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Justice via Algorithm: Efficiency at the Cost of Humanity?



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I just saw new movie **Mercy** (starring Chris Pratt and Rebecca Ferguson), and honestly, the premise is keeping me up at night.

It's 2029. Los Angeles. The backlog of capital crime cases is so high that the justice system has been handed over to AI. The film's protagonist, Detective Chris Raven, finds himself accused of murder and strapped to a chair in front of "Judge Maddox", an AI that gives him exactly **90 minutes** to prove his innocence or face immediate execution.

It's a sci-fi thriller, sure. But as we see Generative AI integrating into law, finance, and healthcare, this movie hits a little closer to home than *Terminator* ever did.

Here is my breakdown of the **AI Judge** concept, both the Hollywood version and the reality.

The Case for the AI Judge (The "Pros")

In the movie (and in theory), the arguments for an automated judiciary are seductive:

- **Zero Backlog:** Justice is instant. No years-long waiting periods for trial. The system is brutally efficient.
- **Consistency:** An AI judge doesn't get "hangry," tired, or distracted. In theory, it applies the law identically to everyone, removing the

variability of human mood.

- **Data Synthesis:** In *Mercy*, the accused has access to the "cloud", every text, GPS signal, and camera feed in the city. An AI can process this exabyte-level evidence in seconds, finding connections a human jury might miss.

The Glitch in the System (The "Cons")

This is where the movie (and reality) exposes the terrifying cracks in the logic:

- **The "Black Box" Problem:** If the AI hallucinates or misinterprets context (like sarcasm in a text message), you can't argue with it. It's code, not conscience.
- **Guilty Until Proven Innocent:** The movie flips the script. Instead of the state proving guilt, the burden shifts entirely to the accused to "beat the algorithm" before the clock runs out.
- **Bias Amplification:** AI is trained on historical data. If historical rulings had bias, the AI doesn't just learn them; it scales them.
- **The Empathy Gap:** A human judge understands "crime of passion" or mitigating circumstances. An AI sees data points. As the protagonist in *Mercy* discovers, you can't appeal to a hard drive's humanity.

Social Impact: The Surveillance State

The most chilling aspect of *Mercy* isn't the judge, it's the evidence. To make this system work, the movie posits a world of **total surveillance**.

For an AI to judge you accurately in 90 minutes, it needs access to *everything*: your ring camera, your private DMs, your location history, and your biometric data. The social contract shifts from "privacy by default" to "transparency for survival."

It forces us to ask: **Is efficient justice worth the death of privacy?**

For those thinking this is pure science fiction, here are a few real-world examples of where we already are:

- **The 'Black Box' Bias:** The COMPAS algorithm is used across the US to predict recidivism risk for sentencing. A famous ProPublica study found it was nearly twice as likely to falsely flag Black defendants as 'high risk' compared to White defendants.
- **Hallucinating Judges:** Just this year (2025), we saw the *Ross v. United States* case in D.C., where judges openly used ChatGPT to help define legal concepts in their opinions. We also saw federal judges in other districts withdraw orders after realizing their staff used AI that invented fake case citations.
- **Predictive Policing Failures:** Both Los Angeles and Chicago had to scrap their predictive policing algorithms after data showed they weren't preventing crime—they were just creating a feedback loop of over-policing specific neighborhoods.

The tech in *Mercy* is faster, but if today's examples are any indicator, it certainly isn't fairer. We need 'human in the loop' laws before we let the code decide the sentence.

The Verdict?

Mercy might be a popcorn thriller, but it poses a serious question for leaders in tech and law. We are already using AI for contract review and predictive policing. The jump to "AI adjudication" isn't technologically impossible, it's ethically perilous.

What do you think?

The last line in the movie is "Human or AI, we all make mistakes".

If you were innocent, would you rather take your chances with a potentially flawed human jury or a strictly logical AI judge?

Let me know in the comments! 🗨️

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