



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on September 25, 2013

Homeland Security Tests Facial Recognition “Machine”

On September 21, the Department of Homeland Security tested a new facial recognition system at the 6,000 seat Toyota Center in Kennewick, Washington, during the season home opener of the Tri-City Americans, a junior hockey team in the Western Hockey League.

The story was initially released by the local *Tri-City Herald*, in a September 13 article linked to the hockey team’s website. The reporter, Annette Cary, phrased the story in innocuous-sounding terms:



Hockey fans at the season opener of the Tri-City Americans will have a chance to help the U.S. Department of Homeland Security improve its facial recognition capabilities.

Video will be taped by Pacific Northwest National Laboratory [PNNL] at the Sept. 21 game in a portion of the Toyota Center in Kennewick.

It is planned to be used by the U.S. government to test the capabilities of facial recognition software that is available or in the prototype stage.

The report noted several provisions made by PNNL to allay the concerns of attendees who feared that the test might invade their privacy. PNNL bought 46 extra seats providing video-free areas for those who did not want to be taped.

“If they didn’t want to be videotaped, they could very easily not be videotaped,” the *Herald* quoted Nick Lombardo, a PNNL project manager, as saying.

The report explained that PNNL was interested in taping its own staffers, rather than random members of the public.

“Basically the crowd is background,” PNNL engineer Marcia Kimura told the *Herald*.

The report also cited a statement from Patty Wolfhope, a program manager at the Department of Homeland Security, who assured the public that no names of people will be collected during the test and that only government researchers, not the technology developers, will see the video.

It might be fair to say that more Americans would be concerned that the DHS has collected video of their face than a private firm like PNNL.

An indication of how sensitive a topic the use of facial recognition technology has become is reflected by how widespread this small-scale test conducted in a medium-sized city of about 75,000 people has been reported. Articles about the test have appeared in Britain’s [Daily Mail](#) and on the website of [RT](#), the Russian-based television network. Extensive coverage was also provided by Rawlson King, a contributing editor to the technology website [BiometricUpdate.com](#).

While most of the reports amounted to matter-of-fact descriptions of the procedures and technology involved in the test, [RT’s coverage](#) alone addressed potential abuses and mentioned Homeland Security’s (DHS) role much more often than the other reports. Perhaps Russians, having lived under a



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totalitarian police state that monitored their every move, are more familiar with what can happen when the government takes too strong an interest in its citizens' whereabouts. Among RT's observations:

- "DHS will utilize a sophisticated system of cameras to collect pictures of attendees in real-time from as far away as 100 meters and then match them up with images of faces stored on a database."
- "The exercise will mark the latest drill for the DHS' Biometric Optical Surveillance System, or BOSS, and when it's fully operational it could be used to identify a person of interest among a massive crowd in the span of only seconds."
- "This isn't the first time that the DHS and PNNL teamed up with the Toyota Center, but researchers are hoping that this endeavor will be the most successful yet. The *New York Times*' Charlie Savage reported last month that the technology was tested recently at the arena, but the government determined at the time that the product "was not ready for a DHS customer." If it succeeds this time around, however, it could open the door for deploying similar systems at international crossings and other hubs across the United States patrolled by DHS."

The August 21 report in the *Times*, "[Facial Scanning Is Making Gains in Surveillance](#)," quoted a statement from Ginger McCall, identified as "a privacy advocate": "This technology is always billed as antiterrorism, but then it drifts into other applications. We need a real conversation about whether and how we want this technology to be used, and now is the time for that debate."

Another quote cited by RT not reported in the U.S. stories about the Kennewick test was from a statement from Jennifer Lynch, identified as a staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). EFF filed a lawsuit against the FBI earlier this year because of the Bureau's Next Generation Identification program (NGI), to be launched in 2014. Said Lynch:

NGI will result in a massive expansion of government data collection for both criminal and noncriminal purposes. Biometrics programs present critical threats to civil liberties and privacy. Face-recognition technology is among the most alarming new developments, because Americans cannot easily take precautions against the covert, remote and mass capture of their images.

RT explained that the "Next Generation Identification program ... will ideally provide the FBI with a database containing the biometric information of millions of Americans. Law enforcement will then be able to use that trove of data to compare *persons of interest* caught on film with images already used on state drivers' licenses and other governmental files." (Emphasis added.)

As an avid watcher of the popular CBS television series, *Person of Interest*, this writer finds the RT writer's choice of the term "persons of interest" to be an interesting coincidence. The series, starring actor Jim Caviezel, is about a former Special Forces member and CIA agent recruited by a reclusive billionaire software genius (Michael Emerson) who built a highly sophisticated computer system for the government that collects data from omnipresent video surveillance cameras, using facial recognition software to identify the persons captured on video. The system is constantly referred to on the program as "the Machine."

Forced to work underground because their mission puts them at odds with the government, the team comprised of Caviezel, Emerson, and a couple of sympathetic New York City police officers utilize the machine to help citizens in danger — citizens the government regards as "irrelevant." Because of this work, members of the team sometimes find themselves targeted by government agents.

Though a fictionalized, dramatized presentation, and focusing on private individuals who employ facial



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recognition software for good, the series also makes evident the threat to freedom such technology would present if used by government agencies.

The voiceover from the show's opening states:

You are being watched. The government has a secret system: a machine that spies on you every hour of every day. I know, because I built it. I designed the machine to detect acts of terror, but it sees everything. Violent crimes involving ordinary people; people like you. Crimes the government considered "irrelevant." They wouldn't act, so I decided I would. But I needed a partner, someone with the skills to intervene. Hunted by the authorities, we work in secret. You'll never find us, but victim or perpetrator, if your number's up... we'll find you.



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