Written by **Annalisa Pesek** on December 15, 2021

South Korea Experiments with AI to Track Citizens with COVID

Big Brother is watching Bucheon, South Korea. And people better be wearing their masks properly.

A new pilot project set to launch in January will test the tracking of citizens with artificial intelligence (AI) and facial-recognition software, via several thousand CCTV surveillance cameras scattered throughout the bustling city of Bucheon, just outside Seoul.

Some lawmakers, however, are attempting to halt the project's roll-out, citing invasion of privacy concerns.

The Bucheon system will monitor the activities and movements of some 800,000 citizens of the Republic of Korea, a city official reported to [Reuters](). The program will identify those infected with the coronavirus, those with whom the infected person comes into contact, and how frequently the infected don a face mask.

JGregorySF/iStock/Getty Images Plus
Gwangjang Market in Seoul, South Korea

"The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears," George Orwell warned. In a free democratic nation, this is really happening.

While it is not clear how the government will identify infected individuals — whether a state database already exists or if authorities are planning to create one — funding the project is the Bucheon government, along with the very Orwellian-sounding Ministry of Science and ICT (Information and Communications Technology). The latter has contributed 1.6 billion Korean won ($1.3 million) to the project, with the city adding another 500 million won.

As of this writing, 4,456 COVID-related deaths have been [reported]() in South Korea, with the country confirming 536,495 cases, in a population of roughly 52 million.

The Bucheon system is not slated to go national yet, but is touted as a way to reduce the workload of human COVID contact-tracers. In a country where citizen surveillance is encouraged and supported by the majority of the population, it is not likely to receive much pushback from the people.

A 110-page blueprint for the project, obtained by Reuters, states the system will be able to track up to 10 people in five to 10 minutes, significantly reducing the time it takes to track a single person under the current contact-tracing program.

According to the program plan, AI algorithms and facial-recognition technology will "analyze the footage of more than 10,820 CCTV cameras tracking an infected person's movements, anyone they had

close contact with, and whether they were wearing a mask.”

Surprisingly, the South Korean government has long employed human surveillance tools as a way to monitor citizens' behavior, and more recently to control the virus spread.

An April 2020 report by the Brookings Institution noted that citizen-tracking technologies have been used in South Korea before for other purposes, including investigations of tax fraud:

> Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the Korean government collected massive amounts of transaction data for investigating tax fraud. Literally every credit card and bank transaction in Korea is recorded on government databases. During the outbreak, this information was repurposed to retroactively track where people went: not just coffee shops and restaurants, but also buses and subways (the latter two mostly paid for by cashless tools). For patient #10422, such transactions would have revealed visits to the supermarket and burger joint, allowing authorities to quickly quarantine and sterilize both locations.

The Bucheon system is deemed lawful by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, “as long as it is used within the realm of the disease control and prevention law.” Park Dae-chul, a member of the conservative People Power Party and vocal opponent of the system, told Reuters that “the government's plan to become a Big Brother on the pretext of COVID is a neo-totalitarian idea. It is absolutely wrong to monitor and control the public via CCTV using taxpayers' money and without the consent from the public.”

City officials argue that citizens must consent to participating, and those who do not will not be detected by the technology.

“There is no privacy issue here as the system traces the confirmed patient based on the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act,” said a Bucheon official. “Contact tracers stick to that rule so there is no risk of data spill or invasion of privacy.”

Elsewhere in the initial report on the technology are claims that while patients must give their consent for the facial-recognition tracking to be used, they may still be identified by their clothes and silhouette, according to a city source.

Bucheon mayor Jang Deog-cheon has maintained that COVID tracing systems are currently overburdened. His perspective aligns with the aim of the AI technology to “overcome the fact that tracing teams have to rely heavily on the testimony of COVID-19 patients, who aren't always truthful about their activities and whereabouts.”

Albert Camus wrote in his 1947 novel *The Plague* that “the only means to fight a plague is honesty.” If Mayor Jang was honestly trying to battle this virus, he would allow the people to make decisions for themselves. Instead, the leader is relying on technologies that spy on citizens and restrict their liberties in a supposed free society. The truth is that South Koreans are not free if the government is allowed to trace their behaviors.

Still, such technological and human experiments are spreading across the globe. South Korea has always been moments ahead of the United States, technologically speaking. Americans need to pay attention, as our government continues to impose irrational and tyrannical measures, and the use of AI for citizen recognition and tracking may not be too far from our shores.

Subscribe to the New American

Get exclusive digital access to the most informative,
non-partisan truthful news source for patriotic Americans!

Discover a refreshing blend of time-honored values, principles and insightful
perspectives within the pages of "The New American" magazine. Delve into a
world where tradition is the foundation, and exploration knows no bounds.

From politics and finance to foreign affairs, environment, culture,
and technology, we bring you an unparalleled array of topics that matter most.

What's Included?

24 Issues Per Year
Optional Print Edition
Digital Edition Access
Exclusive Subscriber Content
Audio provided for all articles
Unlimited access to past issues
Coming Soon! Ad FREE
60-Day money back guarantee!
Cancel anytime.

Subscribe