

AI OPENS UP WAYS TO 'SEE THE UNSEEABLE' IN PUBLIC SAFETY – PROVIDED IT'S USED RESPONSIBLY

Artificial intelligence could be a huge boon to policing and public safety - but it must be used responsibly and win public trust. James Slessor, Managing Director of Accenture Public Safety, reflects on the possibilities.

These days, there's a lot of discussion about how artificial intelligence (AI) might be applied in policing public safety. However, what images does this trigger in your mind?

A dystopian future like Robocop or Terminator, where machines have seized control and humans are subservient? If that's the case, then perhaps you should think again and take a fresh look at what AI can deliver.

There are in fact many ways in which AI can help public safety agencies deliver their mission and enhance our safety and security as citizens.

To explore and seize these opportunities, the public safety community must engage positively with AI – but also be conscious of the need to ensure the technology is used in a responsible and legitimate way.

So, what are the areas where AI can make the biggest contribution to policing and public safety? For me, three areas come immediately to mind:

MANAGING THE MUNDANE

This means reducing the repetitive and procedural activities that many officers and staff must undertake. AI can be applied to many administrative tasks, as we're already seeing in areas such as HR, finance and rostering. In other industries, AI-enabled chatbots and virtual assistants are handling repetitive tasks; for example, the processing of insurance claims. In policing, it's possible to see AI extending into operational areas such as intelligence management, investigation management and case file preparation – helping to free up valuable time for officers and staff to focus on higher-value activities and interacting with communities.

SEEING THE UNSEEABLE

AI can process huge volumes of data at a pace that a human simply can't. As a result, it can extract insights and identify patterns and actions that would otherwise be missed. This can be especially valuable with vast volumes of 'unstructured' data captured from image, video and voice recordings, meaning humans no longer must sit through and interpret numerous information feeds.

AI also has the ability to automatically identify faces, objects and movements and to create alerts or other responses to varying situations.

This has implications for public order, including securing major public events, policing roads and monitoring crime hotspots. These benefits will grow as our society and cities become 'smarter' though rising use of sensors and new IoT (internet-of-things) technologies.

POLICING THE VIRTUAL WORLD

Today, public safety agencies must not only keep our physical spaces and communities safe, but also our virtual ones. The scale and speed of cybercrimes and cyberattacks often mean responding to them in real-time is beyond humans' capability, therefore making the use of AI an imperative.

And because AI is highly effective for activities that are time-sensitive or require hyper-precision, it's well suited to addressing not only cyber threats and the growing world of online crime.

Examples include usage of AI-enabled 'webcrawlers' to track criminal across both the open and 'dark' net. In some areas of online crime, such as online child exploitation, technology has unfortunately amplified existing threats. Again, AI can help combat and prosecute such crimes, for example by patrolling chatrooms and automatically flagging or taking down harmful and illegal content.

However, while all these areas offer exciting opportunities, it's vital that any use of AI in public safety takes into account the trust and legitimacy that underpin its public service mandate. Therefore, we need to make AI 'responsible'.

RESPONSIBLE AI

Interest in what this means and awareness of its importance is thankfully growing. I recently participated in a roundtable discussion on responsible AI in policing, hosted by the public-sector think-tank Reform. The session explored how to harness AI in policing in a sustainable and responsible way. The debate confirmed that this requires public safety leaders to consider four factors:

- **Governance**
implementing accountability frameworks and codes of ethics to manage how AI is used, and compensate for the way innovation outpaces regulatory and legislative cycles.
- **Design**
creating AI capabilities that are transparent, so public safety agencies can explain why a decision was made – with core values of equality, diversity and lack of bias built in.
- **Monitor**
recognising that AI will learn and evolve, and therefore ensuring its performance can be checked continually against a set of values and accountabilities – linking back to eliminating biases.
- **Reskill**
thinking about the workforce impacts from the start, and how best to combine the complementary strengths of AI and humans – potentially freeing officers and staff to focus on activities requiring empathy, human judgement and public interaction.

As these factors underline, adopting AI in public safety raises some challenges. However, these challenges far outweigh the benefits, not just for public safety agencies but also – more importantly – for the public and communities they serve.

Realising these benefits comes down to how smartly agencies can leverage new digital technologies to innovate and move towards a modern preventative policing model.

With AI, it's vital to think carefully about how it is adopted, understand the implications for the public safety organisation and workforce, and stay laser-focused on legitimacy and public trust.

Given the right strategy and controls, and a readiness to learn from other sectors, 'responsible AI' offers great benefits for policing and public safety agencies. We must not let a few Hollywood-inspired dystopian visions hamper our ability to realise the potential of this new technology.

This article was published on the Policing Insight (U.K) news-site on January 28th 2018