Britain | Facial awareness   **Sep 3rd 2024**

Police use of facial recognition in Britain is spreading

The riots have given the technology a boost. Regulation is not keeping up

Britons spend large chunks of their lives on camera. The country has up to 6m closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras—one for every 11 people in the country, the third-highest penetration rate in the world after America and China. To help identify rioters in the wake of violent protests that swept parts of the country in early August, police officers are collecting footage from mosques and shops that were vandalised. Some are releasing
5   CCTV footage to the public to identify suspects. Others are using another technology to get the job done—facial recognition.

Facial-recognition systems use artificial intelligence (AI) to match images to identities. Retrospective facial recognition of the sort being used to pursue rioters compares CCTV footage with suspects; real-time use involves live images being compared with the faces of people who have been placed on "watch lists".

10 Surveys suggest that Britons accept the arguments for facial recognition. A poll taken in March found that 60% of Britons are comfortable with the police's use of the technology in real time to identify criminals in a crowd. That share is likely to have risen as a result of the riots. Scouring images to find troublemakers takes a lot longer if only humans are involved. The South Wales police force identifies 200 suspects every month using the technology; without facial recognition it takes 14 days on average to find a suspect. Sir Keir Starmer, the
15 prime minister, has pledged to increase use of the technology in response to the disorder this summer.

That adds urgency to questions about how it is regulated. The Investigatory Powers Act, which regulates some forms of surveillance, was recently amended to allow government agencies to use AI to process data sets when there is "no expectation of privacy". But Karen Yeung, a professor of law at Birmingham University, points out that there is no legislation specifically covering facial recognition. "Police forces are guided by a complex
20 patchwork of regulation, which in effect means there is little oversight on the use of the technology."

There is, for example, no clear criterion determining when facial recognition can be deployed; instead decisions are left to the discretion of each police force. The College of Policing, a professional body, offers guidance on who can be placed on watch lists before deploying live facial recognition, but the categories can be very broad. The Justice and Home Affairs Committee called in January for watch lists to be subject to uniform standards
25 across police forces. Other jurisdictions have much more stringent rules. Under the EU's AI Act, for example, the use of real-time facial recognition is allowed only when it is approved by a judge.

There is no central register of AI technologies in Britain, either. Public bodies and all 43 police forces in England and Wales are free to employ any AI tools they like, making it impossible to know where and how they are being used. Critics argue that this lack of transparency could lead, among other things, to discrimination—
30 some systems are better at recognising white faces, which may mean more false identifications of non-white individuals.

Use of the technology will almost certainly spread further. Sir Mark Rowley, the Met's commissioner, believes that facial recognition will transform policing "in the way that DNA transformed investigative work 30 years ago". But Fraser Sampson, the last surveillance-camera commissioner (the post has now been abolished), argues
35 that the lack of regulation could lead to a backlash against the technology. The survey in March also found that only 19% of Britons trust police forces to use biometric tools "responsibly". A clearer regulatory framework would probably help build confidence.

(600 words)