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Recognition Technology

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As some cities and states crack down on government use of facial-recognition software, a national advocacy group is going a step further by calling for an outright federal ban on the technology.

On Tuesday, the Worcester, Mass.-based nonprofit Fight for the Future launched what it calls the first national campaign calling for a federal prohibition on all uses of facial recognition technology by governments.

The online launch of BanFacialRecognition.com enables constituents to directly contact their congressional and local representatives, urging them to ban surveillance technology that the group says disproportionately impacts people of color and immigrant communities. A recent MIT Media Lab study concluded that facial recognition misidentifies women and darker skinned people at a higher rate than white males.

“This isn’t preventing a dystopian future – it’s something that’s happening right now,” Fight for the Future Deputy Director Evan Greer said in an interview.

A recent Washington Post investigation revealed that Federal Bureau of Investigation and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents used facial recognition technology to scan millions of Americans’ driver’s licenses without their consent to track down suspects or locate undocumented immigrants. “If Congress doesn’t act to press pause and ban it there’s going to be greater ubiquity,” said Greer.

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Jordan (R-OH), concerned about civil liberties risks.

The sentiment is echoed by nonprofits that represent marginalized communities, such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “ICE’s use of driver’s license databases — without the knowledge or consent of the license holders — is a dangerous abuse of government power,” said CAIR Communications Director Ibrahim Hooper in a statement. “Facial recognition technology is riddled with racial and gender bias and it should not be used by any government agency to target marginalized communities.”

Meanwhile, Amazon has said it plans to continue selling its facial recognition software to law enforcement. Amazon shareholders rejected an activist proposal urging the company to stop selling the technology to governments during an annual shareholder meeting in May.

Fight for the Future will also launch a digital map that showcases cities and states considering regulations or bans of facial recognition technology.

San Francisco became the first city to ban the use of facial-recognition technology by municipal agencies, followed last month by Somerville, Massachusetts. The Berkeley and Oakland city councils in California will vote on similar legislation this month. Massachusetts lawmakers are considering a statewide moratorium on the use of facial recognition technology, while the California legislature is considering a bill that would ban the pairing of face and other biometric surveillance with body-worn cameras.

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