

Prying eyes and ears—the impact of Facebook's Project Aria on people's privacy

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The rapid evolution and spread of digital technology raise various privacy and ethical issues both for those developing technologies and for the public. Some new technology contains small cameras that can be

easily disguised in public, with photo and video data that can be recorded, distributed, exploited and combined with previously collected data. A case in point is Project Aria, launched by tech giant Facebook, in which new mapping technology has been combined with augmented reality (AR) glasses equipped with a smart camera and microphones, enabling users to record and track both public and private spaces, and the people within them—including those who may or may not wish to participate.

The [ethical issues](#) raised by Project Aria are part of the research areas of Sally Applin from HRAF Advanced Research Centres, UK and Catherine Flick from the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility at De Montfort University, UK. Applin and Flick have published their concerns in a paper in Elsevier's *Journal of Responsible Technology*.

In AR, a user's perception of reality is enhanced by additional computer-generated information that is delivered as a computer graphics-style "overlay" viewed through glasses, goggles or a smartphone screen. One use case is from the U.S. Army, which has developed an eyepiece that provides its soldiers with the precise locations of and distances to the people and objects they observe.

Facebook's Project Aria glasses are described as a "research device" that will record the user's location as well as their video, audio and eye-tracking data. The data collected will enable Facebook to lay the groundwork for future AR devices.

Facebook intends Project Aria glasses to be used everywhere, including in public spaces—or "the commons"—such as streets, parks, stations and other places that are provided from public funds. However, through partnerships with major eyewear manufacturers, the Facebook AR glasses will be designed to look like normal glasses. making it

challenging for people to realize who is wearing them, whether they are being recorded, and how to decline to be recorded. In this respect, this technology differs from more obvious AR glasses on the market, as well as from smartphones.

"Facebook is on the precipice of deploying multiple thousands of pairs of augmented reality glasses—all capable of recording video and audio of others in the commons—yet is incapable of providing adequate means for those other people to opt out, without being recorded in the process."

In the paper, Applin and Flick describe a future commons where some people are wearing smart glasses and are able to record what goes on, while others are unable to easily opt out. They also foresee other companies and individuals creating their own versions of AR glasses in order to compete and participate in using AR technology. Applin and Flick synthesize multiple perspectives on the deployment of the Project Aria technology into the commons, using theory, [case studies](#) and secondary research to create a holistic picture of potential impact of this attempt to introduce ubiquitous [technology](#) into the commons.

Central to the paper is an analysis of how Project Aria falls short of Facebook's own Responsible Innovation Principles. Applin and Flick examine these principles one by one, to identify whether and how Project Aria fails to meet them. They conclude: "The research in this paper shows that there is a glaring disparity between what companies say they are doing and what they are. When examined, this is found to be lacking at best, and damaging at worst."

More information: Sally A. Applin et al, Facebook's Project Aria indicates problems for responsible innovation when broadly deploying AR and other pervasive technology in the Commons, *Journal of Responsible Technology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jrt.2021.100010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrt.2021.100010)

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