

The Beijing Times Special Report on the Abuses of Facial Recognition Technology

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Nearly half of the evaluation apps did not solicit user opinions separately, and many scenic spots and communities forced to "brush their faces"

Editor: Ke Rui

Facial recognition technology has been abused to varying degrees in shopping malls, scenic spots, residential neighborhoods, office buildings, and government agencies



Caption: On January 21, in a residential neighborhood in Chaoyang District, residents were opening the corridor door via facial recognition. Photo by The Beijing News reporter Li Kaixiang.

When China's "first case involving face recognition," which received much attention, went to appeal not long ago, it once again brought the topic of "face scans" into public view.

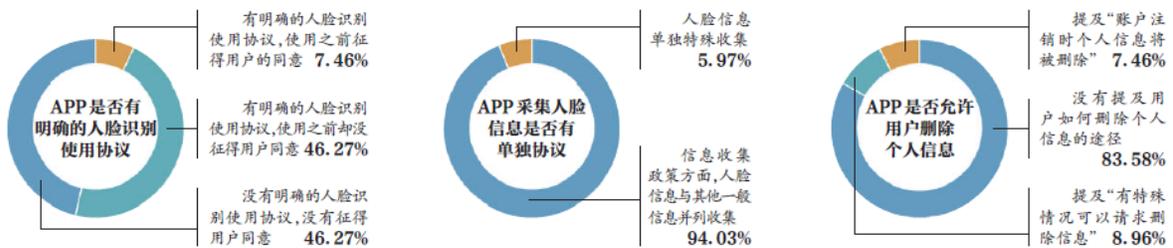
From this "first case involving facial recognition" to cases where prospective house buyers in Jinan would wear helmets to look at houses (to avoid being captured by facial recognition in the sales offices), there has been a lot of controversy in the use of face recognition. At the same time, people have become more alert toward this life-altering technology.

Recently, The Beijing News Think Tank conducted an evaluation on 78 popular apps.

The evaluation found that 67 apps support face recognition. Among the APPs that support the face recognition function, 46.27% of the apps do not have a clear face recognition use agreement, and the user's consent is not obtained in the face recognition function.

In addition, The Beijing News Think Tank found through investigations that facial recognition technology has been abused to varying degrees in shopping malls, scenic spots, residential neighborhoods, office buildings, and government agencies.

Survey of 67 popular apps found 90% of them mix up facial information with general information



Left circle

- 46.27% of apps do not have a clear facial recognition usage agreement; do not obtain user permission
- 46.27% of apps do have a clear facial recognition usage agreement; do not obtain user permission before usage
- 7.46% have clear facial recognition usage agreements; do obtain user permission before usage

Mid circle

- 94.03% of apps collect facial information along with other general information
- 5.97% of apps collect facial information on its own

Right circle

- 83.58% do not tell users how to delete their personal information
- 8.96% tell users that “if there’s special circumstances, you can ask to delete your information.”
- 7.46% tell users that “when accounts log out, personal information will be deleted.”

The Beijing News Think Tank survey found that most of the commonly used apps currently have a "facial recognition" function, which is mostly used for face-swiping login and identity authentication; some social apps can also determine whether the user has qualifications for live streaming during face-swiping authentication; plus, financial apps further provide functions such as face payment and face transfer.

The Beijing News Think Tank selected the top 10 popular apps in finance, life, social, travel, e-commerce, office, and government affairs based on Qimai’s data on the number of app downloads in the iPhone application list. And then it also selected 8 local government apps from "The 2019 Mobile Government Service Development Report," for a total of 78 APPs as the evaluation targets. The evaluation is only for the APP's own functions, and the use of related facial recognition technology to call third-party functions is not regarded as the APP's own functions.

The Beijing News Think Tank found that among the 78 apps, 11 apps did not support the face recognition function, and the privacy policy did not mention facial recognition related information.

Subsequently, The Beijing News Think Tank tested 67 APPs that support face recognition on the purpose of face recognition, usage, privacy policy, and data storage methods.

Nearly half of the apps did not seek user consent separately before conducting facial recognition.

Regarding the choice of verification methods, 96% of APPs do not just support face authentication; users can also choose other verification methods such as passwords and fingerprints.

If the user has enabled face recognition, 97% of the apps support turning off the "face recognition" function, and only 3% of the apps do not support the user turning off the "face recognition" and require the user to pass the "face recognition" for identity verification.

Regarding the scope of facial recognition, before the use of these 67 apps, a "Privacy Policy" appears, and users are required to click "Agree", which means that they have read and agreed to all the contents of the "Privacy Policy".

These privacy policies often already include allowing the collection of user's facial information and other biometric information. Therefore, when the facial recognition function is activated later, some apps have not obtained the user's consent and do not have the set up for the user to check the relevant agreement content again. The user agrees directly by default.

The test found that among the 67 apps, 31 apps operated in this way, that is, they did not obtain the user's "consent" twice. The user can activate the face recognition function with a single "click."

In addition, there are 31 APPs that when facial recognition is open, although there are clear terms related to face recognition, and users can click to view the agreement, it does not clearly emphasize the "consent" section, allowing users to check; rather, it weakens and blurs the process that requires user consent and authorization.

Among the 67 apps tested, only 5 apps showed a "User License Agreement" or a "Usage Agreement" when the user clicked to enable face recognition, and it also clearly asks a second time whether the user "agrees" to release their data related to their face.

95.52% APP mix up facial information with general information

At the same time, it is worth noting that although the privacy policy includes the collection of facial recognition and other information, 95.52% of the apps in the evaluation did not highlight the format to make users clearly aware that biometric information such as facial information was collected, but it mixes up "face information" with general personal information such as names.

For example, in the information collection content of the "Privacy Policy" of the China Construction Bank APP, it is mentioned that "Our bank will collect your basic personal information, identity information, property information, communication information, biometric information, mobile phone number, and signature information, in order to help you complete the e-banking registration. If you refuse to provide this information, you may not be able to open e-banking or use our bank's services normally." It can be seen that biometric information and other general personal information are part of the bank's mandatory collection process.

In terms of data storage and protection, only 2 APPs have special protection for facial biometric information, while the other 65 APPs attribute the protection of facial information to personal information protection.

For example, the China Construction Bank APP mentioned in the "Privacy Policy", "Our bank will take all reasonable and feasible measures to protect your personal information." The clause does not mention what personal information is there, and no special protection measures are taken for sensitive facial information.

Regarding the information of third-party companies that provide facial recognition technology that everyone is very concerned about, the "Privacy Policy" of the 67 apps reviewed did not clearly indicate the specific information of third-party technology companies that provided the app's facial recognition technology, including their names and qualifications.

Finally, in terms of allowing users to delete personal information, out of the 67 apps evaluated, it was found that 56 apps did not mention how users delete personal information, and 6 mentioned "delete information can be requested under special circumstances". There were five that mentioned "Personal information will be deleted when the account is cancelled."

Scenic locations promote "face-scanning" on the grounds of electronic upgrading

A few days ago, The Beijing News Think Tank conducted a questionnaire survey on the abuse of face recognition. The survey found that more than 80% of the respondents chose "public consumption places" for the option of "where facial recognition should not be used," which was the largest proportion.

However, in commercial consumption places, "face scanning" seems to be a trend.

Recently, netizens provided clues that from 2021, users with annual travel tickets in Xiangyang City will "brush their faces" to enter the scenic spot, and the annual travel tickets will be changed to electronic annual tickets.

Why do scenic spots adopt the "face-scanning" approach to the park, and how to save the personal information collected? Regarding this issue, a reporter from The Beijing News called Hanjiang Zhixin Technology Co., Ltd., which handles Xiangyang annual travel tickets.

According to the company's staff, the Xiangyang Scenic Area adopts the "brushing face" approach to entering the park, one is to promote Xiangyang tourism electronic. After the scenic spot system is upgraded, the previous entry method with physical cards has been upgraded to the "face-swiping" entry method; second, the previous physical card comparison is not very convenient, and face recognition can be quickly compared.

Regarding whether tourists can refuse to use face recognition to enter the park, the other party replied, "Now is a transitional period. You can buy physical cards at the scenic spot window, but all subsequent physical cards will be cancelled and you can only enter the park by swiping your face. You can only purchase an electronic card when you purchase an annual pass, and you must enter relevant personal information."

Regarding how to save and manage annual ticket user information, the staff member introduced that user information is stored separately in a dedicated computer. The company has three employees responsible for the entry and management of user information.

According to reports, as early as 2018, 65 well-known scenic spots in China, including Gubei Water Town in Beijing, the Terracotta Warriors in Xi'an, and Huashan Mountain in Shaanxi, have launched AI "face-scan tour" tourism projects where tourists can scan their faces to enter parks when purchasing tickets.

Compared with these public face recognition functions, some face recognition is hidden in the dark of commercial places, and the latter may be more worrying.

Not long ago, the "home buyers wearing helmets to see houses at sales offices" that caused a heated discussion on the Internet was because many sales offices installed cameras and sales staff used facial recognition technology to *shashu* (杀熟), which led to the implementation of price discrimination.

Behind the widespread use of these facial recognition technologies is the substantial increase in the number of relevant Chinese companies.

As of October 2020, according to data and statistics from Qichacha, there are a total of 10,443 companies across the country whose names, products, brands, and business scope cover "facial recognition."

After the trial of the pandemic, "recognition without taking off the mask" has become a highlight of many equipment supply trademark lists. This also means that in the future, consumers will be more and more likely to "steal" facial information.

"Face recognition" is regarded as the "standard configuration" of smart property

****Did not check the translation in this section very carefully***

In recent years, in some cities, face recognition access control is becoming the standard for so-called "smart property".

A staff member of Beijing Jinchan Nanli Community told the Beijing News reporter that the installation of face recognition is mainly to respond to the requirements of smart property management and upgrade the access control system; it is also to make the community safer. Because ordinary access control cards are easy to reproduce, and face recognition can effectively prevent outsiders from entering the community.

However, the staff member said, "Now the access card can still be used, and you can enter the community through face recognition and access card." At the same time, the staff also said that the use of face recognition access control, property personnel and door security have not reduced , Also increased the cost of buying equipment.

It can be seen that although face recognition systems have been installed in some communities, the entry method has not undergone a fundamental change, and it does not seem to have a significant impact on the efficiency and cost of changing the property management work.

Regarding face recognition access control, many residents expressed that they are more worried about the safety of personal information and that their information will be leaked.

"I would rather spend a few more seconds to swipe my card, and don't want to increase the risk of face information leakage." A resident of Beijing Jinchannanli Community told the Beijing News reporter.

In domestic large and medium cities, the addition of face recognition systems in residential communities is becoming a new trend.

Since 2020, some communities in Lanzhou have begun to install face recognition access control systems. According to local media reports, as of now, 1961 sets of front-end sensing devices such as smart access control, car prohibition, and face capture have been deployed, covering 168,900 residents in the community.

But not all cities support face recognition in the community.

At the beginning of December 2020, the "Tianjin Municipal Social Credit Regulations" was voted on, and for the first time in the country, the collection of facial recognition information was publicly prohibited. After that, the neighborhood committee asks residents to decide for themselves whether to continue using face recognition to enter and exit the community. As of December 24, 2020, among the more than 600 residents of Wenhua Village, nearly 50 households have proposed not to use the face recognition access control system.

In December 2020, the "Hangzhou City Property Management Regulations (Revised Draft)" proposed that "forcing property owners to enter the community through fingerprints, face recognition and other biometric information methods" was proposed, which also caused the issue of face recognition in the community to receive wider attention.

In the face recognition abuse questionnaire survey conducted by Xinjing Think Tank, 68.64% of the respondents believed that face recognition should not be used for community access control.

"Face scanning in government affairs" need to be alert to system loopholes

In recent years, local governments have continuously promoted the digitization of government affairs. This is a convenient move. But in reality, the necessity and safety guarantee of using facial recognition technology have become prominent issues. The face recognition abuse questionnaire survey conducted by The Beijing News Think Tank shows that 28.81% of the respondents believe that face recognition is compulsory in government services (such as government apps).

A few days ago, netizens provided clues to The Beijing News Think Tank that there was a "facial recognition" machine (to obtain registration numbers) in the administrative service hall of Rugao, Nantong.

A reporter from the Beijing News interviewed the administrative service hall on this telephone. The staff of the hall replied that the "facial recognition" technology was adopted, "mainly for the convenience of everyone to get numbers."

Does "face recognition" take the number, does it mean that you can only take the number of the person who reads the face? In this regard, the staff member said, "No, if someone else holds your ID card, they can be your agent."

As a result, netizens questioned the necessity of "face scanning to get an account".

According to reports, by 2019, more than 170 cities have opened up "face scan" services for individual taxation, inquiries on retirement funds, certification of pension eligibility, and online

payment of penalties for traffic violations. Among them, the Yangtze River Delta region has made the fastest progress.

The "face-scan government affairs" service has indeed brought convenience to the citizens, but there are also some places where the online service system is not perfect, and there are loopholes in the operation link, which brings the risk of property loss to the public.

In December 2020, the media reported that when some property owners in Nanning, Guangxi, commissioned a real estate agency to sell their houses, they suspected that they encountered fraud. They all use the "Yong e Deng" APP for real estate transfer registration, which is an online business processing platform launched by Nanning City.

According to the monitoring data of the public opinion system of Qianlong Think Tank, the incident of "the transfer of the Nanning Home Owner's house by face-scan" is very popular, and it has entered the top 10 "facial recognition" incidents of 2020.

This case fully exposes that when some government service agencies use face recognition technology, they are still not perfect in terms of specifications and guarantees, and there is even a risk of major security breaches, which requires vigilance.

In response to the current abuse of face recognition technology, Xue Jun, a professor at Peking University Law School, told The Beijing News Think Tank that we must develop a new social regulatory system that adapts to the high-tech era. Use technical guidelines, safety assessment guidelines or technical specifications to effectively regulate the use of face recognition technology.

Over 80% of respondents opposed the use of facial recognition in public spending places

Editor: Wang Chunrui

The Beijing News Think Tank uses questionnaires to understand the public's experience and attitudes towards face recognition technology.

As AI technology continues to mature, facial recognition has been widely used in important scenes of daily life such as security and payment. But today, this life-changing technology is in unprecedented controversy.

In this regard, the Beijing News Think Tank used questionnaires to understand the public's experience and attitudes towards face recognition technology. As of December 31, 2020, a total of 1,515 anonymous questionnaires have been collected, and the respondents covered people in different regions, educational backgrounds, and age groups across the country.

Among them, in terms of gender, male respondents accounted for 51.39% and female respondents accounted for 48.61%; in terms of age, respondents aged 23-40 years old accounted for the largest number of respondents, accounting for 49.47%; in terms of academic qualifications, bachelor degree or above accounted for 80.58% .

Translator's note: there's a very long graphic summarizing the results of the survey, I've translated some select statistics I found most interesting below:

- 48% of respondents have been forced to use facial recognition to check-in at access gates
- The most common scenarios for facial recognition applications were transportation security checks -- 69.88% of respondents -- and identity verification/registration (for example to check-in at hotels or buy tickets) -- 64.92%
- 75.19% of respondents are worried about facial recognition; 60.03% say that they are "on alert" about facial recognition; 2.07% say that they are indifferent or that it doesn't matter
- 55.5% of respondents say that "if there's another method, I definitely will not choose facial recognition"; 38.70% say, "it's not certain, I may use or may not use it."
- 87% of respondents opposed the use of facial recognition in public spending places; 69% of respondents opposed its use in mobile apps; 68% opposed its use in residential neighborhoods
- When asked why they didn't accept facial recognition, 81.81% of respondents said "I don't know who the third-party company providing the technology is"; 75% said "There is no way to view the withdrawal and deletion of facial recognition";