The Guardian

one stop english

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

Level 3 ● Advanced

1 Warmer

In which of these places do you expect to see security cameras? Do you agree or disagree with their use in each case? Think of reasons.

1. in airports
2. in restaurants
3. in the street

4. on buses or trains
5. at sports venues
6. in department stores

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

tantalizing	deterrent	suspect	erosion	blip
surveillance	anonymity	ethnic group	entrenched	blurred

1. _____ is a situation where a person is not known.

2. A _____ is someone who the police believe has committed a crime.

3. _____ is the process of carefully watching people who might be involved in criminal activity.

4. If something is described as _____, it makes you feel excited or hopeful about something you want, often something that you never get.

5. An _____ is a set of people with the same culture and traditions who live in a place where most people have a different culture and different traditions.

6. A _____ is something that makes people decide not to do something by making them realize that something unpleasant could happen to them.

7. When something is _____, it has existed for a long time and is difficult to change or remove.

8. A _____ is a minor problem that does not last very long.

9. If the boundaries between two things become _____, those things become more similar so that you are no longer sure that they are clearly different.

10. _____ is the gradual reduction of something important.

3 What do you know?

Decide whether these statements are true (T) or false (F). Then check your answers by reading the text.

1. In 2019, New York became the first city in America to ban facial recognition.

2. Police in China managed to arrest a man in a crowd of 50,000 by using facial recognition technology.

3. There is one CCTV camera for every 11 people in the UK.

4. A bar in London uses facial recognition technology to identify potential criminals.

5. British governments have supported the use of CCTV technology since the 1970s.

6. Apart from some limited police trials, only private businesses can use facial recognition technology in the UK.

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

Level 3 ● Advanced

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

The use of the technology in places like London's King's Cross is on the rise – and chipping away at our already fragile privacy

Luke Dormehl

13 August, 2019

1 Compared with living in a small community, where everyone knows you, big cities have always offered a large degree of anonymity. You are just one tiny speck in a sea of humanity. It is a place where one can slip, unnoticed, into the crowd and where people can, should they wish, reinvent themselves.

2 Unless they decide to go for a walk at the King's Cross development in central London, that is. The owners of the site confirmed recently that facial recognition technology was being used "in the interest of public safety and to ensure that everyone who visits has the best possible experience." It's not clear how many facial recognition-enabled cameras are being used, how long they have been operating for or exactly what the technology is being used for.

3 The application of facial recognition technology is rising fast. Recently, a bar in London proudly announced that it was using the technology to identify queuing patrons. In exchange for the temporary loan of your face, you need no longer be pushed in front of by sharp-elbowed fellow drinkers. In China in 2018, meanwhile, police arrested a suspect singled out by the technology in a crowd of 50,000 people attending a pop concert. And so the examples continue.

4 Facial recognition is, at least as far as surveillance technologies go, pretty cool. It allows us to unlock our phones by taking a quick selfie. At a growing number of hotels, casinos, cruise ships, high street shops and airports around the world, it promises our own glimpse of celebrity exclusivity. We can be singled out for special treatment, whether it's barriers in the airport that lift as we approach or retail staff who know our preferences before we even speak.

5 The use of facial recognition at locations such as the King's Cross development (home to Google's UK headquarters) relies on one of the big advances facial recognition has made in recent years. Rather than simply being able to match a still image, modern facial recognition systems can now work with live video, in something very close to real time. They can also cope with messy things such as variable lighting sources, which makes them a tantalizing prospect for surveillance systems.

6 Techno-fans may be thrilled with a technology that once belonged in the realm of sci-fi – but there are good reasons to be concerned about facial recognition's creeping presence. A number of researchers have noted that facial recognition algorithms can be less accurate when it comes to identifying individuals from certain ethnic groups. This increases the probability of false positives – particularly damaging when the technology is being used for security purposes.

7 But even if these faults were to be addressed (and they are being worked on), this story nonetheless highlights the growing pervasiveness of facial recognition, whether large numbers of people want it or not. The UK is, in many ways, the perfect testing ground for such technologies. It's long been one of the most surveilled countries in the world, based on the number of CCTV video surveillance cameras. There is estimated to be one CCTV camera per 11 people in the UK, with considerably higher proportions in crowded cities.

8 Most of these belong to private businesses, although successive governments have also supported the use of the technology since the 1990s. Ignoring potential evidence to the contrary, governments have frequently accepted the idea that video surveillance works as a deterrent and an identifier. When it launched its *CCTV: Looking Out for You* programme in the early 1990s, then-prime minister John Major noted that, "I have no doubt we will hear some protest about a threat to civil liberties with the advent of the new technology. Well, I have no sympathy whatsoever for so-called liberties of that kind." This is, needless to say, a "like-it-or-lump-it" argument that is disturbing i n its bluntness.

9 Facial recognition is simply the latest example of these tools, which have already become an entrenched part of life in the UK. Perhaps that's why police trials of facial recognition technology by London's Metropolitan Police and South Wales Police caused little more than a blip on the consternation scale.

10 In 2019, San Francisco became the first city in America to ban facial recognition. While this ban

The Guardian

one stop english

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

Level 3 ● Advanced

covers only its use by city agencies like the police department and not private businesses, it's an important symbolic step that could trigger similar legislation elsewhere.

11 Could something similar happen in the UK? Already used in many private businesses, the deployment of facial recognition in a semi-public area like the King's Cross development shows how blurred the boundaries between public and private space can become. According to a report from the *Financial Times*, similar technology may also soon be adopted at locations in Canary Wharf. In these cases, there is no explicit opt-in from members of the public, and the technology is implemented entirely under the (perhaps questionable) assumption that doing so will prevent crime.

12 "We can't place the responsibility on the consumer to act on this; there needs to be robust regulation put in place soon to provide ethical safeguards," Lee Waters, a Welsh Labour Assembly Member who has spoken out frequently about the impact of technology, told me. "But with Whitehall paralysed by Brexit, this is another area we are neglecting."

13 Whether this marks the start of a genuine public conversation on this subject or simply the continued erosion of public privacy remains to be seen. I wish I could be more confident that it would mean the former. But recent history gives us every reason to fear the latter.

© Guardian News and Media 2019

First published in *The Guardian*, 13/08/19

4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answers according to the text.

1. What, according to the article, is one of the big advances that facial recognition has made in recent years?

    a. It allows people to unlock their phones.

    b. It can now work with video in something very close to real time.

    c. It makes people feel like celebrities as retail staff know what they like before they even speak.

2. What problem with facial recognition have some researchers noted?

    a. It is less accurate when identifying people from some ethnic groups.

    b. It is damaging when it is used for security purposes.

    c. It singles people out for special treatment.

3. Why is the ban on facial recognition in San Francisco not all it seems?

    a. It only applies to city agencies and not to private businesses.

    b. It is nothing more than a symbolic step for other cities to copy.

    c. It has only been applied in semi-public areas.

4. What, according to people in favour of facial recognition, is its main purpose?

    a. to identify queuing customers in bars

    b. to allow people to remain anonymous in large crowds

    c. to provide security and prevent crime

The Guardian

one stop english

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

Level 3 ● Advanced

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a noun meaning *a very small spot or mark* (para 1)

2. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *choose one person from a group for special attention* (para 3)

3. a noun meaning *the process of spreading through the whole of something and becoming a very obvious feature of it* (para 7)

4. a five-word verb phrase meaning *accept a situation even though you do not like it or agree with it* (para 8)

5. a noun meaning *a shocked or worried feeling, often caused when something unexpected happens* (para 9)

6. a verb meaning *make something happen* (para 10)

7. a noun meaning *the process of beginning to use something* (para 11)

8. an adjective meaning *strong and successful* (para 12)

6 Complete the phrases

Complete the phrases from the text using these words.

impact	threat	interest	humanity	questionable	symbolic

1. a sea of _____

2. a _____ assumption

3. the _____ of technology

4. in the _____ of public safety

5. an important _____ step

6. a _____ to civil liberties

7 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

1. In big cities, people can usually remain _____ in the crowd. [NOTICE]

2. New live-video technology can cope with _____ lighting sources. [VARY]

3. There is one CCTV camera for every 11 people in the UK, with _____ more in crowded cities. [CONSIDER]

4. _____ UK governments have supported the use of surveillance technology. [SUCCEED]

5. The 'like-it-or-lump-it' argument was described as disturbing in its _____. [BLUNT]

6. The author is unsure whether this is the start of a genuine public conversation or the continued erosion of public _____. [PRIVATE]

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

• What's the problem? People who obey the law have nothing to fear from surveillance cameras.

• Mobile phone tracking technology, facial recognition ... What next? CCTV in everyone's home?

• Surely it would be quite easy to fool this technology by growing a beard, using make-up or wearing sunglasses.

KEY

2 Key words

1. anonymity
2. suspect
3. surveillance
4. tantalizing
5. ethnic group
6. deterrent
7. entrenched
8. blip
9. blurred
10. erosion

3 What do you know?

1. F (San Francisco)
2. T
3. T
4. F (to identify customers who are queuing)
5. F (since the 1990s)
6. T

4 Comprehension check

1. b
2. a
3. a
4. c

5 Find the word

1. speck
2. single out
3. pervasiveness
4. like it or lump it
5. consternation
6. trigger
7. deployment
8. robust

6 Complete the phrases

1. humanity
2. questionable
3. impact
4. interest
5. symbolic
6. threat

7 Word-building

1. unnoticed
2. variable (or *varying*)
3. considerably
4. successive
5. bluntness
6. privacy