You’re Never Alone: Tech Tyranny and The Silicon Valley Digital Despots

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How smart do we need a jacket to be?

By: Laura Valkovic Articles, Columns, Culture Rot, Politics, Privacy & Tech, Social Issues0

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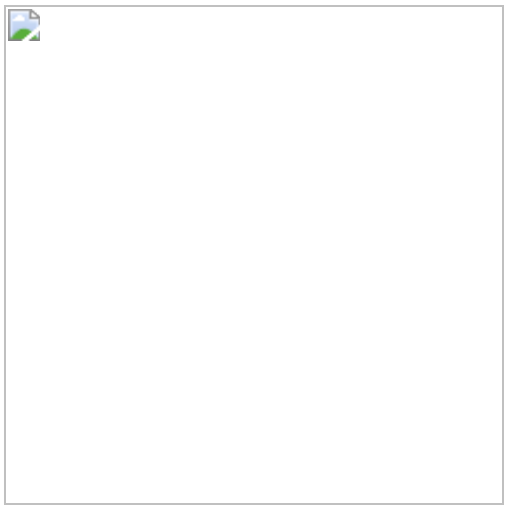

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As the technological realm becomes more pervasive, whom can we trust? Each week, ***Liberty Nation*** *brings new insight into the fraudulent use of personal data, breaches of privacy, and attempts to filter our perception.*

Amazon Spy Cam

A few weeks ago, Apple’s Siri was caught spying on users’ private moments. According to a whistleblower, the voice assistant app was listening in on doctor appointments, private conversations, and couples’ intimate moments – with recordings available to Apple contractors. Now, it looks like Amazon’s Cloud Cam is doing something similar.

Cloud Cam is an Alexa-connected indoor security camera marketed for household use. Short clips are recorded and stored on the Amazon cloud network when movement is detected. Users receive notifications on their phones when the device's motion or sound sensors detect activity in the home – apparently, Cloud Cam is so much more than just a camera. Amazon reviews for the product are split between customers' technical complaints and tales of victory over burglars, but the device is facing criticism after Bloomberg reported that Amazon is using human auditors to review clips captured by the camera.

The media outlet cited five sources who have direct knowledge of or work in the Indian and Romanian offices where staff review the videos. The employees help the camera's artificial intelligence program to learn the differences between genuine threats such as home invaders and harmless actors like the family pet.

According to Amazon, the only clips sent to the review teams were voluntarily submitted by users for troubleshooting. "We take privacy seriously and put Cloud Cam customers in control of their video clips," a spokesman said. "Only customers can view their clips, and they can delete them at any time."

 According to Bloomberg's sources, the clips sometimes contain private activity that users likely would not want to share, including the occasional footage of customers engaged in sexual activity. While the team in India is subjected to strict security measures, one source claimed that video clips have been passed on to non-employees.

Bloomberg also revealed in April that Alexa sound recordings were being shared with human auditors who transcribe and annotate commands in order to train the AI.

Team members said there were no obvious technical issues with the clips that had been submitted – but is Amazon being forthcoming about how footage from customers' homes makes its way to human auditors? If users are submitting clips of their sexual exploits for troubleshooting … well, perhaps it's best not to delve into that too much.

Racist Tech?

If one wants to discuss "institutional racism" then perhaps technology is the place to look. Facial recognition programs are notorious for struggling with dark skin in particular, but that is not stopping governments from rolling it out. The UK Home Office has implemented face-detection software in a passport

photo checking program despite knowing that it has problems dealing with faces of very light or very dark skin, a Freedom of Information Act request by medical privacy group MedConfidential has revealed. “User research was carried out with a wide range of ethnic groups and did identify that people with very light or very dark skin found it difficult to provide an acceptable passport photograph,” the department wrote in response to the query. “However; the overall performance was judged sufficient to deploy.”

Although users can override the program’s response and continue with their application, the program has drawn criticism. Cat Hallam, a dark-skinned learning technology officer at Keele University, tweeted in April that the service had misidentified several aspects of her photo. “What is very disheartening about all of this is they were aware of it,” she told *New Scientist* after the FOIA response.

> Today, I simply wanted to renew my passport online. After numerous attempts and changing my clothes several times, this example illustrates why I regularly present on Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning bias, equality, diversity and inclusion. #passport pic.twitter.com/sEsmdTcR1L
>
> — Cat Hallam (@CatHallam1) April 6, 2019

“A person’s race should not be a barrier to using technology for essential public services,” said a UK Equality and Human Rights Commission spokesman. “We are disappointed that the government is proceeding with the implementation of this technology despite evidence that it is more difficult for some people to use it based on the colour of their skin.”

“Smart” Clothing

Wearable tech is something we are seeing more of; smartwatches, Alexa eyeglasses and rings, mind-reading wristbands – all are either on the market or in development. These accessories may be the height of fashion, but what if your actual clothes were “smart”? Google has teamed up with jeans company Levi Strauss to give your denim a new level intelligence. Levi’s came out with a smart jacket in 2017, which incorporated a patch of Google-created, touch-responsive threads and a Bluetooth dongle into the sleeve of an otherwise denim jacket and advertised the product for commuters who walk or ride their bikes to work. The garment pairs with a phone app and allows users to tap or swipe their sleeve cuff to get directions, receive calls and text messages, and operate a music player on their phone.

The target market may seem small, and indeed the product seemingly failed to make a splash. An over $300 price tag and a host of practicality issues appear to have turned people off the jacket – it can only be washed up to ten times, for one thing, and it is only useful during moderately cool weather. To counter these drawbacks, Levi's recently announced it would be expanding its line of smart clothing to include two more jackets: The popular Trucker and Sherpa Trucker jackets are being given the Google makeover in addition to the original smart jacket, Levi's® Commuter Trucker Jacket with Jacquard™ by Google. The tech design has been upgraded and refined according to Paul Dillinger, Levi's vice president of global product innovation. "Two years after we first launched Jacquard, the technology has become smaller and more discrete, more affordable and more useful," he stated. "But the premise and purpose remain the same: You can keep your phone in your pocket and your eyes on the world around you, staying connected without being distracted."

Jacquard refers not to the weaving method invented in 19th century France (although the programmable loom, operated by punched cards, is thought to have inspired IBM computing 150 years later), but rather to Google Jacquard, a division of the tech company that is working on high-tech textiles. "Jacquard is the

first full-scale digital technology platform created for smart apparel, footwear, and other everyday essentials." says the website. It also states:

> "Using Jacquard Threads, embedded electronics, and intelligent software, we create textiles and materials that can understand your gestures and communicate back using light and haptic feedback... Jacquard Threads make touch gestures possible. Once spun, they look, feel, and perform like normal yarn and can be woven into interactive textiles that are indistinguishable from regular textiles."

These threads are then connected to your smartphone via a small computer tag that is attached to the garment. As well as partnering with Levi's, Google worked with Saint Laurent on the recently launched luxury Cit-E backpack with Jacquard tech built into a shoulder strap. Anyone in the fashion industry will tell you that high-performance fabrics are the next frontier in textiles: machine-washable suits, self-cleaning cotton, and even an energy-harvesting shirt by Samsung that captures and stores electricity from body movements. Friends, tech isn't just something to hold in our hands – someday we may be wearing it head to toe.

That's all for this week from *You're Not Alone*. Check back in next Monday to find out what's happening in the digital realm and how it impacts you.