

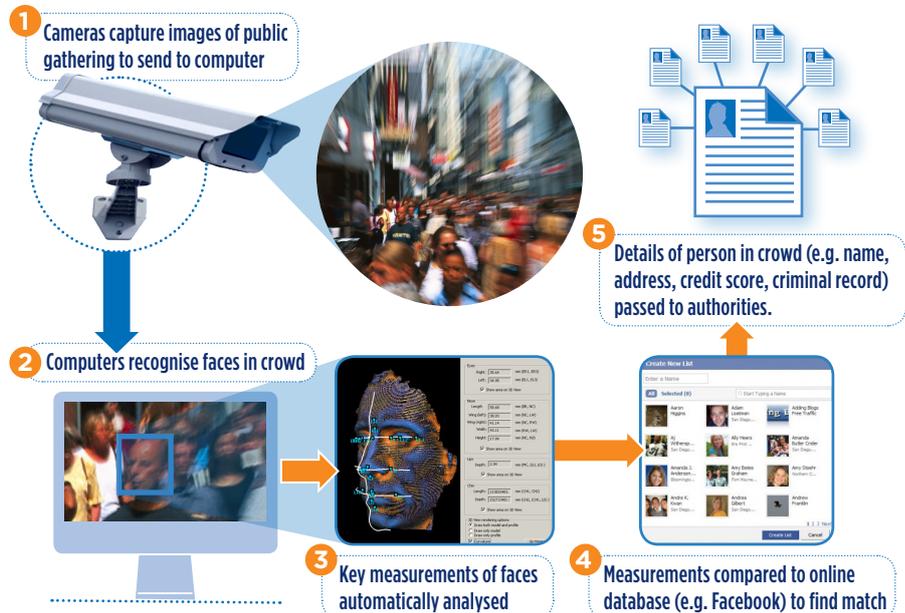
Facebook to be sued over 'Orwellian' spy software

New computer programmes that automatically recognise people in photos are worrying privacy campaigners, who say the technology could become a tool of oppression.



ICT
PSHE
SCIENCE
CITIZENSHIP

HOW FACE RECOGNITION COULD PICK YOU OUT IN A CROWD



Tagging friends manually in Facebook photographs can be a bore, especially for people who are trigger-happy with their cameras. So the world's most popular social networking site introduced a new feature: a computer programme that can gather information about people's faces and recognise them automatically in new pictures – a useful time-saver.

This is just one use of an increasingly popular technology. Face recognition is now being used for security – to unlock some Android phones, for example. Another smartphone app uses face recognition with cameras in clubs and bars to tell potential customers the average age of the people inside – and how many of them are girls. Special face-scanning electronic billboards will be appearing this month in several major cities. They will analyse the faces of passers-by to decide which sort of advert they should be shown, based on age, gender and attention levels.

For business leaders, this sort of approach has a lot of potential. But the rapid development of the technology has campaigners worried. As a recent experiment showed, it is extremely easy, once you plug someone's face into a facial recognition programme, to find out much more about them than their age. Comparing facial data to information online could give you someone's full identity, hobbies, credit rating and perhaps even home address. That information, captured by a camera inside a billboard, could be beamed anywhere.

In principle, campaigners say, we are now getting close to a world where computer programmes can use the CCTV cameras scattered around cities to track all of us wherever we go. It is no surprise then that among the most enthusiastic customers for face recognition programmes are police forces.

A small backlash is already beginning. Officials in Germany are now preparing

to take Facebook to court, accusing it of breaking the law by failing to tell users clearly when it began gathering facial recognition information earlier this year.

FACE OFF

Are such privacy worries just paranoia? The internet means we all now leave huge trails of data behind us whatever we do online – but that data is not used to harm us. By and large, it makes life better (or at least makes for more interesting adverts). Face recognition is just the same thing transferred to the real world. It could also have really useful applications like identifying criminals or finding lost children.

Face recognition is a step too far, campaigners reply. It could strip us of the anonymity we enjoy in crowds – as part of protests for example. It puts too powerful a tool into the hands of governments and police, a tool that could one day be used to destroy personal freedom.

Q & A

Q Why is face recognition just appearing now? How hard can it be?

A Surprisingly hard. Human brains are incredibly good at it, but we have evolved to recognise faces over thousands of years. There is actually a neurological condition called prosopagnosia in which our biological face recognition systems get turned off.

Q What happens then?

A Recognising people becomes difficult or even impossible. It's a real problem.

Q What does it mean to say face recognition programmes are Orwellian?

A In his famous novel *1984*, George Orwell imagined a totalitarian world in which everyone was under surveillance all the time. The slogan printed on walls and

propaganda posters was: 'Big Brother is watching you!'

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'There will be no room for privacy in the societies of the future.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?