

Robotic “Dog” Leased to Massachusetts Police Department Sparks Controversy

By Anne Luquette, J.D. Candidate 2022 | February 24, 2020

The convenience and utility of technological innovation has led to the discovery of awe-inspiring and chilling inventions. One of the most recent innovations in robotics technology has made its way to the Massachusetts State Police (“MSP”), [sparking controversy](#) from technology policy experts and civil rights activists alike. The 70-pound, four-legged robot “dog,” created by Boston Dynamics, was leased to the MSP for three months to assist with the agency’s bomb squad. The robot is named “Spot” and signifies a new age for robotics and technology.

The news of the lease inspired Kate Crockford, director of the ACLU of Massachusetts’ Technology for Liberty, to issue a statement calling for public transparency and increased regulation. The [Technology for Liberty Project](#) strives to “ensure that new technology strengthens rather than compromises the right to free expression, association, and privacy.” The police’s continued use of more advanced technologies without more transparent public disclosure is exactly what Crockford fears will jeopardize those same liberties. In addition, she expressed concern about the potential impact of allowing access to new and uncharted innovations without clear state or federal authority for protecting civil rights within this context.

[Policy experts](#) have likewise called for increased regulation of robotics technology as the creation of newer and better formulations of robots has outpaced regulatory and law-making mechanisms within the government. Ryan Calo, for example, likens the current difficulties in regulating robotics to those experienced when the railroad was first invented. As the debate continues in the U.S. between pushing for closer governmental regulations and trusting large corporations to regulate themselves, Boston Dynamics seems to be doing a better job at limiting the power of the police department than local authorities.

[Marc Raibert](#), Boston Dynamics founder, said that it specifically structured the transaction as a lease so it could regulate the use of the robotics technology and remove the devices from customers that misuse it. While it is heartening that the company is taking steps to think about these issues, it is significant that the power is in Boston Dynamic’s hands to regulate the use of its own products. On the other hand, the question becomes whether the government is equipped to regulate the police, as America has struggled to maintain a policing system absent deep-rooted racial biases that ultimately harm disenfranchised communities. Thus, the invention and use of new technologies in policing is only going to make this debate more dire to resolve.

