Is Congress Full of Crooks? Amazon's Rekognition Software Thinks So!

August 1, 2018 - Two weeks ago we told you that Amazon was running a test with Florida law enforcement to text its "Rekognition" facial recognition software. The test has raised alarms in privacy circles but based on prior Supreme Court rulings, we suspect that any identifications they make will hold up in court. With that said, the ACLU decided to run a test of the software themselves. The used pictures of member of congress and compared them to a database of 25,000 known criminals. Rekognition matched 25 members of Congress with the database; effectively saying that they were criminals. While we wouldn't have too much trouble finding people who think that members of congress should be locked up, we're not sure this is the way to go about that.

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Amazon has been quick to fire back at the ACLU's test. They announced that the test was run using the software's default setting of 80% accuracy. But when the test was rerun by the company using a 99% accuracy setting, not a single member of congress was flagged.

Very frankly, nobody is likely to be convicted of a crime any time soon on facial recognition data alone. This type of software is simply another tool for law enforcement to use to narrow down a pool of suspects, or to help them determine where specific suspects have been seen. But as with any tool of this type, mission creep is a very real concern. As the technology improves and the software becomes more accurate, mission creep is inevitable. With enough computer power and surveillance cameras, it would be quite simple for law enforcement to track everything we do as individuals.

Just as disturbing as law enforcement usage, commercial use of facial recognition could be even more intrusive. Everyone from retailers to private investigators could gain access to your history of movement in the United States with the click of a button.

Recently, Microsoft called to regulation of this type of software. That's probably a very good call but one that will face some significant headwinds. Amazon and other commercial interests are unlikely to support such a call. This combined with the fact that the public isn't clamoring for regulation are likely to mean that it won't happen anytime soon; if ever at all.
byJim Malmberg
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