Amazon to use smart cameras to watch over delivery drivers

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An Amazon. delivery driver departs a distribution facility in Hawthorne, California. The e-commerce giant said it was installing cameras which use artificial intelligence to monitor driver safety

Amazon on Thursday confirmed plans to install artificial intelligence-

imbued cameras in delivery vehicles, describing it as part of an initiative to keep drivers safe.

The cameras are designed to watch the road and the driver, noting concerns as well as good practices, according to a tutorial video.

"We are investing in safety across our operations and recently started rolling out industry leading camera-based safety technology across our delivery fleet," the e-commerce colossus said in response to an AFP inquiry.

"This technology will provide drivers real-time alerts to help them stay safe when they are on the road."

Word of Amazon watching over delivery drives with smart cameras was met with concerns about privacy and the potential for unfairly harsh scrutiny by the company.

"This amounts to the largest expansion of corporate surveillance in human history," Fight for the Future deputy directory Evan Green said in a released statement from the digital rights group.

"We're demanding that Amazon immediately stop the roll out of this unsafe program, and we call on Congress to launch a full investigation into Amazon's surveillance empire."

The Seattle-based company has faced criticism over work conditions at its vast logistics network, which includes using contractors for deliveries.

Amazon said the sophisticated camera systems were by Netradyne, a California firm which uses video monitored by artificial intelligence to improve safety.

The camera system uses machine learning "to recognize distracted driving behaviors and risky situations," according to the Netradyne website.

Amazon cited research showing these systems can reduced accidents through in-cab warnings and by improving driver behavior.

The video presentation indicated the cameras included no live feeds to monitor the drivers in real time.

Ring redux?

Green worried that Amazon would make delivery vehicle camera feeds or recordings available to police, similar to the way people who buy the company's Ring door bells and home-security cameras can opt to share video with law enforcement agencies.

"These devices will exacerbate the unsafe and inhumane working conditions that Amazon's contract delivery drivers are already subjected to," Green said.

The news comes days after Amazon agreed to pay $61.7 million to settle charges it withheld tips from its independent delivery drivers over two and a half years..

The US Federal Trade Commission said the agreement settles a complaint that Amazon failed to give the full tip amounts to drivers in its Amazon Flex program.

Amazon is one of several e-commerce firms that have been accused of misappropriating tips while promising to give the full amounts to drivers.

An Amazon spokesperson said at the time that the company had cleared

up way it reported pay to drivers and was "pleased to put this matter behind us."

Word of plans to keep an eye on drivers with smart cameras comes as Amazon continues to face criticism regarding the pressure and demands put on its workers, particularly those in logistics centers where speed and efficiency are high priorities.

Amazon is the second largest employer in the US with more than 800,000 employees, most of whom are "essential workers" who can't do their jobs from home, according to letter it recently sent offering to make its network part of the government's Covid-19 vaccination effort.

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