

Facial recognition: IT and police in delicate dance

June 18 2020, by Jules Bonnard



Facial recognition technology can now identify people in crowds, raising privacy concerns if it is widely integrated into surveillance systems

Tech giants love to portray themselves as forces for good and as the United States was gripped by anti-racism protests a number of them

publicly disavowed selling controversial facial recognition technology to police forces.

Facial recognition has numerous applications that could simplify our lives as we've seen with Apple using it to unlock smartphones or in stores to replace cash registers.

But the technology has a dark side, with [facial recognition](#) integrated into China's massive public surveillance system and its social credit experiment where even minor infractions of public norms can result in sanctions.

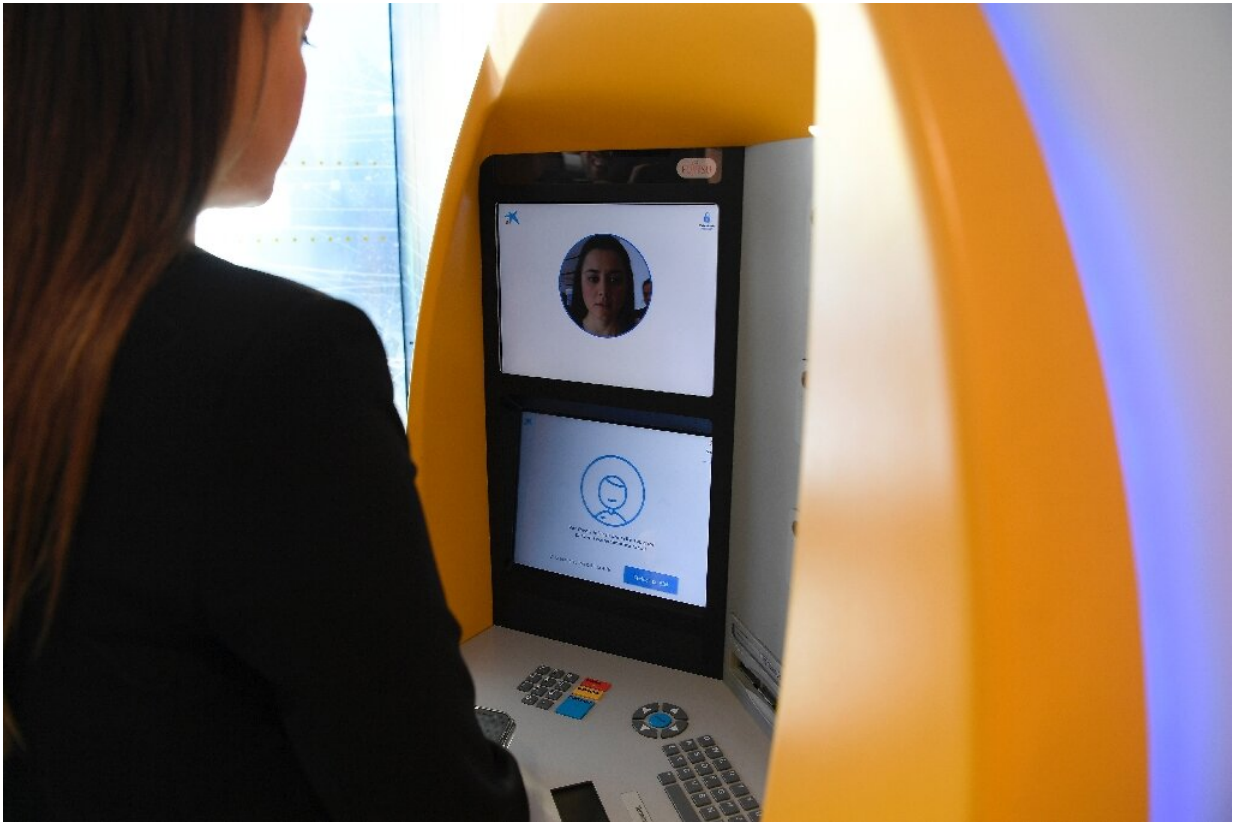
As the protests spread across the United States about [police violence](#) and racism, pressure mounted on tech firms about the technology. Microsoft and Amazon announced they would suspend sales of facial recognition software to police forces while IBM said it would exit the business.

Privacy and [rights groups](#) worry about the implications of the use of facial recognition technology by law enforcement.

'Extremely intrusive' technology

"It is an extremely intrusive form of surveillance and can seriously undermine our freedoms and eventually our society as a whole," says Privacy International.

"The biggest danger is that this technology will be used for general, suspicionless surveillance systems," says for its part the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).



Facial recognition technology can help make our lives more convenient and add security, such as at ATMs used by Spain's CaixaBank

It notes that US state governments hold extensive photo databases as part of their motor vehicle departments, which if combined with public surveillance or other cameras, could result in "a comprehensive system of identification and tracking".

In January 2020, a New York Times investigation pulled back the curtain on the activities of Californian startup Clearview AI, whose facial recognition tool "could end your ability to walk down the street anonymously".

Social network photos scraped

That is because Clearview AI doesn't use photos held by governments, but billions of photos scraped from [social media sites](#).

While social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube (Google) and LinkedIn (Microsoft) protested against the unsanctioned use of their users' photos, Clearview hasn't acceded to their demands to delete them.



Authorities in more and more countries are using facial recognition technology as part of their surveillance networks

The firm, which received funding from PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, says it has already signed up 600 [law enforcement](#) agencies worldwide.

According to advocacy group AlgorithmWatch, at least 10 European police forces already use facial recognition technology and haven't needed to turn to the [tech giants](#).

"I have never seen a contract between Microsoft, Amazon or IBM and a police force in the investigations I have done on the subject," said journalist Nicolas Kayser-Bril, who did the research behind the AlgorithmWatch report.

Technology already widely available

"Tools for conducting facial recognition are widely available," he added, noting that BriefCam, a subsidiary of Japanese multinational Canon which specialises in ultra-rapid analysis of images, is one of the leaders in the European market.



Careful about posting those selfies on social media, at least one facial recognition service has scraped photos from leading sites



Activists in Moscow protesting the use of facial recognition technology paint geometrical shapes and lines on their faces as this is said to confuse the system

China has begun to export its facial recognition technology, particularly via its telecoms equipment giant Huawei.

A company executive told a business forum in Morocco last year that with its technology not only the identity of a person can be identified, but educational and work experience, personal preferences and recent travel.

In February, The Intercept cited a report that 10 European police forces are considering a joint network for facial [recognition](#) searches by extending agreements in place that allow sharing of biometric

information like DNA and fingerprints.

France's interior ministry is expected to unveil soon proposals to widen the use of the technology, with officials keen to be able to use in certain cases such as terrorist attacks and child kidnappings.

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Citation: Facial recognition: IT and police in delicate dance (2020, June 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-06-facial-recognition-police-delicate.html>

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