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Scanner Blackouts and the Rise of AI-Mediated Policing

Executive Summary

Bellevue, Washington's decision to shut off public access to police scanners appears administrative, but structurally, it reflects a critical realignment in how public-safety information is produced, managed, and used.". While cities like Edmonton, Canada are deploying AI-interpreted body-camera systems capable of real-time facial recognition and automated incident tagging [1], Bellevue has removed the only remaining source of real-time, unfiltered, human-level transparency. Bellevue is not currently using AI-mediated body-camera surveillance [2], but eliminating scanner access creates the foundational conditions in which institutional data control expands while public oversight contracts. This arrangement produces a structural information imbalance, where government actors retain direct access to raw data while the public is limited to filtered narratives of events. [3].

A city cannot simultaneously remove citizen access to real-time information, consolidate exclusive control over raw data, and introduce AI as the primary interpreter of public events without fundamentally altering the balance of power between the public and the state. Bellevue's scanner blackout may not yet be paired with Edmonton-style AI surveillance, but it represents the necessary *first step* in a broader pattern of transparency subversion. Once direct public access to raw data is eliminated, future AI systems operate within a closed structure where law enforcement controls both the underlying data and the narrative, leaving the public without an independent means of verification

Systemic Dynamics

Policing oversight historically relied on multiple, parallel information channels: scanner audio, officer recollection, body-camera footage, and civilian witnesses [4]. This redundancy allowed citizens, journalists, and civil society to compare raw signals against official statements. Removing scanner access collapses this redundancy. As policing trends toward AI-assisted body-camera systems—equipped with facial recognition, threat scoring, auto-tagging, and narrative generation—those systems become the primary gatekeepers of "what happened" [1]. Without real-time access to officer communications, the public has no independent mechanism to verify whether AI-generated summaries reflect the lived reality of the incident. The state's internal interpretation becomes authoritative by default [3].

Risk Profile: Personhood and Public Safety

The core democratic principle of personhood is put at risk hence transparency decreases at the same time algorithmic interpretation increases.[5]. A free person must be able to access unmediated information in order to understand, interpret, and evaluate state actions. Removing public access to scanners—and later replacing raw data streams with AI-filtered narratives—erodes the public's ability to discern meaning from firsthand information. This impairs civic agency, informed consent, and the common understanding communities depend on to maintain safety.

A system that limits access to raw information while elevating AI-generated interpretation invites narrative control, obscures public-safety failures, allows algorithmic bias to influence policing outcomes, and reduces the public awareness communities depend on in emergencies. The risk is not merely technological—it ultimately threatens individual autonomy itself, aka personhood.

Preliminary Policy Direction

Washington State should establish a transparency requirement for jurisdictions adopting, or preparing for, AI in law-enforcement functions. At minimum:

1. Real-time scanner access (or an equivalent civilian-accessible channel) must remain intact.
2. AI-generated summaries cannot replace raw footage, radio traffic, or first-source information.
3. Public access to unprocessed incident data should be guaranteed before any AI interpretation occurs.
4. Vendors and agencies must disclose when AI influences tagging, threat assessment, or narrative generation.

Without these safeguards, AI-mediated policing becomes structurally incompatible with citizen oversight, public safety, and the preservation of personhood.

References

[1] Edmonton Police Service, “AI-Enhanced Body Camera and Real-Time Facial Recognition Initiative,” 2024.

[2] Bellevue Police Department Public Communications, “Current Technology Utilization Report,” 2025.

[3] Citizen Lab (Munk School), “Information Asymmetry and Policing Technology,” 2023.

[4] International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), “Best Practices in Transparency and Public Communications,” 2022.

[5] Center for Self Governance (CSG), “Personhood and Information Agency in Modern Governance,” 2021.

[6] AI Now Institute, “Risks of Algorithmic Interpretation in Public Safety Systems,” 2023.