

Concert promoters turn away from facial recognition tech

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In this Sunday, Oct. 27, 2019, file photo, festival-goers attend the Voodoo Music Experience in City Park in New Orleans. Major concert promoters in the U.S. are stepping back from plans to scan festival-goers with facial recognition technology, at least for the time being. (Photo by Amy Harris/Invision/AP, File)

Concert promoters in the U.S. are stepping back from plans to scan

festivalgoers with facial recognition technology, after musicians and others gave it some serious side-eye.

Although it remains entirely possible that music venues will eventually take a second look at the controversial technology.

Live-entertainment giants AEG Presents and Live Nation both recently disavowed any plans to use facial recognition at music festivals, despite earlier indications to the contrary. Their public pronouncements have led a group of musicians to declare victory after a months-long campaign to halt the technology's use at live shows.

Advances in computer vision have enabled businesses to install cameras that can recognize individuals by their face or other biometric characteristics. Venue operators have talked about using the technology at gateways to secure entry for select groups or to offer perks for repeat customers.

Privacy advocates worry that such uses might also pave the way for greater intrusions, such as scanning audience members in real time to analyze their behavior.

Both concert organizations seemed to be edging toward remembering more faces. In May 2018, for instance, Live Nation subsidiary Ticketmaster announced it was partnering with and investing in Texas facial recognition startup Blink Identity, saying in a note to shareholders that its technology will enable music fans to associate their digital ticket with their image and "then just walk into the show."

AEG, which operates the Coachella festival in southern California and other major events, updated its online privacy policy earlier this year with language stating that it may collect facial images at its events and venues for "access control," creating aggregate data or for

"personalization"—a term commonly used by retailers trying to tailor advertising or promotions to a specific customer's behavior.

Now, however, both organizations have done an about-face. AEG's chief operating officer for festivals, Melissa Ormond, emailed activists earlier this month to say: "AEG festivals do not use facial recognition technology and do not have plans to implement." AEG confirmed that statement this week but declined further comment.

Live Nation said in a statement that "we do not currently have plans to deploy facial recognition technology at our clients' venues." The company insisted that any future use would be "strictly opt-in," so that non-consenting fans won't have to worry about potentially facing the music.

Facial recognition isn't seen in many musical venues. The biggest location known to employ it is New York City's Madison Square Garden, which confirmed this week that facial recognition is one of the security measures it uses "to ensure the safety of everyone" in the arena. It declined to say what it looks at and why. The New York Times first reported its use last year.

While the music industry paused, Major League Baseball stole a base by rolling out biometric ticketing in the U.S., usually involving fingerprints or iris scans to get into ballparks. Authorities in some parts of Europe have bounced around the idea of using either facial or voice recognition to keep tabs on unruly soccer fans, such as those participating in racist chants. Police agencies in China have used facial recognition at concerts featuring pop singer Jacky Cheung to identify and arrest people wanted as criminal suspects.

American music event promoters this fall have been pressured to disclose their facial recognition plans by digital rights group Fight for

the Future, which asked dozens of festival organizers to pledge not to use a technology it describes as invasive and racially biased.

For some, it was an easy answer. Organizers of the Summer Meltdown Festival outside Seattle said they are "happily free of facial recognition technology." Also confirming they don't use it were hosts of events including South by Southwest, Lollapalooza, Bonnaroo, Governors Ball and the Voodoo Music and Arts Experience in New Orleans.

Rage Against The Machine guitarist Tom Morello co-authored an opinion column in BuzzFeed last week that described the pledge as the "first major blow to the spread of commercial facial recognition in the United States."

The CEO of Blink Identity says opposition to its Ticketmaster partnership is misguided.

"They're talking about mass surveillance," said Mary Haskett, who co-founded the Austin, Texas startup. "We're against mass surveillance.... Nobody's talking about doing what they're protesting against."

Haskett said Blink's system allows concertgoers to opt in by taking selfies with their phones, which the company transforms into mathematical representations and deletes. The system might offer access to a shorter line or a VIP section.

But protesting musicians fear their fans' mugshots could still end up in the hands of law enforcement or immigration authorities.

"Of course it's going to be used by security," said Joey La Neve DeFrancesco, a guitarist for Rhode Island punk band Downtown Boys, which played Coachella in 2017. "Of course it's going to be used by law enforcement."

Punk rockers aren't the only ones fixing the technology with a death stare. A June survey by the Pew Research Center found that while people are generally accepting of facial recognition used by police, only 36% said they trust tech companies to deploy it responsibly. Just 18% trust advertisers.

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