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Your Face Belongs to Us: A Secretive Startup's Quest to End Privacy as We Know It

Kashmir Hill
(Penguin Random House, 2023, 502)

Reviewed by: Rubia Shoukat¹

Facial recognition capability has silently evolved into a game-changing technology over the years. The account of “Your Face Belongs to Us” unfolds the gripping true story of the rise of a technological startup “Clearview AI.” It also serves as a grim warning that states will continue to face challenges without continuous vigilance and government control of emerging technologies. The book discusses how, from stalkers to authoritarian states, the use and abuse of Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) will be the world's future. Written by Kashmir Hill, the book comprises three parts: (i) The Face Race, (ii) Technical Sweetness, and (iii) Future Shock. This book illuminates our complex relationship with technology and how it entertains us even as it exploits us.

Kashmir Hill stumbled upon Clearview AI, a mysterious startup selling an app that claimed it could identify anyone using a snapshot of their face with terrifying implications. The app could use the photograph to find a person's name, social media profiles, friends and family, and even home address. But this was just the start of a more shocking story.

Launched by computer engineer Hoan Ton-That and politician Richard Schwartz, assisted by a group of controversial characters on the right-wing ideological movement (alt-right), Clearview AI rises quickly to the top, sharing its app with billionaires and law enforcement agencies. In this riveting feat of reporting, Hill narrates the story of Clearview AI, exploring how facial recognition technology is reshaping our lives. The government and major technology companies showed reluctance to use FRT due to its controversial application and racial and gender biases (p. 9). Prominent Silicon Valley companies, such as Google and Meta (Facebook), have shown hesitance in the commercial adoption of this technology, not because of any technological limitations but due to ethical considerations. Google says that it decided not to make general-purpose FRT available to the public because the company wanted to work the “policy and technical issues at stake.” (p.128)

The book provides a detailed history of how Clearview AI developed,

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who invested in it, and why a better-resourced competitor like Facebook or Amazon did not beat this unknown player in the market. However, the book's most significant contribution may be the ethical question it raises, which will be central to the privacy debate surrounding FRT for many years to come.

People worldwide have already willingly uploaded their private lives online, where the data is accessible to companies that work closely with law enforcement agencies (p. 9). Conveniently, everyone has created a database through social media accounts. Accordingly, whoever can set the right neural network on the correct database of faces can make the first face-matching technology. The technology works on the reverse image search based on the image retrieval query technique. It was like atoms were lying there waiting for Oppenheimer to turn them into a bomb. The author considers Hoan Ton-That, who started making Facebook quiz apps, the Oppenheimer of FRT. (p. 26)

Starting with Venmo, which had the weakest protections for profile pictures, Ton-That collected photos from social media sites (p. 107) and created a working prototype with USD 200,000 from venture capitalist Peter Thiel and a multi-billion picture database (p. 108). There are no clear privacy laws about who can use facial recognition, which brought the police department in contact with him for investigative purposes.

Proponents of FRT have always touted its military and law enforcement applications. Clearview AI, for instance, reportedly helped rescue a child victim of sexual abuse by identifying their abuser in the grainy background of an Instagram photo, which led police to his location (p. 174). Publicizing such morally black-and-white stories provided an obvious rhetorical advantage.

One possible counterargument is that FRT is not just an excellent picture search engine. It is a radical reimagining of the public sphere vis-à-vis individual privacy. If widely adopted, it will further close the gap between our lives in physical reality and our digital lives. This is an ironic slamming shut off one of the core promises of the early days of the Internet, 'the freedom to wander without being watched, the chance to try on multiple identities' and so on. Facial recognition could bind us to our digital history in an inescapable way, spelling the end of being in public anonymously.

This could make facial recognition more ethically problematic than other biometric data gathering. Microsoft could not have anticipated how social media would further muddle the issue because consent happens gradually. We give the images to Instagram and TikTok, assuming that the Federal Bureau of

Investigation will not use them. Softer applications of the technology are already prevalent in everyday use, whether Clearview AI is involved. Clearview AI collected a billion faces by the end of 2018, creating a robust product for investors and customers. Unlike significant tech companies, it took the lead in releasing a facial recognition tool. Silicon Valley giants' hesitation gave Clearview AI a unique advantage in the emerging facial recognition market (p. 128).

In the late 1910s, when passport photos were introduced, many Americans bristled because the process reminded them of taking a mugshot. Today, nobody would think twice about going for a passport photo. Though Hill's reporting led to an American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawsuit that prevented Clearview AI from selling its technology to private corporations and individuals (p. 254), Clearview AI's database grew to 75 million images per day. Previously, Clearview AI had, on average, found thirteen photos when a face was searched; now it is double the figure.

Now that Clearview AI is openly retailing FRT to police departments, whether big companies like Microsoft, Meta and Google will continue to shun it due to ethical considerations is to be seen. With an early competitor taking all the media heat and absorbing all the lawsuits, they might decide that the time is right to enter the race. If they do, the next generation of FRT will improve exponentially as the ocean of images will only get deeper.