

To Collect and To Serve.

The challenges—and possibilities—
of digital evidence in law enforcement.

The average person is photographed or videoed 14 times on any given day. This includes those citizens who are a little shady, disreputable or downright criminal. Now that video evidence has reached this critical mass, it's no surprise that footage is becoming an integral piece in our crime-solving puzzle. Yet with its ascension comes some interesting issues, especially when you're talking about digital video.

Digital video is typically stored on a hard drive inside a DVR at the scene of a crime. Law enforcement can expect any number of experiences with this sort of footage—including 'I can't get the (expletive) video off of this DVR.' The video ends up contributing nothing to the case. Or perhaps the video is collected from the DVR, but the quality is so poor that little can be discerned. Then there are the times where video solves a crime—and fast. Cases where no one saw anything—except for the video (watch a few episodes of CSI and you'll get the impression this is what happens in every case).



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But let's start with a frustrating example from the UK of the limitations of digital evidence.

A thief burglarized a man's car in London. The incident took place during 1 of those 14 moments in his day in which the thief was being taped. In this case, by a neighbor's home CCTV system. The footage went to the local police.

But as it turned out, investigators had to suspend their search...due to lack of evidence. A spokesman for the police explained that the video footage had not led to any new insights because of the quality of the video. This sent the man, already understandably vehement about the crime, into another stratosphere of rage.

"You can commit a crime and still get away with it despite being caught in the act," he bemoaned.

But as anyone in law enforcement knows, being caught on tape may not equal being caught. In most situations, evidence produced by a video surveillance system leads to new insights about a crime. But just how valuable these insights are may depend on how 'clear' that video happens to be.

And what you're able to get out of the video footage. Take, for instance, the new mother in Florida, who had been the victim of an unspeakable crime. Her one-day-old child was abducted from her hospital room by someone posing as a nurse. Just a few promises that the

child was getting an eye exam and 'poof,' gone. In the sustained chaos and stress of a hospital environment, no one noticed.

Except, it turns out, for the video camera in the hallway. Analyzed footage revealed the suspect to be a woman, and showed her lurking around the halls hours before the actual crime. It also gave investigators an idea of how she got the child out of there unnoticed (in this case, a duffel bag). So while Florida police didn't get an exact ID from the surveillance footage, they got enough clues to nab the woman (the local paper was also able to broadcast the footage on their website, allowing ordinary citizens to help with the case). Always review any video evidence at the scene of a crime to be sure to consider all the hints and tips in the footage below the obvious.

With all the possible outcomes and unknowns of today's digital technology, you may feel a temptation to not even try to collect evidence. The hassles of transferring it off the DVR, the spotty quality issues that put our London man's case into deep freeze, for example. But then consider the Florida mother, and where her case would be without that footage.

In the end, video footage is one piece of evidence. One element along with fingerprints and interviews and eyewitnesses in the pursuit of criminals. It provides tremendous opportunity to learn information about crimes. That's what motivates each and every one of us to collect and analyze video evidence every day.

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