

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

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The use of the technology in places like London's King's Cross is on the rise – and chipping away at our already fragile privacy

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- Compared with living in a small community, where everyone knows you, big cities have always offered a large degree of anonymity. You are just one tiny speck in a sea of humanity. It is a place where one can slip, unnoticed, into the crowd and where people can, should they wish, reinvent themselves.
- Unless they decide to go for a walk at the King's Cross development in central London, that is. The owners of the site confirmed recently that facial recognition technology was being used "in the interest of public safety and to ensure that everyone who visits has the best possible experience." It's not clear how many facial recognition-enabled cameras are being used, how long they have been operating for or exactly what the technology is being used for.
- The application of facial recognition technology is rising fast. Recently, a bar in London proudly announced that it was using the technology to identify queuing patrons. In exchange for the temporary loan of your face, you need no longer be pushed in front of by sharp-elbowed fellow drinkers. In China in 2018, meanwhile, police arrested a suspect singled out by the technology in a crowd of 50,000 people attending a pop concert. And so the examples continue.
- Facial recognition is, at least as far as surveillance technologies go, pretty cool. It allows us to unlock our phones by taking a quick selfie. At a growing number of hotels, casinos, cruise ships, high street shops and airports around the world, it promises our own glimpse of celebrity exclusivity. We can be singled out for special treatment, whether it's barriers in the airport that lift as we approach or retail staff who know our preferences before we even speak.
- The use of facial recognition at locations such as the King's Cross development (home to Google's UK headquarters) relies on one of the big advances facial recognition has made in recent years. Rather than simply being able to match a still image, modern facial recognition systems can now work with live video, in something very close to real time. They can also cope with messy things such as variable lighting sources, which makes them a tantalizing prospect for surveillance systems.
- Techno-fans may be thrilled with a technology that once belonged in the realm of sci-fi – but there are good reasons to be concerned about facial recognition's creeping presence. A number of researchers have noted that facial recognition algorithms can be less accurate when it comes to identifying individuals from certain ethnic groups. This increases the probability of false positives – particularly damaging when the technology is being used for security purposes.
- But even if these faults were to be addressed (and they are being worked on), this story nonetheless highlights the growing pervasiveness of facial recognition, whether large numbers of people want it or not. The UK is, in many ways, the perfect testing ground for such technologies. It's long been one of the most surveilled countries in the world, based on the number of CCTV video surveillance cameras. There is estimated to be one CCTV camera per 11 people in the UK, with considerably higher proportions in crowded cities.
- Most of these belong to private businesses, although successive governments have also supported the use of the technology since the 1990s. Ignoring potential evidence to the contrary, governments have frequently accepted the idea that video surveillance works as a deterrent and an identifier. When it launched its CCTV: *Looking Out for You* programme in the early 1990s, then-prime minister John Major noted that, "I have no doubt we will hear some protest about a threat to civil liberties with the advent of the new technology. Well, I have no sympathy whatsoever for so-called liberties of that kind." This is, needless to say, a "like-it-or-lump-it" argument that is disturbing in its bluntness.
- Facial recognition is simply the latest example of these tools, which have already become an entrenched part of life in the UK. Perhaps that's why police trials of facial recognition technology by London's Metropolitan Police and South Wales Police caused little more than a blip on the consternation scale.
- In 2019, San Francisco became the first city in America to ban facial recognition. While this ban

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covers only its use by city agencies like the police department and not private businesses, it's an important symbolic step that could trigger similar legislation elsewhere.

11 Could something similar happen in the UK?

Already used in many private businesses, the deployment of facial recognition in a semi-public area like the King's Cross development shows how blurred the boundaries between public and private space can become. According to a report from the *Financial Times*, similar technology may also soon be adopted at locations in Canary Wharf. In these cases, there is no explicit opt-in from members of the public, and the technology is implemented entirely under the (perhaps questionable) assumption that doing so will prevent crime.

12 "We can't place the responsibility on the consumer to act on this; there needs to be robust regulation put in place soon to provide ethical safeguards," Lee Waters, a Welsh Labour Assembly Member who has spoken out frequently about the impact of technology, told me. "But with Whitehall paralysed by Brexit, this is another area we are neglecting."

13 Whether this marks the start of a genuine public conversation on this subject or simply the continued erosion of public privacy remains to be seen. I wish I could be more confident that it would mean the former. But recent history gives us every reason to fear the latter.

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