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Police use of AI more responsible with an independent data ethics advisory committee

Groundbreaking research led by Northumbria University has revealed how the use of an independent Data Ethics Advisory Committee by West Midlands Police has transformed the understanding of how to achieve responsible artificial intelligence (AI) in policing, offering a blueprint for a national model of oversight.

Over the past five years, the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner (WMOPCC) and West Midlands Police (WMP) have maintained an innovative

Data Ethics Committee. This interdisciplinary body, comprised of independent experts in law, computer science, ethics, social impact, and victims' rights, advises on the design, development, and deployment of advanced AI tools and data analytics in policing. The new [research](#) highlights how this independent advisory model has transformed police officers' understanding of the ethical and technical implications of AI, while simultaneously ensuring that human rights are at the forefront of thinking around new technology initiatives.

The [research](#) has been led by [Professor Marion Oswald MBE](#) from Northumbria Law School, in collaboration with colleagues from Northumbria, Northampton, Glasgow and Aberdeen Universities, and partnering with the office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner and West Midlands Police. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through its [Bridging Responsible AI Divides](#) (BRAID) programme, the research concludes that this type of independent advice can help to bridge the gap between ethical reflection, scientific rigor, and human rights considerations in law enforcement.

The study found that the Committee's work did not impede operational policing, but rather supported it, leading to more responsible and ethical AI use. It concluded that such independent scrutiny could serve as a model for responsible AI use nationwide.

Commenting on the significance of the research, Assistant Chief Constable Matt Welsted from West Midlands Police said: "WMP is a highly innovative force dedicated to delivering the best possible service to the public in the most efficient and effective way. Often this involves cutting edge technology and sophisticated data analytics which although exciting, comes with significant responsibilities. This research and the recommendations made will be invaluable to helping us and other forces get this balance right and ensure that the decisions we make and the tools we use to police our communities are ethical and legitimate".

Key Findings:

- Police officers gained valuable insights into technical, operational, legal, and ethical aspects of AI through engagement with the Committee. One officer reflected: "When I went to the ethics committee, I actually had my eyes opened... There were

some considerations that I didn't understand initially, but as I got more into the project, I could absolutely see the relevance."

- The Committee's advice directly influenced the development of AI and data tools, with adjustments made based on its recommendations.
- The Committee members, in turn, gained a deeper understanding of the operational pressures police officers face and the potential of AI to enhance policing services, while still protecting community interests and victims' rights.

The research, which included interviews with Committee members, police officers, data scientists, and community representatives, as well as a review of Committee documents and observations of technology in action, calls for greater community involvement in the data ethics process. The research team emphasizes that community trust in AI policing tools can only be achieved if the voices of community representatives are respected and visibly influential. The research also concluded that more attention should be paid to a wider range of human rights responsibilities. There also needed to be sufficient time taken in Committee meetings to understand technical details, how AI outputs will be used in operational policing and how AI might support police responsibilities for public safety.

Professor Marion Oswald MBE, chair of the Committee, led the research project, with the interviews and research analysis being carried out by other members of the research team. Professor Oswald said: "An interdisciplinary Data Ethics Committee, such as the one maintained by West Midlands Police, is crucial for ensuring responsible use of AI in policing. By integrating diverse perspectives and expertise, the Committee enhances the validity and ethical grounding of AI tools, fosters transparent dialogue, and addresses critical issues of privacy and public safety. Its success hinges on clear roles, community representation, and robust support, offering a model for national strategy and guiding others in the ethical deployment of advanced data technologies.

"Our research underscores the importance of balancing technological advancement with ethical oversight, advocating for a structured, transparent, and inclusive approach to AI in policing, with the West Midlands Data Ethics Committee serving as a leading example."

Northumbria University has a global reputation for research and teaching in

AI and Professor Oswald is the principal investigator of the Responsible AI UK Keystone project 'PROBabLE Futures: Probabilistic AI Systems in Law Enforcement Futures'. The University was recently awarded £9 million by UK Research and Innovation to establish a Centre for Doctoral Training in the field of AI. Known as the Citizen-Centred AI (CCAI), it focuses on the inclusion of citizens in the design and evaluation of AI – helping to make the rapidly advancing technology work for ordinary people.

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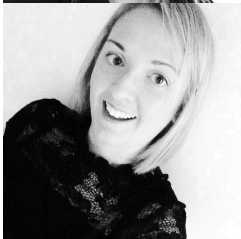Student Communications Manager
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