

Some drivers may claim not to see Dave. But he sees them



Sick of drivers cutting him up on his commute, CTC member **Dave Brennan** decided to use a helmet camera as a campaigning tool

BIKE, CAMERA ACTION!

It was the final straw. Something had to be done. No longer would I allow drivers who endangered me whilst I cycle commuted to get away with it. But what could I do? The police wouldn't have time to deal with every close pass or verbal assault that came my way. Venting at my friends and family certainly didn't help. I needed to find a way to encourage other road users to give me some respect on the roads. My eureka moment came when I spotted a thread on the old Cycling Plus web forum discussing the merits of using helmet cameras to record incidents...

Cycling is fun, safe and a great way to keep fit. I enjoy the vast majority of my cycle commutes to and from my work. The 10-mile round trip is one of the highlights of my day and I always feel a little depressed when I have to use the car for one reason or another. However, cycling on urban roads is not without its downsides.

Every so often, on about 3% of my commutes according to back-of-an-envelope calculations, cars, buses, lorries, pedestrians or even other cyclists do something that upsets my cycling karma. Over the past three-and-a-half years I have been sworn at, driven at, had doors opened on me, had a bus force me off the road, had eggs thrown at me, and had pedestrians run out in front of me. I've even come across 'a gent' relieving himself in a cycle lane.

These incidents didn't happen often, but they did happen often enough to make me want to do something about it. I decided to get a helmet camera. I bought it with the aim of collecting evidence and, where required, reporting the perpetrators either to the police, or where they were driving a business vehicle, to their bosses. Over the last two years it has enabled me to do this and more.

(Left) Dave's camera clocks a driver overtaking much too close and (centre) another driving right at him! Dave puts the pick of his commuting videos online on YouTube (www.youtube.com). Search for 'Magnatom' and you'll find him



I AM BORG

My first purchase was an Oregon Scientific ATC-2000 helmet camera, which at the time cost just under £100. This was a self-contained wireless unit that could record video without the need for a separate recorder. When placed on my helmet it certainly wasn't a secret camera! It was obvious from a distance what it was. It wasn't light either. Luckily my commute is relatively short so I didn't require special neck-strengthening exercises!

After I had tested the camera with the obligatory filming of my nose, the floor, the ceiling, and with practice, my family, it was time to use the camera on my commute. Once I found the best camera position I started to get decent looking footage that didn't just consist of sky or tarmac. It wasn't long before the camera proved its worth.

One morning, travelling into work on a busy road, a bus was approaching from behind and teeing itself up to overtake me where there was no room to do so. As it began its manoeuvre I turned to see the driver and I pointed to the camera jutting out from my helmet. Expecting the worst, I braced for the gust of wind that would strike me as the bus whizzed past. It never came. Having clocked the camera, the bus driver decided against overtaking and pulled back behind me to a safe distance. I spent the rest of that commute with a huge grin on my face and I was determined to share my experience with others.

CHANNEL MAGNATOM

From the beginning I have posted the most interesting of my videos on YouTube under the pseudonym 'magnatom'. I soon discovered that there was interest in these videos on cycling internet forums such as CycleChat (cyclechat.co.uk). It provided an excellent medium for showing what happened to me on the roads of Glasgow.

However, as time went on my videos were becoming the focus of debate, sometimes about how bad the driving was or what action I should take as a result. More interestingly the debate would often focus on how I could cycle differently to negate the problems in the first place. Not only did my cycling skills improve as a result (and there is room for more improvement), but others would also thank me for my videos as they learned from them as well.

Not everything was positive. On YouTube my videos started to attract the attention of people who felt that the best place for cyclists was anywhere but the road. I would receive comments about cyclists not paying 'road tax', running red lights, or endangering people by pavement cycling. In fact one poster suggested that because I rode a bike during the rush hour, I was the cause of all the congestion!

This came to a head in March 2008 when I started to receive death threats on YouTube, where posters suggested that they would find me and knock me off the road. As a

result of this the police got involved.

At the same time a Sun reporter got interested as well, and wrote an article on me, asking 'Who is the vigilante cyclist Magnatom?' The Scottish ITV news also started running a similar story on the lunchtime news. My wife phoned me at work to tell me I was on the TV! After much soul searching, a chat with my long-suffering wife and, after a policeman suggested that I was unlikely to get assassinated ('Yer no Martin Luther King'), I went ahead with a TV interview. It went well and I managed to get the message of mutual respect across, at least to a Scottish audience. Since then the abuse has dropped to background levels.

As well as the abuse, the lawfulness and ethics of filming have been called into question. Many armchair lawyers have suggested that filming and posting videos is against the law. An email discussion with the Information Commissioner for Scotland's office suggests that this is not the case. Filming and publishing as I do is apparently exempt from the data protection act under the recreation exemption.

The ethics of filming may be a thornier issue, with concerns for civil liberties and the worry that this type of filming is adding to today's 'CCTV society'. I believe that if you have nothing to hide then you have nothing to fear. As not everyone agrees with this attitude, care needs to be taken with what type of subjects you film and broadcast.

Despite all of the associated issues with filming and publishing videos online, there have been a number of positive developments. As well as igniting debate and encouraging other cyclists to consider the way they cycle, it has proved a useful campaigning tool.

Following one incident with a bus operated by First Bus Glasgow, I contacted them, and provided a link to the video online. At the same time I asked them if they would

Touring & mountain biking

With the correct equipment you should be able to film a full day ride. Helmet cameras for touring or mountain biking need to be rugged, waterproof, and have good battery life. Cameras where you can swap the battery easily or you can attach additional battery packs to extend filming life are a must. You'll need to be aware that cold weather can reduce the life of a battery, so storing batteries in a backpack or bag to keep them warmer is a good idea.

You will also need extra recording space if you want to film longer rides. This might mean using high capacity flash cards if using a solid state recorder or bringing along spare flash cards or camcorder tapes if using a camcorder. Hard disk recorders have greater capacity, but these can suffer problems if buffeted around.

HELMET CAMS



“A policeman suggested I was unlikely to get assassinated: ‘Yer no Martin Luther King’. So I went on TV”

be willing to take part in a cycling safety campaign, the Give Cyclists Room campaign. To my surprise they agreed to take part in the campaign, and as far as I am aware 1,000 buses are driving around the West of Scotland with these stickers in line of sight of the drivers. I am now also in talks with another bus company with a national franchise, looking at providing them with video examples of poor bus driving, and poor cycling, for training purposes.

ASSIMILATION

Of course not everyone has to post videos on the web or use the videos for campaigning. You might want to film a mountain descent or a documentary of your favourite road ride. Whatever you'll use the footage for, there are generally three types of camera. There are the wireless cameras with self-contained batteries and recorder; there are single-wire systems, which have the camera and the electronics connected by one, often waterproofed cable; and there are multi-wire systems, which have separate cameras, batteries, recorders and microphones. Which system you chose depends on your budget, your willingness to compromise on quality, and your requirements for ease of use.

Good beginner systems tend to be of the wireless variety, due to their plug-and-play operation. However, to keep the weight and size of these wireless cameras down, video

quality, at the moment, is generally compromised. So if you want to have the best video quality, i.e. resolution approaching DVD quality, and the ability to produce video in lower light conditions, you generally need to look at wired systems. These systems have more space for the electronics and the recorders and so quality can be improved. Of course with increasing quality comes increasing cost. It is possible to spend more on a helmet camera than a top of the range bike!

According to both Actioncameras (www.actioncameras.co.uk) and Dogcamsports (www.dogcamsport.co.uk), two companies that specialise in selling these helmet cameras, there has been a growing trend in cyclists purchasing helmet cams. They suggest that the majority are purchased to enable evidence to be collected. As more and more cyclists use helmet cameras for this purpose, and once the general public realise that this is happening, maybe those road users who act dangerously will start to realise that if and when they do act dangerously that they might get caught in the act.

We shouldn't need to wear cameras while commuting, but I believe they do have an impact. So in my opinion, the more helmet-camera cyclists there are the better!

CTC is launching a campaign against dangerous driving. More details about this next issue.

Which helmet camera?

It depends on your budget and the requirements you have from your footage. These three illustrate the range available.

OREGON SCIENTIFIC ATC 3000 CTC Shop, www.ctcshop.org.uk, £88

This wireless unit is an excellent starter camera at a good price. It records onto memory cards, up to 4Gb, and can record at 640x480 resolution for up to 2 hours. It is rugged and waterproof, although it is a little heavy and bulky. It also doesn't film well under poor light conditions.



VIO POV.1 Actioncameras, www.actioncameras.co.uk, £538

One of the best fully-integrated (single wire) cameras available now. Rugged and waterproof it records at 740x480 and is reasonable in low light conditions. At maximum resolution with a 8Gb memory card it can record for over 5 hours. It's not cheap but is easy to use and gives good quality video.



DOGCAM PRO SONY HQ2 Dogcam, www.dogcamsport.co.uk, £185 + recorder

This multi-wire system provides excellent resolution at 795x596 and excellent low light capabilities. Connected with a good recorder (£270 upwards), it will produce the best video quality. You can compromise and use a cheaper recorder like the Archos 405 MP4 player/recorder or you can use a camcorder. It is more complex to set up and you need somewhere to store the recorder and battery, neither of which are waterproof.

