



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on September 5, 2016

Knightscope Robots: Enhanced Safety or More Invasive Surveillance?

Knightscope robots — one for inside work, the other for outdoors — have been under development for three years, and have logged 35,000 hours of testing and 25,000 miles of rolling through malls, parking lots, and manufacturing facilities. And yet, within weeks of the K5 outdoor model being released in the Stanford Shopping Center, an upscale shopping mall in Palo Alto, California, one of them [couldn't avoid hitting](#) a 16-month-old toddler and running over his foot.



It was a poor start to Knightscope's first major public contract with the mall, and they did the best they could to ameliorate the situation: Company executives apologized profusely — stating that they were “horrified” over the incident — and then invited the family of the toddler to their grand opening in late July. According to company spokesmen, the updated and revised edition of K5 would have avoided the toddler. The company also announced a breakthrough contract it just signed with a major private national security firm for more of the robots.

The rollout was no doubt impressive, as K5 has an amazing array of technology designed as “an advanced anomaly detection device” — read: a robot that detects, records, analyzes, and then informs its handler of suspicious activities taking place nearby. Stacy Dean Stephens, Knightscope's vice president of marketing, told Digital Trends:

It patrols within a geofenced area using its sensors to alert security professionals of potential threats.

Each machine [which looks like a fat white penguin weighing 300 pounds] has 360-degree high definition video [recording capabilities] for both day and low light; thermal imaging [to track humans and other objects such as animals throwing off body heat]; two-way radio with public address, intercom and broadcast; license plate recognition; and people detection — to name a few [of its functions].

Its other attributes include nearly 30 different sensors that can not only see but hear, smell, and touch its environment. It has built-in facial recognition capability depending upon outside sources for the data, which it can then store internally. Its sensors are so sensitive that it can recognize the sound of glass breaking or gunshots. It can smell a fire or detect an explosion taking place in its geographical area. If an unruly teenager (or other disagreeable humanoid) tries to kick it, write graffiti on it, or push it over, the robot will record video and audio of the incident and send an alert to its “master,” a public safety official in the back office.

In the event the robot witnesses a crime, its tapes can be used in the forensics, and will likely be allowed in court in the future.



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According to the company, its robots are “force-multipliers, data gatherers and smart eyes and ears on the ground, helping protect [its users’] customers ... property and ... employees 24/7 — both indoors and out. This technology changes everything.”

Despite disclaimers that the company doesn’t want to displace mall guards or other human security personnel but only to enhance their capabilities, it’s clear where the technology is headed. From the company’s website, it notes that its robots provide “security professionals with a significant force-multiplying effect and, at the same time, integrate extremely ‘smart eyes and ears’ to a security deployment in order to cover much more ground [than traditional human guards] efficiently.”

The company claims that the mere presence of the droids will reduce crime and related insurance costs. Said William Li, the company’s CEO, “Our aim is to cut the crime rate by 50% in a geofenced area, which would increase housing values and safety while lowering insurance costs.”

The company touts another advantage: It can lease two robots (one can take a break and get recharged while the other one is on duty) for less than a human mall guard. Each unit costs \$6.25 an hour (less than minimum wage, without benefits, vacation, or family time off) whereas traditional security services charge \$25 to \$35 an hour per person to cover the same ground. And they can be placed on patrol 24/7.

At present the robots are essentially random-roving data-gathering devices, not programmed to do any more than just report “back to central” any suspicious activities they sense. Presumably the units are bullet-proof and are not equipped with any ability to defend themselves or to intervene in a potentially threatening situation. At least not yet.

But a similar device delivered a bomb last month to blow up Micah Johnson, the Dallas shooter, who had just fatally shot five police officers. Said Dallas Police Chief David Brown, “We saw no other option but to use our bomb robot and place a device on its extension for it to detonate where the suspect was. Other options would have exposed our officers to grave danger.”

Robots are in common usage inside an increasing number of police departments, being used to disable explosive devices or to disorient and incapacitate suspects that have barricaded themselves into places not easily reached by officers by delivering flashbangs which emit a bright light and an incapacitating noise.

But Micah Johnson was the first suspect to be blown up by a robot. Said a robotics expert on the scene: “If the first responders who were there thought this was the most appropriate way to use it, it must have been the most extreme situation. It’s tragic that this situation ended this way, but it was in response to an even greater tragedy.”

Knightscope officials were mum on the potential threats to personal privacy, concentrating instead on “efficiency” and “cost savings” and “improved safety” for its customers. But ordinary citizens may have different concerns. If private conversations can be heard and recorded, without a warrant, what about the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition against “unreasonable” searches and seizures? Others, such as Jeramie Scott, a national security fellow at the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), stated. “Automated surveillance, facial recognition and license plate recognition in public makes us all suspects. The K5 could become a cuter, less aggressive terminator that kills privacy instead of people.”

Knightscope is expected to roll out its K3 and K5 robots nationally next year.



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