns, body torque). Figures 4–8 illustrate such sightings (see also Figure 1D).



Figures 4–8. LEOs sighting the VG.

The asymmetric organization of sightings relates to the fact that these parties do not in the first place seek to accomplish reciprocal visual accessibility. Rather than making themselves visible and monitorable for one another so as to enable coordinated entry to interaction, as with the pre-beginnings of many other social encounters (Pillet-Shore 2018), here the parties are more invested in the visibility and monitorability of the OTHER. This shapes the organization of the pre-beginning phase and, as we see below, has repercussions for how the participants engage with one another later on, too.

Occasion-relevant categorization. Coupled with sighting is the practical matter of categorizing the sighted party in an occasion-relevant way. And similar to sighting, there is an asymmetry here in categorization: VGs have already categorized police officers as such (indeed, this is required to engage in copwatching in the first place), but LEOs must practically categorize the (person who turns out to be a) VG. To determine this, LEOs engage in split-second, online categorization work (Mondada 2009:1983; see also De Stefani & Mondada 2018:250–53) based on visual appearances (Sacks 1972) and relying on categories recognizable ‘at a glance’ (Jayyusi 1984:68–70). Such categorization is addressed to answering questions like ‘what kind of person is this?’, ‘what are they holding?’, and ‘what are they doing (here)?’. More specifically, LEOs must instantaneously determine whether the person constitutes a threat to their safety or not. This categorization may pose difficulties in the case of VGs, who wield small (often black or shiny) objects aimed toward the officers

(see accounts in Wall & Linnemann 2014:135; Newell 2019:68). And low visibility, for instance during nighttime operations, may compound these difficulties, as in the following case. Here, a copwatcher is already present at the scene (reportedly his neighborhood) as the officers arrive. Just before the transcript, the VG approached three arriving police cars, raised his camera, and pointed it towards them. This then occasions reactive measures from LEO1, who draws his gun and aims it at the VG.

(4) VALED_071, 00:07-00:28 (California, USA)

1 % (1.2) % (1.2) %
leo1 %opens door %plants one foot outside vehicle, gazes at VG%
2 LEO?: %(We got a)
leo1 %draws gun, aims at VG->
3 LEO1: #Put it down. Put ih- %(.) whadday[ou %doi-]
->%lowers gun----%plants 2nd foot->
fig #9
4 VG: [it's NOT M]E MA:N_
5 LEO1: %Whadda you doin'.%That's REALLY% SMART.
%exits vehicle-----%closes door---%walks twd VG->>
6 VG: it's a FUCKING CA:M'RA.
7 LEO1: >Okay.< How am I supposed to kno:w that.= (when/we're)
8 goin' to a (godd[amn dark-])
9 VG: [DON']T POINT YOUR FUCKING GUN AT
10 ME MA:N;

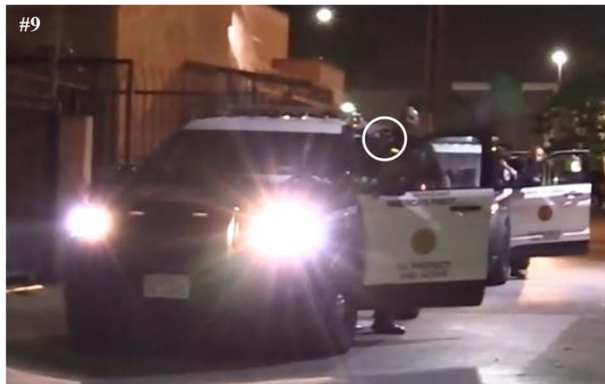


Figure 9. LEO points gun at VG.

This encounter could have ended fatally for the VG. The LEO’s gunpoint from behind his car door (Figure 9) and his immediate command to “Put it down” (line 3) indicate that he initially mistook the VG’s camera for a weapon. It appears that he

revises this (mis)apprehension as he cuts off his repeated command (line 3), lowers his gun, and exits the vehicle. Moreover, rather than issuing further commands, he begins to admonish the VG for his misleading appearance (lines 3–5). Examples like this show how LEOs must make split-second decisions based on visual-perceptual appearances and the categorial identifications they afford. Especially with persons pointing objects at LEOs, visually determining what they are doing and whether they pose a threat may not always be straightforward.

The pre-beginning components we have described provide for potential interaction between LEO(s) and VG(s) in a rather oblique sort of way. As we have shown, VGs' pre-beginning activities—silent approach, peripheral positioning, and early sighting/categorizing—propose an asymmetric participation framework in which the observation and recording of police activity is prioritized over interaction with police. Though doing 'being an uninvolved observer' sets up a scene of unidirectional monitoring, we suggest that it weakly aligns with police activities, insofar as it recognizably proposes non-interference with them. At the same time, the participation framework proposed by VGs instates them as documenting observers rather than passers-by. Their persistence on the scene and the coupling of their actions to those of the police (see extract (2)) thus also bring them into the orbit of police activity. And by positioning themselves within some policeable perimeter, VGs become potentially policeable subjects. This sets up a problem for LEOs as to whether and how to engage VGs. We turn to this problem next.

Minimal openings vs. substantive openings

In opening an encounter with someone recording them, police officers may be brief in doing so, or they may produce something more substantial. Given their involvements in ongoing operations, such decisions of whether, when, and how to engage the VG are informed by considerations related to the practical coordination of multiple activities (Haddington, Keisanen, Mondada, & Nevile 2014). Perhaps most minimally we see this in how openings may be done 'in passing' or as an 'aside', like in Figure 10 below. Here, the LEO is returning to his patrol car and simply looking at and waving to the VG from the other side of the road after having spotted him. This constitutes the entirety of their interaction with one another (see also Sacks 1992:553–54) and displays LEO's prioritization of his main activity over that of engaging with the VG beyond an acknowledgement/greeting.



Figure 10. LEO minimally engaging the VG with a look and wave done in passing from across the street.

With the mere acknowledgment of the VG's (enduring) presence, the LEO ratifies the VG's participatory status as an 'uninvolved observer'. The use of such casual and designedly routine greetings or pro-forma personal state inquiries (Schegloff 1986; Duranti 1997) is also seen in [extract \(5\)](#), which consists of reciprocal 'How are you'-type turns and a compliment-appreciation sequence.

(5) VALED_050, 00:18-00:22 (California, USA)

LEO1: 't's up. How're you. =

VG: = 't's goin' on ma:(n)_

LEO1: Nice shirt ma:n.

VG: 'pre:ciate it.

Such minimal and routine forms of engagement can be considered aligning because they embody MUTUAL non-interference and enable 'peaceful coexistence' between LEOs and VGs. They constitute ways of interactionally 'enacting indifference' (Hirschauer 2005:59) by attending to the situation as 'business-as-usual'. We must note, though, that even such minimal engagement accredits the VG a special status in the setting, since other, non-filming bystanders ordinarily remain unaddressed in our data.

Such minimal, routine exchanges happen to be rare in our data. Fewer than half of LEO-initiated openings in VALED feature routine opening actions like greetings or personal state inquiries as (part of) the first turn or at all. Instead, our data regularly show more substantive openings.

With more substantive openings, LEOs either dispense with routine openings completely in favor of immediately problematizing the recording activity, or they combine routine opening items with problematizing actions in the same turn (see De Stefani & Mondada 2018:250 on public encounters between strangers). Such opening actions disalign with the VG's project of remaining an uninvolved observer, because they reflexively transform the situation into one in which VGs are now in

an encounter with the police as a policeable subject (Heritage 1984:106–10), which is something the VGs—like most ordinary citizens—generally prefer to avoid (Kidwell 2018:292). Substantive openings thus embody an elementary disalignment between the VG's self-imposed role of 'uninvolved observer' and an other-imposed role of 'policeable subject' (i.e. they contest the participation framework proposed by the VG's pre-beginning activities). This elementary disalignment may engender uncooperative or even antagonistic behavior by VGs (compare Goodwin 2007:62–68), as is seen in [extract \(6\)](#). This takes place after the VG has approached the scene of an arrest and the LEO has spotted him. The entire exchange is done as 'cross-play' (Goffman 1979:9); the LEO remains near the detainee ([Figure 11](#)) and engages with the VG as an 'ancillary involvement' through her use of body torque (Schegloff 1998).

(6) VALED_137, 00:36-01:02 (Arizona, USA)

- 1 LEO1: ↑^HI.
- 2 (1.5)
- 3 VG: ((commentary for virtual audience)) We got a stupidvi:sor,
- 4 LEO1: ((continues to talk inaudibly to DET))
- 5 % (2.3) %& (0.5)
- vg %takes 3 steps fwd on sidewalk%stops and turns->
- leo1 &turns head, looks at VG->>
- 6 VG: ((commentary for virtual audience)) We got one detai:ned,%
- >%
- 7 (2.6)
- 8 LEO1: (Do you need help_i)
- 9 (5.1)
- 10 LEO1: [DO YOU NEED HE:LP?]
- 11 VG: [We got one on the]ground.
- 12 (0.8) & (0.3)
- leo1 &cup's hand behind ear->>
- 13 VG: #D'Z IT FUCKIN' LOOK ↑LIKE I NEED HE:LP?
- fig #11



Figure 11. LEO cups ear to hear VG.

From the start of this interaction, we see a fundamental disalignment between LEO and VG in their willingness to engage one another. The LEO's initial greeting (line 1) goes unreciprocated (line 2) as the VG instead produces live commentary for his virtual audience (lines 3 and 6). Still, the LEO attempts to engage the VG by issuing an offer of assistance, which, after a five second gap, she reissues with greater intensity (lines 8–10). Her pursuit is overlapped by the VG's talk (line 11), which the LEO treats as inaudible talk addressed to her: she cups her hand behind her ear to initiate repair (line 12) (Mortensen 2016). At this point, the VG responds with a firm dismissal of her offer, treating it not only as having been unsolicited but also as being situationally inappropriate (line 13). In this case, then, the more substantive opening builds upon and occasions even more disaligning actions and orientations.

In most of the substantive openings in our collection ($n = 63$), LEOs approach the VG, and in doing so, they either suspend their ongoing operation entirely or seize a moment when they are not principally involved in it (e.g. when serving as backup). By placing the spotlight of police attention on the VG in a separate focused encounter, LEOs strongly disalign with the VG's proposed participatory status as 'uninvolved observer'. Moreover, as shown below, their approaches almost always involve problematizing the VG's recording activity in some way, leading to prolonged arguments about legality, ethics, rights, and so forth. In what follows, we examine how certain types of actions by LEOs can further manifest disalignment regarding the parties' competing agendas, projects, and concerns.

LEO (opening) actions that directly problematize VG recording

Our data showed that LEOs routinely behaved in ways that straightforwardly problematized the act of recording at the start of their encounters with VGs. We describe three of these below: recording obstructions, recording interdictions, and departure directives.

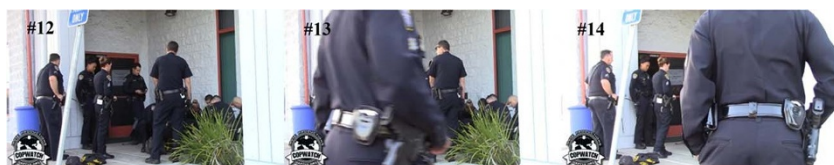
Recording obstructions. LEOs may deal with VGs by undertaking to obstruct their recording activity. Drawing on embodied and/or material resources, these techniques are independent of any verbal engagement with the VG and may be deployed with or without talk. That is, they may be a component of pre-beginnings, openings, or any other phase of the encounter.

Two obstructive techniques recurred in our data: physical blocking (LEOs obstructing the view of the camera with their bodies, hands, or cars) and ‘blinding’ (incapacitating the camera by shining a flashlight or patrol car spotlight towards its lens) (see also Simonson 2016:430–31). Blocking requires LEOs to be mobile and is thus typically done by those who are not principally involved in the main operation (i.e. backup officers). Blinding is usually done during nighttime operations and therefore affords a kind of ‘official’ accountability (see below).

An instance of blocking appears in [extract \(7\)](#) below. Here, a VG has assumed a stationary position at some distance from a group of LEOs, who are huddled around a detainee in front of a police station. The transcript begins with one LEO walking into the VG's shot and positioning himself between the camera and the police huddle (line 1, [Figures 12–14](#)). This is recognizable as blocking (and comes to be treated as such) due to its conspicuous obstruction of the recording.

(7) VALED_146, 01:02-01:15 (California, USA)

- 1 # (0.8) # (1.2) # (0.3)
fig #12 #13 #14
2 VG: Why you gotta blo:ck my (0.1) & (0.2) view.
leo &turns around, walks twd VG->
3 LEO: Wuh=I'm free to stand wherever I ↑like to stand.
4 Th[at's why.]
5 VG: [You are.]
6 (.)
7 VG: +But &you did that intentionally.
+moves laterally left->
leo ->&
8 LEO: No I'll stand wherever I ↑like to st[a:nd.]
9 VG: [Yeh.]+
->+
10 (0.7)
11 VG: &'t's a+n obstruction ~o:f my:~ (0.2) freedom of &press ma:n,
+moves laterally right->>
leo &walks into shot, turns back twd VG-----&



Figures 12–14. LEO blocking camera.

Being (recognizably) deployed as obstructive measures, blocking and blinding clearly embody disalignment with regard to the recording activity. For this reason, they typically engender VG complaints or complaint-implicative reactions, as we see in VG's complaint-implicative account solicitation (line 2) and accusation of willful intent (line 7). Such obstructions are also potentially problematic from a legal standpoint. They can be construed as 'prior restraint' of freedom of press (e.g. Cornell Law School n.d.), which, indeed, the VG invokes here as part of the emerging argument (line 11). At the same time, recording obstructions may be defeasible (see lines 3 and 8) if presented as merely incidental or unintentionally obstructive. They may even be defended as functional: blocking may simply be a part of 'huddling together' or self-grooming, and blinding may simply be an unavoidable consequence of dealing with poor visibility. In [extract \(7\)](#), LEO's initial positioning with his back to the VG permits an account whereby he was not blocking the VG's view but merely monitoring the detainee as part of his job.

Recording interdictions. Among the verbal actions that LEOs use to directly problematize VG activities, we find recording interdictions ($n = 17$), that is, explicit requests or directives to not record or to discontinue recording. Getting somebody to abandon what they are currently doing, thereby treating it as unwanted or undesirable, clearly embodies disalignment with that activity. Compared to recording obstructions, which may remain defeasible, recording interdictions officially go 'on record' as disaligning moves. However, given that filming in public is lawful and generally harmless, such interdictions are equally problematic. Indeed, VGs routinely resist and/or challenge them, typically with reference to the legality of their actions. Consider [extract \(8\)](#), which shows three LEOs who have detained a man on a busy daytime street, with the VG standing nearby on the pavement. Another bystander (potentially a friend of the detainee) is also involved in this exchange, which begins as LEO3 loosens the detainee's handcuffs.

(8) VALED_122, 00:34-00:42 (South England, UK)

1 (0.6)

2 LEO1: ((to LEO2)) ((inaudible)) #

fig #15



Figure 17.

- 7 (0.4)
 8 VG: [No I'm sorry.]
 9 BYS: [Can you stop plea]se. Can you s[top. (0.5) Please.]
 10 VG: [(nuh) sorry sorry.]
 11 VG: I'm in public.

Here, LEO1 appears to notice that the VG is filming the arrest as she steps towards LEO2 to say something to him (lines 2–4, Figures 15–16), whereupon she immediately issues a recording interdiction “C’n you: stop please” (line 6). This request is accompanied by a manual ‘stopping’ gesture (itself a form of blocking; Figure 17) and is echoed by another bystander, who joins the exchange by repeating the request twice (line 9). In response to these interdictions, the VG politely refuses the request (lines 8, 10), appending a reference to being “in public” as an account for his refusal (line 11). His place reference is doubly indexical: it not only invokes the VG’s legal right to record in public but also treats that connection (between being in public and recording lawfully) as transparent enough for “I’m in public” to work as a self-explanatory warrant for his refusal. That is, he treats the local legal framework as ‘knowable’ (cf. Raymond et al. 2022) and not requiring further explication.

For officers, this presumption appears to be generally justified, as they, by and large, claim awareness of citizens’ right to record the police in public (e.g. Farmer 2016:96). However, under certain circumstances LEOs may nonetheless deem it appropriate, useful, or necessary to issue recording interdictions. In extract (9), two LEOs are dealing with a detainee who had swung a hammer at a delivery driver. The VG has just started filming, positioning himself in the adjacent parking lot, when LEO1 approaches him with a recommendation not to film (line 3).

(9) VALED_125, 00:07-00:16 (South England, UK)

- 1 DET: ((inaudible))
- 2 LEO2: Yes [()]
- 3 LEO1: ['t's prob'ly: best not to fi:lm.]
- 4 (0.3)
- 5 VG: .h It's public [da:rling. An' I'm allowed]=
- 6 LEO1: [D'ju wanna come over he:re.]=
- 7 VG: =[to. + (0.3) [h. .h heh h.]
- 8 LEO1: =[↑NO: +I ↑kno:w you are.[Do you (underst-/wan'duh st-)]
- vg +moves twd sidewalk->>
- 9 LEO1: cuz I don' wan' you to aggravate the situ:ation. =We're
- 10 already dealing with #tha:t#. Yeah?

This interdiction is designed as a recommendation (“‘t’s prob’ly: best not to fi:lm”), which moderates its deontic force and frames it as a non-enforceable matter. Still, the VG resists the recommendation with reference to his right to record in public (lines 5, 7), which the LEO acknowledges as known (line 8). Indeed, the LEO’s initial “NO” marks her turn as undertaking third-position repair and serves to reject the VG’s displayed treatment of her as unaware of his right to record (Schegloff 1992). Note further that, at this point in the sequence, the LEO has already taken a different tack by asking the VG to reposition himself in line 6 (see *Relocation attempts* below). And although the VG has resisted the LEO’s recording interdiction, he does comply with her relocation request by moving towards the pavement while the LEO acknowledges his right to record (lines 7–8). In light of the LEO’s claim to be aware of the VG’s right to record, her initial recommendation may be seen as having been made ‘against her better judgment’. We see this in lines 9–10, where the LEO mobilizes aspects of the situation and her concern for its possible escalation as grounds for her initial recommendation (and the relocation request as an alternative solution).

On some occasions, rather than being provided post-hoc in the face of VG resistance, accounts are directly built into the recording interdiction. In *extract (10)*, the LEO addresses the VG shortly after having spotted him (see *Figure 6*) and issues the following recording interdiction.

(10) VALED_133, 00:54-01:03 (Midlands, UK)

- 1 LEO1: I ca:n’t stop you fi:lm_{in}’, (0.2) But I suggest that (.)
- 2 you give someone some dignity,
- 3 (0.2)
- 4 LEO1: (You/We’ve been-) (0.6) You don’t need to be fi_{lm}in’
- 5 our intera:ction °(with him/them.)°
- 6 (0.5)
- 7 LEO1: We’re tryin’duh he:lp him.
- 8 (1.3)

Here, too, the LEO acknowledges the VG's right to record by framing the interdiction as a non-enforceable suggestion (lines 1–2). Moreover, an account is directly built into the suggestion: the LEO invokes the compromised dignity of the person they are dealing with (lines 1–2) and appeals to a shared morality by characterizing the VG's filming as counterproductive to this end (lines 4–5). The LEO then incrementally expands his turn with an assurance of their benevolent motives (“We’re tryin’duh he:lp him”, line 7). This reassurance engages with, and seeks to dispel, a possible suspicion or mistrust the VG might hold towards the police and treats it as what motivates his filming. By invoking unwarranted mistrust towards someone who ‘only means well’, this turn expansion ups the moral ante and indirectly condemns the recording activity as unnecessarily invasive.

These cases show that many LEOs are aware of citizens’ right to record the police in public and orient to recording interdictions as being accountable actions. And yet, for the police, the situational specifics (e.g. an aggravated or distressed subject) may still warrant an interdiction, with corresponding accounts being built into or appended to those actions. Such interdictions are also commonly framed as requests, suggestions, or recommendations rather than as commands or orders.⁶ But regardless of their formatting, since recording interdictions seek to stop the recording, and thus work against the VGs’ objectives, they are routinely met with resistance and manifest disalignment.

Departure directives. Practically equivalent to recording interdictions are departure directives (n = 9), with which LEOs tell the VG to ‘move on’ or otherwise leave the scene, often produced in passing or from afar. Like recording interdictions, such directives (if complied with) prevent the possibility of further recording, and are therefore disaligning with the VG’s core objective. And indeed, VGs seem to respond to such directives with the same kind of resistance seen above. Below, for instance, a VG is filming from afar and is accosted by LEO1, who directs him to “Go on mate” and “Carry on” (line 1).

(11) VALED_013, 01:17–01:24 (North England, UK)

- 1 LEO1: ((from afar) **Go on mate, Carry on.**
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 VG: I c’n- (.) PUBLIC PLACE MATE.
- 4 LEO1: Say again?
- 5 VG: PUBLIC PLA: [CE.] (0.7) [Don’t teh-]
- 6 LEO1: [I k]now. I know, [(Just)] to respect
- 7 this gentleman’s privacy.=That’s a:ll.

These departure directives convey ‘moving on’ or ‘not lingering’ rather than (genuine or sarcastic) encouragement of the VG’s filming. The VG responds by referring to his right to record in public (similar to [extract \(8\)–\(9\)](#)). LEO1 acknowledges this with a multiple saying (Stivers 2004) “I know I know”, before accounting for the directive nonetheless with reference to the subject’s privacy (lines 6–7, compare to [extract \(10\)](#)). More generally, departure directives essentially impinge on the VG’s right to move freely in public places. Perhaps for this reason, they are rather rare

in our data ($n = 9$), with roughly half ($n = 4$) issued in subsequent (re)openings and issued on behalf of, or with reference to, aggravated or distressed subjects.

The outlined LEO practices for directly problematizing the recording activity show how matters of visual accessibility are not only dealt with in the pre-beginning phase of interaction, but can re-appear in opening actions as well. Recording obstructions plainly orient to, and seek to counteract, the visibility of action, thus attempting to undermine VGs' ability to record. Likewise, recording interdictions and departure directives straightforwardly oppose and disalign with the VGs' observational project. Consequently, they are typically met with protest or resistance from VGs.

LEO opening actions that indirectly problematize VG recording

The VG's recording activity may also be problematized in more indirect ways. We discuss three of these below: account solicitations, offers of assistance, and relocation attempts. At least superficially, these indicate no problem with the VG's recording. However, as we will show, they are nevertheless treated by VGs as pretextual measures.

Account solicitations. LEOs may open their interactions with VGs by soliciting an account for the VG's current activity ($n = 18$).⁷ This treats the VG's reasons for recording as not transparently explicable. Such questioning, on its face, indicates that an account is not obviously locatable and can, moreover, reflexively suggest that there are no good reasons for recording. Account solicitations may thus serve as an indirect vehicle for challenging or criticizing the recording activity (Bolden & Robinson 2011). Consider the following extracts, each of which show an account solicitation.

(12) VALED_012, 00:55-01:00 (North England, UK)

LEO1: ↑C'n I just ↑ask you why you're ↑vide↓o:ing.
(0.7)

VG: In public. (0.8) Public photographe:h.

(13) VALED_121, 00:36-00:44 (Midlands, UK)

VG: ((for virtual audience)) Public investigation going
on h[ere.]

LEO1: [WHY']RE YOU HERE RECO:RDIN'
(0.6)

SUS: (You 'on' need [to record me.]

VG: [Why no:t

LEO2: 't's alrigh_t.=I'm recordin' as well.=You know that

VG: That's alrigh' (yeah)

(14) VALED_126, 01:10-01:22 (South England, UK)

LEO1: MATE

(1.1)

LEO1: **What's the point.**

(2.4)

LEO1: What's the point.

(1.3)

LEO1: What's the point.

VG: Why no:'

LEO1: Yeah bu' why. (.) What you gettin'.

As these demonstrate, LEOs' account solicitations may be formatted in various ways. They can include a prefatory "C'n I just ask you" (extract (12)), which softens the challenge inherent in the account solicitation. By contrast, LEOs may solicit accounts in ways that make no efforts to conceal the challenge, like with a bare solicitation "WHY'RE YOU HERE RECO:RDIN'" extract (13)), or they may in fact imply that no suitable account exists, as with "What's the point" (extract (14)).

In response to account solicitations, VGs regularly treat their recording as specifically UNaccountable insofar as particular reasons are not given (see Sacks 1992:23–24 on 'account apparently appropriate, negativer'). This is perhaps most evident when VGs counter account solicitations by asking "Why not?" (extracts (13)–(14)), but the same orientation informs responses like "public photographe:h" (extract (12)), which justify their recording in mundane (and lawful) terms. What these sequences reveal, then, is a fundamental divergence between LEO and VG stances towards the activity of recording and specifically its (un)accountability.

Offers of assistance. Among LEOs' opening actions we also find offers of assistance ($n = 16$, see also extract (6)), which typically appear in the 'reason for making contact' slot (following potential greeting items) and precede other actions sequentially. Such offers can indirectly problematize the VG's recording in a structurally parallel manner as account solicitations. For while they appear to fulfill the mission of law enforcement 'to protect and SERVE', they presume not only some situation of need, but one in which the proper resolution is provided by the LEO. And where the anticipated response to the offer is "I don't need any help", then the implication is "Then why are you here?" or "Then you can move along". Take extract (15), which begins as VG films LEO1 during a traffic stop.

(15) VALED_141, 00:00-00:22 (Unknown, US)

1 (8.4) ((LEO1 exits vehicle))

2 LEO1: ((from afar)) ^HI:. **What c'n we help you with.**

3 (1.4)

4 LEO1: ('t's going on [])

- 5 VG: [I don'] need no help.
 6 (2.8) ((LEO1 approaches VG))
 7 LEO1: What's that?
 8 VG: I don't need no he:lp;
 9 (0.3)
 10 LEO1: 'kay so whadda we ↑do:ing.
 11 (1.0)
 12 VG: Takin' pictures;
 13 (0.5)
 14 LEO1: Yea::h,

Here, LEO1, upon exiting her vehicle, addresses the VG from afar with a greeting and an offer of assistance (line 2). Her offer is formatted as a WH-question (“What c’n we help you with”), which presupposes VG’s need for help. When no immediate response is forthcoming (line 3), LEO1 follows up with a problem solicitation (“t’s going on”, line 4), while the VG dismisses the relevance of the offer by challenging LEO1’s presumption of a need for help (lines 5, 8). With the relevance of an offer now having been dismissed, LEO1 more directly problematizes the VG’s actions by inquiring into his doings (line 10). Yet again, the minimal type-conforming response from VG suggests his orientation to his activity as unproblematic and transparently accountable (Fox & Thompson 2010). Moreover, it formulates VG’s current doings in terms of an innocuous and lawful activity (“Takin’ pictures”, line 12). Much like the minimal references to being in public, such activity formulations indexically invoke a relevant framework of (legal) unaccountability (see also the VG’s response to the account solicitation in [extract \(12\)](#) in this respect, where both are combined). At the same time, formulating what one is visibly doing is a way of ‘stating the obvious’ and pushes back against the askability of the LEO’s question (see Stivers 2011). In these ways, then, the VG’s responses embody disalignment with the LEO’s orientation towards the activity as accountable, let alone one that would warrant an offer of assistance.

[Extract \(15\)](#) highlights another feature of these offers, namely that they are generally unsolicited: VGs neither request help, nor do they behave in ways that would suggest that they are searching for help (Kendrick & Drew 2016). Consequently, they may be heard as ‘pseudo-offers’, serving as ‘off record’ devices to problematize the VG’s activities (cf. Jefferson & Lee 1981). LEOs may thus hearably mobilize an institutionally-licensed action (offering assistance) as a vehicle for reflexively problematizing the VG’s actions.⁸ And as [extract \(15\)](#) and (6) show, VGs are attuned to such hearings and generally dismiss/challenge offers of assistance, if they respond to them at all.

Relocation attempts. The final indirect method found to recur in our data for problematizing VG’s recordings are relocation attempts (n = 41), with which LEOs aim to get VGs to move to or stay away from specific areas. While similar to departure directives in doing spatial management, relocation attempts are less restrictive because they permit VGs to stay on the scene, if in a certain area. They typically involve

LEOs attempting to reposition VGs somewhere that allows for (peripheral) monitoring, often somewhere further away from the scene than where VGs had positioned themselves. Even when VGs are recognized as not an immediate threat to the officers' safety, LEOs may nevertheless attempt to relocate them because they might aggravate the situation by interacting with victims, witnesses, or suspects (Newell 2019:69; see also [extract \(9\)](#)). In these and other ways, spatial management, specifically regarding the VG's position relative to the scene, is bound up with officers' safety concerns. For LEOs, then, relocation attempts may be treated as an 'additional task' beyond their main one, as can be seen in how they are commonly treated as a distraction from and/or an obstruction with police operations. Consider [extract \(16\)](#), which begins as LEO3 arrives on the scene as backup and is briefed by LEO2 regarding the VG, who is standing nearby. Amid this briefing, LEO3 addresses VG directly with a greeting followed by a relocation request.

(16) VALED_143, 06:07-06:23 (California, US)

- 1 LEO2: [I told him I don't mind if][he reco:rd_s,]
- 2 LEO3: [Hi.=How'zit going.]
- 3 VG: [>Pretty good.=How you doin'. <]
- 4 (.)
- 5 LEO2: (he) j[ust needs to move ba:ck.]
- 6 LEO3: [So here's the thi:ng,] (0.5) **it's okay for you to**
- 7 **reco:rd;=but you have to record at a distance that doesn't**
- 8 **interfe:re with our jo:b. So: i[f you can] go ba:ck to that**
- 9 VG: [Eu:h£-]
- 10 LEO3: **corner?=You can record from the:re.** (.) D'juh under[sta:nd?]
- 11 VG: [But I'm]
- 12 no:t interfe:ring,=m[a'am.]
- 13 LEO3: [You a]:re, because we ha:ve some
- 14 investiga:tion that we're doing he:re?=You're interfe:ring.

[Extract \(16\)](#) highlights the ambivalent and delicate character of relocation attempts. On the one hand, insofar as VGs wish to remain 'uninvolved bystanders' (see lines 11–12), and insofar as the LEO is understood as acting to preserve mutual non-interference, relocation attempts may lead to aligning and cooperative responses (see [extract \(9\)](#)). This is possible because, unlike compliance with departure directives or recording interdictions, complying with a relocation attempt does not wholly preclude the possibility of continued filming (note the disclaimers built into lines 1, 6–7).

On the other hand, such re-positionings restrict how an event can be recorded (e.g. a fixed position or a static angle, greater possibilities for blocking, inaudible talk). And indeed, when it comes to dealing with video activists, police are known to employ '[s]patial strategies of isolation and containment [as a...] counter-neutralization move' (Wilson & Serisier 2010:169). As such, relocation attempts are

vulnerable to be understood as pretextual measures, aimed at hampering the recording. So even when they are made accountable as enabling mutual non-interference, it is not guaranteed that they will be understood as such. In fact, VGs typically resist them, such that they constitute the single most common source of disagreement and contention in our data. Part of the problem with relocation attempts, which is visible in [extract \(16\)](#), is that what counts as interference or obstruction from the officers' point of view is often not transparent (see lines 11–14). Our data suggest that this intransparency can be an obstacle to achieving compliance with relocation attempts, though not an insurmountable one if interactional effort is invested (Küttner & Hoey 2025).

These observations expose how interactions between copwatchers and police are predisposed to disalignment. Though LEOs do not explicitly indicate a problem with the VGs' recording, their opening actions are nevertheless treated that way. For hearable within account solicitations, offers of assistance, and relocation attempts are ulterior motives and/or other projectable actions down the line: having no obvious reason to film implicates stopping the recording; needing no assistance implicates leaving the scene; and relocating to another area, while respecting the right to record, could nonetheless impair recording quality. In this respect, citizen mistrust of police may manifest in VGs' treatment of such actions as pretextual measures for indirectly problematizing their recording activity.

Summary and Discussion

With the widespread commercial availability of smartphones and other portable recording devices, law enforcement officers (LEOs) now (have to) work with the expectation of being filmed. For police, the epitome of this new visibility has been the emergence of so-called 'copwatching': citizens documenting and publicizing police activities (especially potential misconduct) with the primary aim of increasing police accountability. As is evident in many copwatch videos posted online, this form of video activism regularly produces friction and disalignment between LEOs and copwatchers. In this article, we have analyzed video-recordings of actual encounters between LEOs and copwatching videographers (VGs) in the US and the UK to explicate how disalignment between them manifests interactionally during the early moments of their encounters.

Our examination of the pre-beginning moments leading up to interaction showed how VGs would regularly make a non-direct and silent approach, position themselves on the borderlands of the scene, and work to record, while maintaining distance from, police activity. We suggested that such a manner of approach and positioning embodied doing 'being an uninvolved observer'. This pre-beginning conduct exhibited non-interference with police activity and therefore could provide for unhindered progression of both the recording and police operations. And insofar as it accommodates LEO concerns for officer safety, it may be considered a weakly aligning move from the VGs. At the same time, it unilaterally proposed an asymmetrical participation framework that positioned officers as the object of active observation, monitoring, and recording. This was itself predicated on a one-sidedness of visual accessibility and limited (if any) availability for interaction on the part of the VGs. Not only does this participation framework form a tenuous basis for the (possible)

initiation of interaction, it also favors interactional disalignment. To the extent that VGs' pre-beginning conduct is designed to present themselves as uninvolved observers, LEO attempts at engaging in focused (rather than passing) interaction with them directly conflict with these participatory aims. Indeed, inasmuch as they treat VGs as policeable subjects, any such attempts effectively contest the participation framework proposed by VGs and may occasion uncooperative, resistant or even antagonistic behavior from them (cf. Goodwin 2007).

Still, LEOs would routinely try to initiate interaction with VGs, usually in ways that problematized their filming and embodied disalignment with their observational project. Some LEO opening actions sought to counteract the VG's filming directly, either through embodied or material means (i.e. blocking and blinding) or through verbal ones (i.e. recording interdictions and departure directives). These were unsurprisingly met with VG complaints, challenges, and resistance. Other LEO opening actions, while not overtly problematizing the VGs' recording, were understood (by VGs) to do so indirectly. Account solicitations and offers of assistance, for instance, were typically understood as challenging the recording activity, suggesting that there are no warrantable grounds to film the operation. LEO attempts at repositioning the VG, by contrast, were regularly oriented to as pretextual measures, designed to hamper the recording rather than working to preserve a state of peaceful co-existence and mutual non-interference. Correspondingly, VGs often resisted in ways that pushed back or counter-problematized the implications or terms of the LEOs' initiating actions.

What emerges from these findings is an enriched picture of how participants organize, and deal with, 'sousveillance'-in-action and how they work out matters of police authority and citizen mistrust in the immediacy of embodied interaction. They allow us to respecify these topics as members' concerns, practically managed through interaction rather than specified in advance (cf. Thomsen 2019). VGs' pre-beginning conduct, with its prioritization of unidirectional visual accessibility for instance, is a constitutive element of DOING 'being a surveilling observer'. LEOs' opening actions, by contrast, inevitably contest the very participation framework that this activity is premised upon and are regularly understood to problematize the recording activity itself, often occasioning argument and resistance. Our findings not only show that police's 'new visibility' (Goldsmith 2010) is hotly contested but also HOW this contestation emerges interactively in situated encounters between LEOs and VGs.

Our findings also connect to and elaborate prior criminological work. As is known from various interview and ethnographic accounts, many officers have serious reservations about copwatching, which are informed by both practical/operational as well as information-political considerations (e.g. Sandhu & Haggerty 2015; Farmer 2016; Newell 2019). Chief among their practical/operational concerns is officer safety, mainly related to worries about bystander interference and a loss of control over the situation. As a practical matter, for on-duty officers, dealing with these concerns typically translates into practices aimed at territorial management and control, such as establishing and controlling a safety perimeter (see Schults 2019). Our findings reflect this in that the LEOs in our data would most commonly approach copwatchers to problematize and change their spatial positioning (see relocation attempts). However, because many experienced copwatchers seem to accommodate

officers' safety concerns, at least to some extent, by maintaining some distance from the operation, they often orient to LEOs' relocation attempts as unnecessary or pretextual measures and resist them. As a result, LEO attempts at exerting territorial control also constitute the single most common source of disagreement and contention in our data.

While relocation attempts problematize VGs' spatial positioning rather than the recording activity itself—and are therefore potentially understandable as addressed to practical/operational concerns—most other LEO opening actions we observed in our data targeted the recording activity itself, and did so in ways less readily recognizable as serving practical/operational needs.⁹ Their opaque practical/operational relevance is problematic for both copwatchers and their audiences alike. This is because it elevates the interpretive salience of other, potentially more information-politically driven motives of the police, such as suppressing the visibility of police activities, which can reflexively suggest having 'something to hide'. These sentiments echo criminological accounts (e.g. Goldsmith 2010) which suggest that copwatching, while potentially increasing police's accountability to the public, also undermines their ability to 'patrol the facts' (Ericson 1989) and reduces their 'account ability' (Ericson 1995).¹⁰ Our findings show that it does not take much for such suspicions to arise. For instance, a LEO approaching a copwatcher with an unsolicited offer of assistance, by virtue of its hearability as challenging the legitimacy of the VG's presence and filming, may be enough to bring such suspicions of ulterior motive into play.

Ironically, given that the recordings of these encounters are disseminated to a broad viewership online, it is precisely these kinds of potentially 'motivated' opening actions that produce the reputational damage so many officers are concerned about (e.g. Newell 2019). If the concern is that copwatching videos may negatively affect police-community relations or may reinforce negative attitudes towards the police, then such actions are arguably counter-productive.

Moreover, it appears from our data that considerable interactional work is required to overcome these interpretive reflexes. Given the foregoing, it would seem that one key ingredient could consist in LEOs making the practical/operational grounds for their actions transparent and interactionally account-able (i.e. rationally intelligible). Due to the lack of interactional research in this domain, it is unclear how this would translate into effective communicative strategies that would work for officers dealing with copwatchers 'on the ground'. However, our data suggest that cooperative outcomes in what copwatchers themselves refer to as 'positive encounters' are by no means an unattainable ideal (Küttner & Hoey 2025). To explore, explicate, and articulate HOW they evidently CAN be accomplished interactionally would thus constitute a promising arena for further research.

Notes

1. All of these reasons are mentioned or cited by various videographers in our database as well.
2. Though see Antony & Thomas (2010:1287), whose findings suggest that at least some viewers are sensitive to the partial character of recorded video.
3. In both the US and the UK, filming in public is generally a legally protected activity, including the filming of police officers on duty. In the US, it is federally protected under the First Amendment to the

US Constitution, which safeguards the freedom of speech, the press, and assembly, among other things. Several US Courts of Appeals have reinforced citizens' right to record the police with corresponding decisions, ruling that it is subject only to reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions (e.g. if videographers interfere in the officers' execution of their duties, threaten the officers, or break other laws while recording). Similarly, there is no law in the UK that prevents anyone from filming activities in public, including police activities. The Metropolitan Police has issued the following guidance, which has been adopted by all police forces in Great Britain: "Members of the public and the media do not need a permit to film or photograph in public places and police have no power to stop them filming or photographing incidents or police personnel." (<https://www.met.police.uk/advice/advice-and-information/ph/photography-advice/>; accessed 14 October 2024). This right to record in public is limited only by reasonable suspicion of terrorism, according to the Terrorism Act 2000.

4. While pre-beginning activities are typically understood to *project* the initiation of interaction (Schegloff 1979), we use *pre-beginnings* more encompassingly to refer to activities that sequentially PRECEDE the initiation of focused interaction between LEOs and VGs. This is because VG's pre-beginning conduct does not project focused interaction.

5. This kind of 'silent approach' may be characteristic of more experienced copwatchers (see also Huey, Walby, & Doyle 2006:155), whereas ordinary recording bystanders may be more prone to interject themselves into operations by yelling and taunting (Farmer 2016:97–98). In our data at least, VG-initiated openings are commonly explicable by reference to idiosyncratic situational particulars.

6. In more authoritative instances, recording interdictions are framed as, or combined with, threats of seizure of the VG's camera. Such threats mobilize the possible evidentiary status of the recording and seek to discourage the VG from filming by invoking the possibility of loss of property.

7. Account solicitations may also seek reasons for the VG's presence and blend with identification work. LEOs may, for instance, seek to determine whether the VG is 'with' a suspect/detainee (e.g. "Are you with him/her/them?"). Where such account solicitations are produced, they are generally followed by actions that problematize the recording activity.

8. A parallel deployment of this technique comes from classroom settings, where teachers mid-lesson might call upon chatty students to ask, "Do you have a question?" (presuming that the answer is "No"). This mobilizes an institutional obligation (to answer student's questions) to problematize the students' disruptive talking. We thank data session participants at the VU Amsterdam for bringing this analogy to our attention.

9. This is not to say that the production of such actions may not be informed by operational (e.g. safety-related) reasoning. For example, a LEO may well issue a recording interdiction to prevent an already tense situation from escalating, as in *extract (9)* above. The point is that these actions are often not in and of themselves transparently recognizable as serving such ends. And even where they are made interactionally accountable (i.e. rationally intelligible) in those terms, they still lack a solid legal foundation and are therefore not enforceable. Compliant reactions would thus appear to depend entirely on the VGs' congruent assessment of the situation and the risks associated with recording.

10. This is, of course, precisely one of the articulated aims copwatching seeks to achieve.

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