

The Ethics of Using Facial Recognition Technology

Facial recognition technology (FRT) is a type of artificial intelligence system that uses computer vision to identify and match facial features to features in a database. FRT is often used with cameras to identify individuals within a surveillance feed. FRT can potentially be used for great good, but it can easily be manipulated and abused.

The use of FRT combined with surveillance technology is a potent tool for police officers and people trying to help communities deal with criminal justice issues. For example, FRT can comb through security feeds to find a match to discover the last recorded whereabouts of a missing person. It can identify criminals and help police track them down. It can run background checks and identify dangerous people in airports, even those wearing disguises.

However, facial recognition technology is not perfect. China currently leads the world in the use and export of FRT, applying the technology to everyday tasks such as paying for groceries, checking out books at school, and tracking attendance. In recent years, the Chinese government has started a campaign of discrimination and detainment against ethnic minorities in mainland China, predominantly Muslims and ethnic groups such as the Kazaks and Turkish Uyghurs (the largest demographic in the northwest region of Xinjiang). Concerned about the rise of separatist ideas, the government is using FRT to surveil, track, and detain Uyghur citizens if any semblance of “religious extremism” or “terrorism” is found. The technology is even used to track events at which Uyghurs gather, their purchases of new phones, the Ramadan fast, and donations to mosques. Human rights organizations have confirmed that arrested and detained Uyghur citizens are sent to mass internment and re-education camps, where survivors describe human rights abuses and crimes against humanity.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the promise of creating a safe society through surveillance worth the loss of privacy?
2. Can the use of FRT be justified if the cost is censorship and discrimination?
3. To what extent are people entitled to privacy?