

# Australian police using face recognition software as privacy experts issue warning

Privacy experts have described as “very dangerous” revelations an Australian entrepreneur has developed facial recognition technology that is being used by US law enforcement agencies, allowing surveillance images to identify suspects by matching their social media profiles.

*The New York Times* reported on Sunday that Hoan Ton-That - an Australian developer and one-time model - has developed a facial recognition app that allows a user to take a picture of a person, upload it and get to see public photos of that person along with links to where those photos appeared. It noted the development may “end privacy as we know it”.



Hoan Ton-That, whose app matches faces to images it collects from across the internet. CREDIT: AMR ALFIKY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Police in the state of Indiana reportedly solved a case within 20 minutes of using the app. After a bystander recorded a fight that ended when one shot the other in the stomach, police ran a still of the gunman's face through the app. They got a match: the man appeared in a video posted on social media, and his name was included in a caption on the video.

The system developed by Clearview AI uses a database of more than three billion images that the company claims to have scraped from user uploaded images and videos to social media including Facebook and YouTube.

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NSW and Victorian authorities confirmed on Sunday they use facial recognition technology as part of police work. They did not specify what software.

A spokesperson for NSW Police Minister David Elliott said in a statement: “Face Matching Services are being implemented to provide law enforcement with a powerful investigative tool to identify people associated with criminal activities.



Hoan Ton-That, founder of Clearview AI, showing the results of a search for a photo of himself. *CREDIT: AMR ALFIKY/THE NEW YORK TIMES*

“We know that the integrity and security of our personal information is critical and that is why this government invests in, and supports, our agencies to ensure that usage of these systems is ethical, appropriate and secure.”

A Victoria Police spokeswoman confirmed that cameras at some of Victoria's busiest police stations are used to capture facial images and identifying offenders in custody, following revelations last month that Victoria Police are using a facial recognition system called iFACE to identify criminal suspects at 85 police stations.

The federal government's own plans suffered a setback in October with its backbench MPs joining Labor to call for a rewrite of expanded facial recognition laws which critics warn could lead to mass surveillance in Australia.

Dr Monique Mann, a senior lecturer in criminology at Deakin University and board member of the Australian Privacy Foundation, on Sunday called for a ban or moratorium on use of facial recognition technology, saying its application can be “very dangerous”.

“In that instance the arguments being made were that it would be enhancing safety and security but there is no empirical evidence that that would occur.”

She highlighted issues of convenience, discrimination and racial bias as key areas that needed to be considered and disagreed with arguments about waiting until technology improves as that implies advocating for a "perfect surveillance state".

Dr Mann said the international experience was facial recognition technology was being outlawed given the human rights concerns. A significant difference existed between authorities using technology to verify identity such as at airports and searching databases to identify people.

In December, the Human Rights Commissioner Edward Santow called for a "moratorium on the potentially harmful use of facial recognition technology in Australia" until there is a legal framework to safeguard human rights.

It came after Liberal MP Andrew Hastie, chair of Parliament's joint intelligence committee, surprised colleagues by recommending the Coalition rewrite legislation allowing for the sharing of biometric information between federal and state governments.

Liberal and Labor MPs on the committee said tougher safeguards were needed for the scheme, designed to automate storage and exchange of biometric and identity data, including from passports and driver licences.

The Identity-matching Services Bill and the Passports Amendment Bill were reintroduced in July with the bulk of their powers accruing to Peter Dutton's Department of Home Affairs.