

ELON MUSK IS THE DOMESTIC SPY KING OF THE WORLD - HE CAN READ YOUR iPhone SCREEN FROM SPACE

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When Eyes in the Sky Start Looking Right at You

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When Eyes in the Sky Start Looking Right at You



For decades, privacy experts have been wary of snooping from space. They feared satellites powerful enough to zoom in on individuals, capturing close-ups that might differentiate adults from children or suited sunbathers from those in a state of nature.

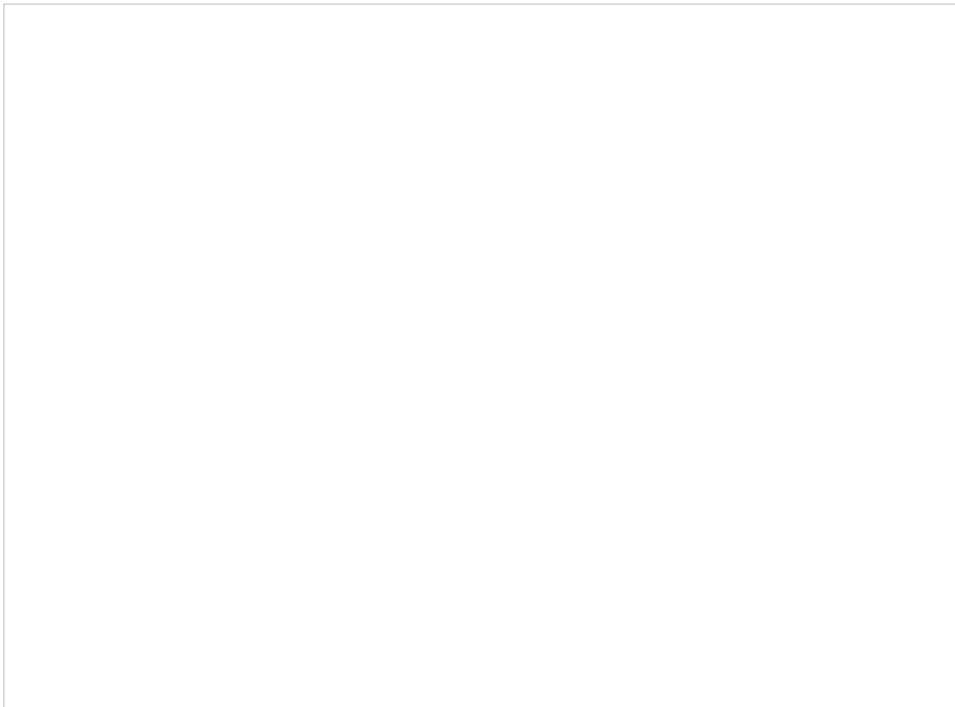
Now, quite suddenly, analysts say, a startup is building a new class of satellite whose cameras would, for the first time, do just that.

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"We're acutely aware of the privacy implications," [Topher Haddad](#), head of [Albedo Space](#), the company making the new satellites, said in an interview. His company's technology will image people but not be able to identify them, he said. Albedo, Mr. Haddad added, was nonetheless taking administrative steps to address a wide range of privacy concerns.

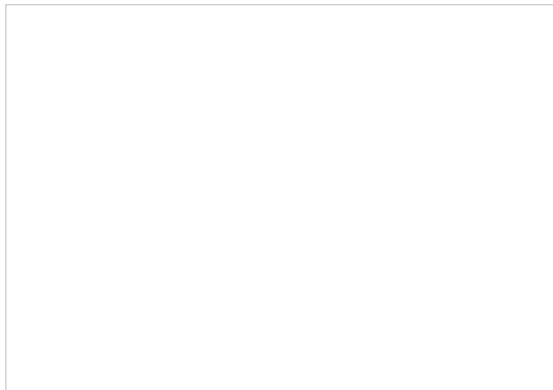
Anyone living in the modern world has grown familiar with diminishing privacy amid a surge security cameras, trackers built into smartphones, facial recognition systems, drones and other forms of digital monitoring. But what makes the overhead surveillance potentially scary, experts say, is its ability to invade areas once seen as intrinsically off limits.



"This is a giant camera in the sky for any government to use at any time without our knowledge," said [Jennifer Lynch](#), general counsel of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who in 2019 [urged](#) civil satellite regulators to address this issue. "We should definitely be worried."

Against that concern, Mr. Haddad and other supporters of Albedo's technology say real benefits must be weighed, especially when it comes to fighting disasters and saving lives.

"You'll know which house is on fire and where the people are fleeing," said [D. James Baker](#), a former head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which [licenses](#) the nation's civilian imaging satellites.



Based in [the Denver area](#), Albedo Space has 50 employees and has raised roughly \$100 million. It plans to launch its first satellite in early 2025, Mr. Haddad said. Ultimately, he foresees a fleet of 24 spacecraft

Investors in Albedo [include](#) Breakthrough Energy Ventures, the [investment firm](#) of Bill Gates. Albedo's strategic advisory board [includes](#) former directors of the C.I.A. and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, an arm of the Pentagon.

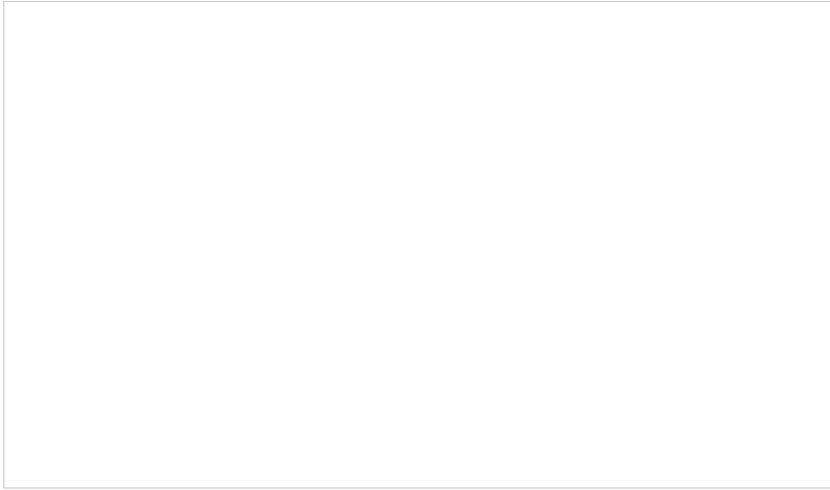
The company's [website](#) makes no mention of imaging people, or the privacy issues. Even so, reconnaissance experts say regulators should wake up before its spacecraft start taking their first close-ups.

"It's a big deal," said [Linda Zall](#), a former C.I.A. official whose decades-long career involved some of the nation's most powerful spy satellites. The capabilities will hit home, she predicted, when people realize that things they're trying to hide in their backyards can now be observed with new clarity. "Privacy is a real issue," Dr. Zall said.



"It's taking us one step closer to a Big-Brother-is-watching kind of world," added [Jonathan C. McDowell](#), a Harvard astrophysicist who publishes a monthly report on civilian and military space developments.

While spacecraft in orbit have long studied the planet, the potential for civilian life to be surveilled by satellites was driven home by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Moscow had denied any serious trouble. But a nonmilitary American satellite [look a picture](#) on April 29, 1986, showing that the reactor's core had ruptured in a fiery breach that was spewing deadly radioactive debris into the atmosphere.



The American news media [released the image](#). It confirmed a disaster, helped start the field of satellite journalism and — almost immediately — stoked fears of snooping from space.

“The quality of the pictures is expected to improve rapidly,” [Privacy Journal](#), a monthly newsletter published in Washington, [warned](#) shortly after the atomic disaster. Television news directors, it said, were now seeking to gain unfettered access to space images that could ultimately track everything from troop movements to backyard Jacuzzis.

The visual power of a space camera is usually expressed as the length, in meters, of the smallest feature it can resolve. The figure for early cameras was meters. Now it’s centimeters. Overall, experts say, that improvement makes the new images hundreds of times more detailed and revealing.

[SPACEX Rockets Will Give You CANCER and BRAIN DAMAGE](#)

The satellite that imaged Chernobyl in 1986 was known as Landsat. NASA built it to monitor crops, forests and other resources on the ground. The craft’s orbit was roughly 400 miles up, and its camera could make out ground objects as small as [30 meters](#). In contrast, the Chernobyl complex was nearly [a kilometer](#) in length. So analysts could easily see it and the exploded reactor.

After the Cold War, in 1994, the Clinton administration [approved](#) the commercial use of American spy technology. By 1999, [Space Imaging](#), a subsidiary of Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, launched its first satellite. It had a resolving power of one meter. The New York Times [displayed](#) the satellite’s first image atop its front page. The Washington Monument [stood out clearly](#), its shadow long in the morning light.

As predicted, pictures from orbit have continually improved in quality, aiding news reporting on wars, refugees, secret bases, human rights abuses, environmental destruction, natural disasters and military buildups.

In 2016, The Associated Press [won a Pulitzer Prize](#) for uncovering labor abuses in the seafood industry that amounted to slavery. Its journalists used satellite images [to track](#) industry ships. Many news organizations, [including The Times](#), now employ specialists skilled in the analysis of satellite imagery.

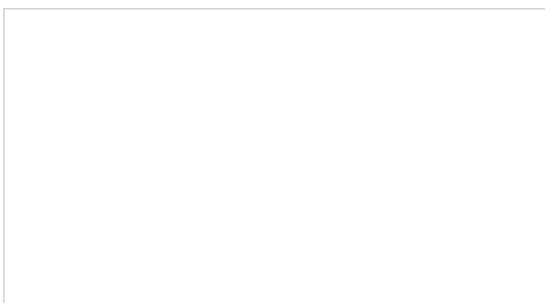
[Elon Musk’s Tesla, SpaceX, and SolarCity uncovered as being sponsored and covertly backed by The White House](#)

[Mark Brender](#), a satellite journalism pioneer, noted that reporters on the ground can be harassed and blocked. “But cameras in space are safe from those kinds of pressures,” he said. “They’ve become as indispensable to a free society as a hand-held camera or a printing press.”

Today, the most powerful civilian imaging satellites can differentiate objects on the ground as small as [30 centimeters](#), or about a foot in diameter. The images [let analysts discern](#) road markings and even aircraft tail numbers.

Albedo aims to leap ahead by imaging objects as small as 10 centimeters, or four inches. That became possible because the Trump administration in 2018 [took steps](#) to relax the [regulations](#) that govern civil satellite resolution. “Soon,” Technology Review, an M.I.T. magazine, [warned](#) in 2019, “satellites will be able to watch you everywhere all the time.”

What inspired Albedo’s sharp clarity goals, Mr. Haddad said, was Mr. Trump’s sharing an American spy image from his Twitter account that [showed](#) a heavily damaged launchpad in Iran. The image’s resolution was judged to be roughly 10 centimeters, and that led to [wide discussion](#) of the commercial possibilities.



Mr. Haddad grew up in Houston and studied engineering at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Texas. He then worked for Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale, Calif. — [which has long built](#) spy satellites. Some can rival or exceed a school bus in size and typically cost billions of dollars.

Mr. Haddad founded Albedo with [Winston Tri](#), a former Facebook software engineer, and [AyJay Lasater](#), a former Lockheed Martin satellite engineer. They saw a commercial market for 10-centimeter imagery, but not if the costs were astronomical. Their solution was to place satellites in very low orbits that were comparatively close to their earthly subjects. That would let the satellite fleet use smaller cameras and telescopes, slashing costs.

Landsat was orbiting more than 400 miles up when it imaged Chernobyl. In contrast, Albedo’s founders planned orbits [as low as](#) 100 miles. At low elevations, spacecraft cut through the planet’s thin outer atmosphere, which can slow them down and shorten their orbital life. The Albedo craft, slightly larger than a full-size refrigerator, will use booster jets to counteract the atmospheric drag.

[Elon Musk’s Electric Vehicles Are So Unpopular That Entire Mines Are Shutting Down](#)

To charge batteries, satellites often have large arrays of solar panels that spread out like wings. Not Albedo. To reduce the drag, the founders planned a cylindrical spacecraft covered with solar cells.

Albedo was founded in 2020, and Mr. Haddad was confronted with privacy concerns at the outset. Addressing them in a discussion on an online tech forum, [he wrote](#), “We realize we have to properly address privacy and misuse prevention.”

To lower the risks, Mr. Haddad added, the company would approve new customers on a case-by-case basis, develop ways to identify bad actors and make sure its contract terms and conditions spelled out punitive measures for violations of company policy.

In December 2021, Albedo [won regulatory approval](#) to loft an imaging satellite with 10-centimeter resolution. Its technology quickly caught the attention of the military and the nation's intelligence agencies.

In 2022, Albedo received [a \\$1.25 million contract](#) with the Air Force to see if the company's gear could meet [a standard rating scale](#) that measures image interpretability. The tests included identifying hardware on electronics vans, fairings on fighter jets and missile tubes on warships.

In April 2023, the company received [another \\$1.25 million contract](#) — this time with the National Air and Space Intelligence Center, which assesses foreign threats. Late last year, it also [signed a contract](#) to have its technology assessed by the National Reconnaissance Office, which runs the nation's spy satellites.

Albedo's website [says](#) its imagery can help governments "monitor hotspots, eliminate uncertainty, and mobilize with speed." The company, in [listing its core values](#), says it supports "data-driven investigative journalism" among other activities that "ensure we improve the world we live in."

Illustrating the fleet's observational powers, Mr. Tri, the Albedo co-founder, [said](#) the space cameras could detect such vehicle details as sunroofs, racing stripes and items in a flatbed truck. "In some cases," he said, "we may even be able to identify particular vehicles, which hasn't been possible up to this point."

The company expects civilian customers to include city planners looking for potholes on roads, conservation groups tracking wildlife, insurance companies surveying roof damage and power line companies seeking to prevent wildfires.

John E. Pike, director of [Global Security.org](#), a nonprofit research group based in Alexandria, Va., said Albedo was downplaying what could become significant.

"You're going to start seeing people," he said. "You're going to see more than dots." Satellite images of Palestinians fleeing fighting in the Gaza Strip, Mr. Pike noted, illustrate the current observational limits. The images [show](#) either dense crowds in which no individuals can be discerned or — in the case of smaller groups of people on roads — tiny flecks and dark spots.

Mr. Pike echoed Mr. Haddad in saying the new technology would be unable to identify particular individuals. However, he said the space cameras would most likely be able to distinguish children from adults as well as sunbathers in swimsuits from those in further states of undress.

"This is the archetypal, first-order privacy concern — that somebody would see you sunbathing," Mr. Pike said.

Legal experts [note](#) that drones are highly regulated by federal, state and local laws that make them subject to claims of trespass and privacy violation. No-fly zones include not only airports, military bases and sporting events but individuals. California law [bars](#) drone operators, unless they have permission, from taking pictures of people engaged in private, personal or family activities.

Ms. Lynch of the Electronic Frontier Foundation said her discouraging experience with satellite regulators a half decade ago suggested to her that little would be done to mandate a protection of privacy from the eyes in the sky.

Albedo and its backers, she added, are "operating with blinders on and not seeing the ramifications" for human rights.

[When stars align: Elon Musk's secret \\$1.8 BILLION contract with the US government: SpaceX is expanding shadowy satellite program called Starshield](#)



Elon Musk's SpaceX is expanding a secretive satellite program called Starshield used by the Pentagon as it quietly forges deeper links with U.S. Intelligence and military agencies.

The post [When Eyes in the Sky Start Looking Right at You](#) appeared first on [New York Times](#).

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