INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

BRIEFING 2 - **October 2024**

What do the public expect from online crime reporting?

Authors:
Ben Bradford | Arabella Kyprianides | Will Andrews | Elizabeth Aston | Estelle Clayton | Megan O'Neill | Helen Wells.

A comparison of live chat with human and AI operators

Key points

- People prefer human operators over chatbots in online crime reporting scenarios, seemingly because they see humans as more trustworthy and sensitive.
- While procedural justice is valued in all interactions with police, including with chatbots, people find it easier to 'see' procedural justice in human behaviour, and its impact is greater in human interactions.
- People are more positive about online crime reporting for less serious crimes, but there is a need to balance human and AI interactions to enhance the perceived fairness and effectiveness of these systems.

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Background

Police interactions, including those where someone wishes to report a crime, are increasingly moving online. Some of these interactions already involve Chatbots driven by Artificial Intelligence, and the use of AI in these scenarios is likely to increase in the future. This represents a substantial "channel shift" from the past, where most interactions with the police required phone calls, visits to police stations, written communication, or encounters in public places like streets. Police hope that moving contact online will improve efficiency, service quality, enhance public trust, and ensure consistency in encounters.

However, many people experience "algorithmic aversion" when dealing with machines. Algorithmic aversion is a psychological phenomenon where individuals exhibit a preference for human decision-makers over machines when making important or sensitive decisions. People may distrust, fear, or feel uncomfortable relying solely on algorithms in certain contexts, even if they may be more accurate, consistent, or unbiased.

We also know that people attend closely to the quality of interactions with authority figures such as police officers, particularly across dimensions of respect, neutrality, transparency and 'voice' – that is, procedural justice. There is good evidence to suggest procedural justice remains important in on-line, virtual and/or automated environments. However, while algorithmic decision-makers might be able to demonstrate some aspects of procedural justice, like neutrality, they may struggle with others, such as providing a voice, politeness, or showing respect.

What will be the impact of technological mediation on public trust, police legitimacy, and perceptions of procedural justice? With stretched public resources and increased demand inevitably pushing police towards dealing with people online, understanding how the public judge contacts handled by machines is vital. We fielded two studies that explored what the public want and expect from online crime reporting, comparing interactions via live chat handled by human operators with those handled by chatbots.

What we did

Two online studies involved 640 participants (study 1) and 648 participants (study 2) reading a realistic 'live chat' exchange involving a crime report online. The 'chat' exchange was between a police representative and someone reporting a crime, where the police representative was either a human police operator or an AI powered chatbot.

In study 1, we examined the effect of the operator type (human or chatbot) and the seriousness of the crime (graffiti or burglary) on online crime reporting experiences. The immediate outcome offered (active police attendance vs. passive recording) was also manipulated. We assessed the impact of these manipulations on judgments about process fairness, satisfaction with the outcome, perceptions of decision-making, and overall satisfaction with the process. Crucially, in each case the chat was identical – all that differed was whether participants were told it involved a human operator or a Chatbot.

Study 2 focussed more closely on procedural justice, specifically politeness and respect, and its role in shaping online crime reporting experiences. We concentrated here on a burglary scenario, and manipulated the procedural justice of the interaction (just or unjust), while keeping the other aspects of the experimental design and measures consistent. Again, the more procedurally just, and less procedurally just chats, were identical in the human operator and Chatbot conditions.

Key findings

Human preference rooted in trust and sensitivity. There was a consistent preference for human operators over chatbots, seemingly driven by concerns about trustworthiness and the need for human involvement in sensitive situations. Both the process and the outcome were judged to be fairer with human operators, regardless of the crime type and whether the outcome was passive or active. Overall satisfaction with how the police handled the case was higher with human operators, irrespective of the outcome offered.

The (human) value of procedural justice. Participants prioritised procedural justice and communication clarity, and valued fairness and clear explanations more when these were provided by human operators. For human operators, politeness and respect significantly influenced participant satisfaction with case handling. By contrast, for chatbots, these factors had little to no effect on satisfaction with chatbot interactions. That said, participants did draw a distinction between machine behaviour that was more or less fair – they could 'see' procedural justice in machine, as well as human, interactions.

Impact of crime type. Positive reactions to the reporting experience were more common for less serious crimes and active outcomes, including when these interactions were handled by machines, suggesting these systems are better suited for less serious matters.

Balancing human and AI interactions in policing. Emphasising human elements like politeness and respect can enhance the perceived fairness of AI, though greater automation in online reporting systems may face resistance, especially for serious crimes.

Implications

Based on the key findings from these studies, we present a set of recommendations for integrating AI-assisted interactions in online crime reporting.

Human involvement in sensitive and serious cases

The clear preference for human operators in serious or sensitive crime reporting emphasises the need for human oversight in these situations. While AI can help streamline processes, humans should handle cases where trust, fairness, and emotional intelligence are crucial, ensuring public confidence in the system.

Strategic use of AI for efficiency in routine and less serious crimes

AI systems can be effectively used for managing less serious crimes. By assigning AI to handle these lower-risk interactions, police organisations can free up human resources for more complex and sensitive matters, improving operational efficiency while maintaining public trust.

Designing AI for fairness and user choice

To foster trust in AI, systems should be designed to uphold principles of procedural justice, delivering clear communication, fairness, and transparency.

Tempering enthusiasm for AI as a cost-saving tool

While AI offers opportunities for efficiency, police organisations should be cautious about adopting it solely to save costs or reduce human resources. Trust, procedural fairness, and emotional sensitivity are vital to public satisfaction, particularly in serious matters. Over-reliance on AI to replace human involvement could undermine these values and erode public confidence in policing.

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

Grant number: ES/V00283X/1

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