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Drones: Deadly robots or useful machines?

Video transcript for 'Drones future', with Noel Sharkey

When we look into the future, drones and other robot vehicles are likely to be completely controlled by computer programmes. That means you'll be able to get your phone, touch a point on your map and the drone will fly there completely on its own and do something that you've told it to when it gets there, like deliver a pizza.

And it's not just flying robots, your car may also drive itself. It may pick you up, take you to work, take you out for the evening, park itself and come and get you later and take you home again.

Self-driving cars are already legal in California and Nevada. And you know they could be very useful for the visually impaired or other people who have real problems in driving.

More controversially, several nations are developing new robot weapons that can select their own targets and kill them without human intervention.

This is a hot topic at the United Nations because there's serious doubt that these weapons will be able to comply with the laws of war.

But proponents argue that these robot weapons could save soldiers' lives by keeping them from potential harm.

Those against are concerned about a move towards the full automation of war. They say that humans should always stay in meaningful control of weapons and not delegate the decision to kill to machines.

Also scientists are researching how large collections of robots could work together much like swarms of insects do. But the problem is it can be very difficult to predict collective behavior.

Robot vehicles of the future have the potential to be of great benefit to humanity. They could help us be more efficient with our food production, they could help us protect from dangerous species. The possibilities are really limitless.

But could this be leading us down a slippery slope into a very grim world? That's why we need to keep the debate on policy and regulation open until we fully understand the ethical implications of this technology.