Technological advancements often come with a delicate balancing act for developers: to develop technology that can improve public safety while protecting the public’s right to privacy. The development and use of Automatic License Plate Reader (ALPR) camera systems, in particular, raise considerable concerns about this balance as ALPRs have become widely used by law enforcement. With recent developments in ALPR technology, police can record the license plates of cars within three lanes of traffic simultaneously from their dashboard cameras (Hodge, 2019). They can even store images of the drivers and passengers in those vehicles. While ALPRs can help police to investigate serious criminal offenses in important ways, there are serious concerns regarding their unregulated use and growing availability.

Axon, a market-leading enterprise in law enforcement technology, announced on October 23, 2019 that it will incorporate AI-powered ALPR technology into its next-generation in-car video system (Partridge, 2019). As Axon enters the market and increases the availability of low-cost ALPR systems, law enforcement’s use of surveillance technology is bound to increase—perhaps to society’s benefit or perhaps to a fault. As ALPRs become more widespread, the ethical implications of this technology call for evaluation.

Many who oppose ALPRs argue that this technology’s threats to civil liberties and privacy rights significantly outweigh its benefits to public safety. In an assessment of Axon’s newest AI-powered policing technologies, Axon’s AI and Policing Technology Ethics Board found numerous concerns with the unregulated use of ALPRs. Barry Friedman, Policing Project Faculty Director, clarified the Board’s view by reporting, “ALPRs have the potential to threaten everyone’s privacy and worsen racial and socioeconomic disparities in the criminal justice system, especially if used to enforce low-level traffic offenses or generate revenue in the form of fines and fees” (PolicingProject.org, 2019). Indeed, increasing the use of AI-driven ALPRs allows police to collect an abundance of data on drivers long-term—the vast majority of whom have not committed a crime. Not only is this a threat to public privacy, the availability of this technology could lead to exacerbated enforcement of low-level offenses. The evidence shows that such increased enforcement disproportionately impacts low-income individuals and communities of color. Hence, even if ALPRs sometimes help police catch the right person for a serious crime, the potential for excessive use of it in minor cases...
often will lead to greater harms to the innocent.

On the other hand, advocates of ALPR technology argue that this powerful tool allows police to efficiently protect and serve their communities. Recently, a 12-month study of the Cincinnati Police department found that officers equipped with ALPR were almost 15 times more efficient at making arrest than those without it (Dees, 2019). Moreover, the American Civil Liberties Union’s review of millions of scans from 293 police departments and five state agencies found that only between 0.01 to 0.08 percent of license plates scanned by law enforcement cameras actually produced “hits” that lead police to criminal suspects (Farkas, 2017). This report stands squarely against many groups’ concerns about privacy and exacerbated enforcement. From this report, it is clear that a considerable amount of the data collected will never be seen or used at all. Provided that ALPR technology simply collects too much data, it cannot be a threat to public privacy.

As with many technological advancements, ALPR technology brings into focus a growing conflict between the desire to use innovative technology for social goods like safety and the desire to protect public privacy. It is worth noting that, for the most part, ALPR technology captures publicly accessible information that photographers often legally capture on public property unbeknownst to passersby every day. However, in the hands of police, the recording of that information is not a trivial matter for many individuals who see the criminal justice disparities in their communities. If we cannot guarantee that ALPR technology will not be abused by police, should we allow our police to use it? And, at what cost do we disregard it?

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ethical issues with police enforcement’s use of AI-powered ALPR technology?

2. What concerns about privacy are implicated in using this technology? Are other organizations’ (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service) use of the information acquired by it equally worrisome?

3. What ethical guidelines would you propose for vendors (like Axon) and law enforcement using ALPR technology? How might these avoid harmful consequences or ethical transgressions—foreseen or unforeseen?

4. Are there ethical limits to how long data acquired by ALPR technology should be held? Explain.

Further Information:


Farkas, Karen. “Despite Low “Hit” Ratio, Police Defend License-Plate Readers as


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July 2, 2020

https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/ethicsproject/