

BACKGROUND

The use of facial recognition technology is becoming more common in public spaces across Europe. In many European cities, we are being recorded in real time in a way we never have been before. London is one of the most heavily monitored cities in the world, with the average resident said to be caught on CCTV up to 300 times a day. Think how much footage you end up on when commuting to work, or heading on your holidays?

CCTV is now being used by government agencies to monitor traffic in Malta, with plans to introduce crowd-safety monitoring in certain areas. What if the CCTV infrastructure we currently use could be updated to use facial recognition technology? The police in Ireland are exploring if this might be possible.

SCENARIO

Consider the following hypothetical situation. You are running late for work. You leave your house and go to get into your car, parked on the street, only to discover that you are missing a wing mirror from your car. You have no idea who did it or what happened. You now have to ring and report it to the police and end up being late for work. You hear from the police in the following weeks that the person has been found and called to court already. Using facial recognition they have been able to track who was driving the car. How do you feel about facial recognition now?

Now consider this, you're driving down a street, late at night, in an area of a city you don't know very well. A cat runs out on the road in front of you and you swerve to avoid it. You accidentally hit a wing mirror off a car parked next to you. It's late at night, no one has seen. You keep driving. A few weeks later you get a letter receiving a court summons that you have committed criminal damage and that through facial recognition your movements have been tracked and you have been proven to be driving the car. How would you feel about facial recognition then?

Those in favour of using facial recognition believe it would make others behave better and that it won't affect law-abiding people. They believe that this type of monitoring could stop others from littering, speeding and committing a crime. They also say that these systems could be valuable in situations like a missing child. It is worth noting that research shows the existence of CCTV only actually reduces crime very slightly in one specific context (carparks) internationally.

Those against facial recognition argue that using technology in this way is unfair. Facial recognition systems can be biased. The systems can struggle to correctly identify faces that are not white and are not male. They can in some instances incorrectly identify people. Those who are concerned about facial recognition systems feel that tracking and identifying innocent people without just cause is an invasion of privacy.

DISCUSS

1. How would this make you feel? Would you be in favour of using facial recognition in public spaces, or would you have some concerns?
2. How do you think this type of tracking could be used?
3. Where do you think this technology is going - in 5 years, in 20 years?
4. Should you have to give permission to allow this type of data collection? What other steps or systems could be put in place to protect all those involved if we used this technology?

FLIP Questions

1. Consider the accident described above. How sure are you that facial recognition is 100% accurate? Do you think facial recognition works the same for everyone? Now imagine your car was stolen, and then hit another car. You still get a court summons, as they say your face was identified. How would you dispute that?
2. Should governments have access to information like this? Do people have a right to privacy? At what point should governments be allowed to track its citizens? Should you have an option to opt out? Would this be fair?
3. Should the use of such powerful technologies, that are enabled by AI, be regulated? If so, who should regulate their development and use?
4. Should researchers (in academia or in companies) have to consider the potential uses for which the innovations they develop might be put? Should they be held accountable?