

ACLU to police using robots: Tell us more

November 29 2019, by Nancy Cohen



Police are using robot dogs. Everyone seems interested but not everyone seems amused. The American Civil Liberties Union has asked Massachusetts State Police to explain how and where it is using robot dogs, said news reports.

Kade Crockford, ACLU of Massachusetts, talked to [Gizmodo](#) via email. "All too often, the deployment of these technologies happens faster than our social, political, or legal systems react."

(*Engadget's* Jon Fingas [said](#) there was a concern that Massachusetts officers could arm bots without telling the public or setting clear rules.)

The dogs are the Spot breed created by Boston Dynamics, and for three months the dog-like robots have been tested out alongside officers.

[Daily Mail](#) said this is the first known use of Spot robots being used by [police](#) anywhere. Boston Dynamics, creators of Spot, sent *Gizmodo* a statement: "...the Mass State police is our only public safety-focused relationship to date. In the next 5-10 years, we see first responders utilizing Spot to get eyes on [dangerous situations](#), inspect suspicious packages, as well as sense hazardous gases in emergency situations."

Which officers will be deployed with the robots? Will the dogs carry weapons?

There are answers. Massachusetts State Police officials said the robots were being used as a "mobile remote observation device" to look at suspicious devices or locations that might be hazardous for human officers. Radio station [WBUR](#) was told the robots had worked with the organization's bomb squad.

WBUR's report was widely quoted by tech-watching outlets. A police spokesperson said [robot](#) technology was valuable for law enforcement "because of its ability to provide situational awareness of potentially dangerous environments."

Meanwhile, as for the robot makers' side, WBUR was told that Boston Dynamics had leased the robots to the police to retain control over how they were used. That lease agreement carried explicit clauses requiring that the robots not be used for harming or intimidating people.

Gizmodo noted that the Spot robot had earlier been officially made

available for lease to businesses and that the four-legged robots had been in use by the state police "since at least April 2019 and has engaged in at least two police incidents."

Gizmodo noted that Boston Dynamics CEO Marc Raibert had spoken at a conference in April about how the robots were already being used by MSP. Boston Dynamics actually showed its Spot with the MPD at the conference. In the video Spot was opening a house door with a backup robot right behind it. "This is being tested at the Massachusetts State Police," said Marc Raibert, "and this is one of their testing places, where they worry about hostage situations."

Raibert in the April 19 [video](#) from *TechCrunch* defined Spot as a general purpose robot, which means we don't have in mind a specific application but it's got a lot of versatility ...Spot is a platform where you can add [mechanical components](#) and there's an API where you can add your own software and in fact we have been developing components in order to get the project out of the gate where we have added a manipulator...a 360-degree set of cameras."

(Liam Tung in [ZDNet](#): Boston Dynamics offered testing partners access to the Spot software development kit (SDK), "which allows customers to create their own applications and control 'command poses and velocities, configure payloads, and access robot perception and payload data".)

Brian Heater is the Hardware Editor at [TechCrunch](#). He described that video shown in April as a scenario "which found the robot opening doors during a training exercise for the Massachusetts State Police." It was, he said, "a brief video that demonstrated how the robot could potentially be used to help get human officers out of harm's way during a terrorist or hostage situation."

In the bigger picture, those who over the years have been following the

many videos from Boston Dynamics showcasing their robots have seen outside reactions with words like "terrifying" and "nightmare." Not surprisingly, sites chimed in on this development too, referring to a bleak future of robot use by law enforcement.

Terrifying people or helping to save lives? Brian Heater in *TechCrunch* weighed in: "This particular video has the added bonus of combining people's distrust of big, scary robots with their (arguably deserved) distrust of law enforcement. It's pretty easy to watch a video like that and go immediately down a dystopian rabbit hole."

More than one perspective, however, has been presented.

Boston Dynamics, for example, said this in its statement to *Gizmodo*:

"Sending a nimble robot like Spot into these situations can remove humans from potentially life-threatening environments and provide emergency responders with better situational awareness of a crisis. These are the same capabilities that oil and gas, electric utility, nuclear decommissioning [sic] and mining customers will use to perform critical safety inspections without exposing people to risk."

The company said, "We'd like to stress again that our written license agreement with Spot customers does not permit use of Spot for any purpose that would harm or intimidate people." (As Jon Fingas said in *Engadget*, "The police likely couldn't have weaponized the bot if they wanted to.")

"Part of our early evaluation process with customers is making sure that we're on the same page for the usage of the robot," he said. "So upfront, we're very clear with our customers that we don't want the robot being used in a way that can physically harm somebody."

In the WBUR report, Ally Jarmanning had quoted Michael Perry, Boston Dynamics vice president for business development:

"That's one of the reasons why the company is opting for lease agreements, rather than a sale, Perry said. Boston Dynamics wants to be selective in which companies get access to Spot—and have the ability to take the equipment back if the lease is violated."

Jarmanning reported that on the ACLU side, "Crockford said they want to see a policy from state police about its use of robotics and a conversation about how and when robots should be used."

More information: data.acum.org/public-records/...-in-law-enforcement/

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