The Guardian

onestopenglish

Can anyone halt the menacing creep of facial recognition technology?

Level 1 ● Pre-intermediate / Intermediate

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1 Warmer

In which of these places do you expect to see security cameras? Do you agree or disagree with their use in each case? Think of reasons.

1. in airports
2. in restaurants
3. in the street

4. on buses or trains
5. at sports venues
6. in department stores

2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers will help you.

surveillance	preference	anonymous	suspect	accurate

1. If someone is _____, no one knows who they are. (para 1)

2. A _____ is someone who the police believe has committed a crime. (para 2)

3. _____ is the process of carefully watching people who might be involved in criminal activity. (para 3)

4. A _____ is a feeling of liking or wanting something more than something else. (para 3)

5. If something is _____, it is correct or true in every detail. (para 5)

deterrent	legislation	erosion	ethnic group	CCTV

6. An _____ is a group of people with the same culture and traditions who live in a place where most people have a different culture and different traditions. (para 5)

7. _____ stands for *closed-circuit television*. (para 6)

8. A _____ is something that makes people decide not to do something by making them realize that something unpleasant could happen to them. (para 7)

9. _____ is a law or a set of laws. (para 8)

10. _____ is the gradual reduction of something important. (para 10)

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. Why does a bar in London use facial recognition technology?

2. How many people were at the pop concert in China where a suspect was identified by facial recognition technology?

3. How can you unlock your phone using facial recognition?

4. How many CCTV cameras are there in the UK?

5. When did UK governments start supporting the use of CCTV cameras?

6. Which city recently became the first in America to ban facial recognition?

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Luke Dormehl

13 August, 2019

1 In a small village, everyone knows you, but in a big city, you can be anonymous. Except if you decide to go for a walk at the King's Cross development in central London. The owners of the site confirmed recently that facial recognition technology is being used for "public safety and to make sure that everyone who visits has the best possible experience". It's not clear how many facial recognition-enabled cameras there are, how long they have been there or exactly what the technology is used for.

2 The use of facial recognition technology is increasing fast. Recently, a bar in London proudly announced that it was using the technology to identify queuing customers. In China in 2018, police arrested a suspect identified by the technology in a crowd of 50,000 people at a pop concert. And so the examples continue.

3 Facial recognition is a pretty cool type of surveillance technology. It allows us to unlock our phones by taking a quick selfie. At more and more hotels, high-street shops and airports around the world, it can make us feel quite important. We can get special treatment – barriers in the airport lift as we come near, and shop staff know our preferences before we speak.

4 The use of facial recognition at places such as the King's Cross development is based on one of the big improvements in facial recognition in recent years. Modern facial recognition systems no longer match still images but can now work with live video.

5 But there are good reasons to be worried about facial recognition's growing presence. Facial recognition can be less accurate when identifying people from certain ethnic groups. This could be particularly damaging when the technology is used for security purposes.

6 But even if these problems are solved, this story highlights the growing use of facial recognition, whether large numbers of people want it or not. In many ways, the UK is the perfect testing ground for such technologies. It's long been one of the most watched countries in the world. There is one CCTV camera for every 11 people in the UK, with even more in crowded cities.

7 Most of these belong to private businesses, although different UK governments have also supported the use of the technology since the 1990s. They think that video surveillance works as a deterrent and an identifier.

8 In 2019, San Francisco became the first city in America to ban facial recognition. The ban affects only city agencies like the police department and not private businesses, but it's an important symbolic step that could encourage the introduction of similar legislation in other places.

9 Could something similar happen in the UK? Already used in many private businesses, the use of facial recognition in a semi-public area like the King's Cross development shows how difficult it is to say what a public space and what a private space is. According to a report from the *Financial Times*, similar technology may also soon be introduced at other semi-public places.

10 Lee Waters, a Welsh Assembly Member, says there needs to be some strong regulation to protect the public. "But the UK government is paralysed by Brexit, so they are not paying any attention to this problem." We cannot know yet whether this is the start of a genuine public conversation on this subject or simply the continued erosion of public privacy.

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4 Comprehension check

Match the beginnings and endings to make statements about the text.

1. Shops can use facial recognition …
2. Facial recognition systems can ...
3. Facial recognition is less accurate …
4. People can use facial recognition to …
5. San Francisco has …
6. Other cities could …

a. … unlock their phones.

b. … when identifying people from some ethnic groups.

c. … to know customers' preferences before they speak.

d. … banned the use of facial recognition technology by city agencies.

e. … introduce similar legislation.

f. … now work with live video.

5 Chunks

Rearrange the words to make phrases from the text.

1. experience the possible best
2. facial systems recognition modern
3. growing recognition's facial presence
4. watched one the world in the most countries of
5. of the legislation introduction similar
6. public regulation protect strong the to

6 Two-word phrases

Match the words in the left-hand column with the words in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

1. facial
2. video
3. private
4. public
5. ethnic
6. growing

a. business

b. safety

c. group

d. recognition

e. use

f. surveillance

7 Word-building

Complete the table using words from the text.

	verb	noun
1.	recognize	
2.	deter	
3.	erode	
4.	treat	
5.	regulate	
6.	introduce	

8 Discussion

- **Do you agree with the use of facial recognition technology in public places? Why? Why not?**