

Facebook, YouTube: Firm must stop scraping faces from sites

5 February 2020, by Matt O'brien



This March 20, 2018 file photo shows the YouTube app on an iPad in Baltimore. YouTube is demanding that a facial recognition company that works with police stop harvesting its videos to identify the people in them. The Google-owned video service said Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2020 that it has sent a cease-and-desist letter to New York-based Clearview AI. The small firm has drawn scrutiny following investigative reports in January by the New York Times and BuzzFeed detailing its work with law enforcement agencies and its practice of scraping social media and other internet platforms for images. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)

Facebook joined YouTube, Twitter and payment service Venmo on Wednesday in demanding that a facial recognition company stop harvesting user images to identify the people in them, which the startup does as part of its work with police.

Facebook said it has demanded New York-based Clearview AI stop accessing or using information from its flagship site and Instagram.

"Scraping people's information violates our policies," a company spokesman said.

Clearview has drawn scrutiny following investigative reports in January by the New York

Times and BuzzFeed detailing its work with law enforcement agencies and its practice of scraping social media and other internet platforms for images.

Venmo on Wednesday said it is sending Clearview a cease-and-desist letter.

"Scraping Venmo is a violation of our terms of service and we actively work to limit and block activity that violates these policies," said Venmo spokesman Justin Higgs, who said the Paypal-owned mobile payment service is in the process of sending the letter.

Google-owned video service YouTube sent a similar letter to Clearview on Tuesday.

"YouTube's Terms of Service explicitly forbid collecting data that can be used to identify a person," YouTube spokesman Alex Joseph said in a statement Wednesday. "Clearview has publicly admitted to doing exactly that, and in response we sent them a cease and desist letter."

Clearview CEO Hoan Ton-That told CBS in an interview that it has a First Amendment right to the roughly 3 billion images it has collected.

"The way we have built our system is to only take publicly available information and index it that way," he told CBS.

He also said the technology is only used by law enforcement to identify potential criminals.

CBS was first to report the YouTube letter Wednesday. Twitter sent a similar letter in January and ordered Clearview to delete all the data it has collected from Twitter, including anything already shared with third parties. Microsoft-owned LinkedIn said Wednesday it is also looking into it and will take "appropriate action" if Clearview violated its terms.

Clearview attorney Tor Ekeland said in a statement Wednesday that the company's technology "operates much in the same way as Google's search engine."

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