

Learnings from our event

The future of autonomous technology - August 2023

14 August 2023

Browne Jacobson recently hosted an [autonomous technology event](#) in London as part of London Tech Week. Here we have captured the key learnings from the evening.

Autonomous automotive technology has been steadily advancing, revolutionising the transportation industry. With each passing year, significant progress is made in the development of self-driving vehicles, paving the way for a future where cars are increasingly autonomous.

The opportunity for greater access to services and the economic advantage to the UK, estimated to be over £50bn, is huge. Investment in new and emerging technology to secure safer roads also means saving lives. This huge opportunity is mirrored by the challenges involved.

Technological advancement is moving faster than legislation. Seismic change may be required, involving a regime that has the ability to set standards and impose sanctions. Far-reaching, complex legislation will be required by the government who estimate that by 2025, we'll have autonomous vehicles on the roads. With little legislative time to implement a robust governance system, issues such as the vehicle approval scheme, cyber security and use of personal data, in addition to apportioning liability for accidents, all have to be factored in.

Ensuring that vehicles on the road are safe, legal and comply with regulations around environmental protection and data protection must also be considered alongside new criminal offences for manufacturers and developers who fall below these standards.

When considering a realistic timescale for rolling out fully autonomous vehicles, this might impact different sectors such as retail and its supply chains. The insurance and local government sectors will have to consider policies and city design to facilitate infrastructure changes.

The Panellists were Sarah Gates, Director of Public Policy at Wayve Technologies, Mark Preston, Co-Founder of Streetdrone, Lucy McCormick, Barrister and author of 'The Law and Autonomous Vehicles', and Charlotte Young, General Liability Underwriter at Hiscox Insurance. The Panel joined our Head of [Automotive](#), Giles Parsons, and Head of [Manufacturing and Industrials](#), Paul Kirkpatrick, to discuss the following current trends and possibilities in autonomous automotive technology, shedding light on the transformative potential it holds.

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What are the key areas we need to work on to ensure autonomous technology succeeds?

The education piece

Artificial Intelligence serves as the backbone of autonomous vehicles, enabling them to perceive and interpret their surroundings. Recent developments in AI, particularly in deep learning and neural networks, have significantly improved the capabilities of self-driving cars. AI algorithms are becoming more adept at recognising and understanding complex traffic scenarios, pedestrians, and other vehicles, enhancing safety and reliability.

One area which needs more work is public education surrounding autonomous vehicles. General road users may not always stop if they have an incident with an autonomous vehicle. Unless educated about certain scenarios, such as whether this would qualify as leaving the scene of an accident if there is no one there to exchange insurance details with, might cause issues. Similar human – tech disconnects have arisen with autonomous interaction with law enforcement.

Sarah Gates shared how Wayve are trialling self-driving vehicles, offering a change in public perception of safety around driving. While some may fear the unknown of driverless vehicles, others may welcome the comfort and efficiency of having a driverless car. Sarah shared that Bill Gates was a fan, having trialled the self-driving vehicles in London.

Lucy McCormick, Barrister

Author of 'The Law and Autonomous Vehicles'

“The UK government is very keen that road users are really clear on the difference between ‘a really advanced car that can help you drive a lot’ - fundamentally you’re still responsible for monitoring it, and a vehicle that’s driving itself and you are not responsible for monitoring it.”

Charlotte Young, General Liability Underwriter

Hiscox Insurance

“I think it applies to so many people these days and especially in the world we’re currently living with in the past few years, I would feel much safer getting in a taxi knowing that there’s no person driving it.”

Regulatory and legal frameworks

As autonomous automotive technology progresses, there is a growing need for well-defined regulatory and legal frameworks to ensure safety, accountability, and public acceptance.

Governments and regulatory bodies worldwide are actively working to establish guidelines and standards for autonomous vehicles. Striking a balance between encouraging innovation and ensuring public safety remains a key challenge, but collaborative efforts between industry stakeholders and policymakers are essential to pave the way for widespread adoption of autonomous technology.

There remains work to be done on finding the appropriate balance of liability where there is a mixture of autonomous and human input involved. One interesting possibility is whether it is possible to get to a stage where insurance of autonomous vehicles could transition from a human liability to a product liability insurance risk.

The relevant insurance assessment would not be based on personal characteristics of an individual where the individual is no longer driving the vehicle, rather the vehicle itself. The potential reduction in accidents and the removal of emotion from the equation is a huge opportunity for individuals, moving from a model of personal liability to product liability insurance.

Lucy McCormick, Barrister

Author of 'The Law and Autonomous Vehicles'

"Industry wants legal certainty. It would generally be happier with something that was tighter - that it had absolute certainty of what was and wasn't on the right side of the line."

Sarah Gates, Director of Public Policy

Wayve Technologies

"Ultimately if you don't create that framework [of legislation], then you do leave the path open to people not understanding what the technology is."

Ethical considerations and public perception

Autonomous vehicles raise ethical considerations, particularly in situations where choices must be made in potentially life-threatening scenarios. Questions surrounding liability, decision-making algorithms, and the public's trust in autonomous technology need careful consideration. Open dialogue, transparency, and ethical frameworks are necessary to address these concerns and ensure public acceptance of autonomous vehicles.

Legislation such as the EU's AI Regulation is an interesting "first mover" in this space. One of the key obligations of the AI Regulation is human centric AI deployment which would respect ethical boundaries, and ensures that any AI system used in an autonomous vehicle that is used by an EU citizen passes stringent source dataset hygiene tests.

What are the key opportunities?

Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and shared autonomy

Autonomous vehicles have the potential to revolutionise the concept of mobility, giving rise to new business models and services.

Mobility as a Service (MaaS) envisions a future where autonomous vehicles are part of a comprehensive, integrated transportation network, providing efficient and cost-effective mobility solutions. Shared autonomy, where multiple users share the same vehicle, can further optimise resource utilisation and reduce congestion, making transportation more sustainable and accessible.

Mark Preston, Co-Founder

Streetdrone

"Jobs are changing. On the site at Nissan... you don't have to be in the dirty, smelly, dangerous tractor, you can be back in the air-conditioned office running the trucks... I can see the day when the right vehicle does the right job at the right time, and can be optimised and efficient as well."

Our panellists highlighted how AI technology may impact not just transport, but also housing developments and urban planning. What if your ageing relative didn't need to actively drive, but could be driven? Where would you live if you could be transported home by an autonomous vehicle after socialising with alcohol? There are myriad social changes which could occur by virtue of a transition to autonomous.

Sarah Gates, Director of Public Policy

Wayve Technologies

“It won’t be overnight, but the idea that we could potentially have fewer vehicles and they would be utilised more efficiently is really, really appealing.”

Sarah Gates, Director of Public Policy

Wayve Technologies

“Removing emotion from driving is actually very attractive. So, this idea that you’re not going to have road rage and the horrible negative experiences you can have from that just going about your day, I think that’s hugely appealing.”

Collaborating to develop emerging tech

The trends and possibilities in autonomous automotive technology hold immense promise for transforming the transportation landscape. Advancements in AI, sensor technology, connectivity, and regulatory frameworks are driving the development and deployment of self-driving cars and Browne Jacobson are at the forefront of advising on the emerging technology in this space.

Paul Kirkpatrick, Head of Manufacturing and Industrials

Browne Jacobson

“You’d expect industry to want the legislation to be as lax as possible. But generally, industry does not, industry wants legal certainty, and it would generally be happier with something that was tighter than it had absolute legal certainty of what was and wasn’t the right side of the line. ”

As technology continues to evolve, it is crucial to foster collaboration, prioritise safety, and address ethical concerns to unlock the full potential of autonomous vehicles for a connected and autonomous future.

Lifestyle changes

Lifestyle and behavioural changes are also key. The practical opportunities on offer mean that people can take the time they spend driving and free up their time to do something more creative and fulfilling with their time than long commutes or road trips.

Sarah Gates, Director of Public Policy

Wayve Technologies

"In the UK, it's estimated that people over the course of their lives spend around 4 years of their lives driving."

Lucy McCormick, Barrister

Author of 'The Law and Autonomous Vehicles'

"I have to drive to Norfolk to see my in-laws several times a year. It is a very boring drive. There is no glamour in it and the idea of being able to just hand over to the vehicle and get on with something else during that drive I think is an absolute winner."

Watch on-demand →

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