San Francisco Becomes First City to Ban Facial Recognition for City Government

May 16, 2019 - The City of San Francisco just became the first city in the United States to ban the use of facial recognition software for city departments. Itâ€™s a blanket ban that is a reaction to privacy concerns raised over the use of this type of software. But the ban wasn't well thought out, doesn't place limits on commercial uses of such software and could very well create problems for the city's residents.

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s.type = 'text/javascript';
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
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})();
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There is no doubt that facial recognition systems raise some legitimate privacy concerns. But many of the issues being raised by their use are due to misconceptions about how the systems are actually used. This is especially true when it comes to law enforcement use of these systems.

Once a facial recognition program picks a criminal suspect out of a pool of pictures, that's not the end of the story. Nobody is going to be prosecuted based simply on that. All the program does is narrow down a suspect pool. Police will still need to investigate and provide evidence.

The same is true when the police actually know who they are looking for. Facial recognition allows police to sort through large numbers of pictures over a wide geographic area and gives them the ability to focus their resources. In short, it can help them get the bad actors off the streets.

These systems can also provide immeasurable benefits to crime victims when time is of the essence. In cased of child abduction for instance, they can provide a resource that can mean the difference between life and death for victims. But not in San Francisco.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors didn't appear to take any of these issues into consideration when voting on their ban. At the same time, they didn't do anything to regulate the commercial use of this type of system. That means it's ok for retailers to track your every move and store your biometric data. And the ban doesn't impact the use of facial recognition by the state or the federal government either.

The ban also requires city agencies to get permission from the Board of Supervisors to use facial recognition data that is shared by private citizens and companies. For instance, if someone robs a store, and the store identifies the culprit through facial recognition, the police may not be able to use that information to make an arrest. Do they need to seek

permission from the Board of Supervisors first? It sure sounds like they do.

Frankly, what San Francisco did was anything but well thought out. We're all for regulating the use of systems that impact privacy. But what we're having trouble with is we're not sure who San Francisco is trying to protect with this new law. It's almost as if they're trying play off of people's fears and stuff the genie back in the bottle. We get it, but that never works. They would have been much better off trying to setup a regulatory regimen that allows for beneficial uses, but which also carefully monitors systems for bad actors.

Personally, I'm a lot more concerned with private sector databases that store this type of biometric information than I am with law enforcement uses of it.
byJim Malmberg
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