

Nightly Business Report Transcript

03/05/03: Terror's Toll-Part 2: The Battle Over Biometrics

SUSIE GHARIB: It's a challenge that's critical for the U.S. -- how do we pick out a terrorist from just another face in the crowd? The government is spending millions of dollars on new technology to answer that question. Tonight as we continue our series Terror's Toll, Washington Bureau Chief Darren Gersh looks at the debate over what's known as biometrics.

DARREN GERSH, NIGHTLY BUSINESS REPORT CORRESPONDENT: They're watching over the metro, the platform, the station. They're watching the street, at federal buildings. In any good sized city there are some surveillance cameras. But in Washington, D.C. They seem to be everywhere. By the time I make it from the metro up to my office, I have been observed by more than half a dozen cameras. Now the technology exists to take an image from any one of those cameras, digitize it and match it against a database. The technology is called biometrics, measuring the human body, in this case my face, so a computer can verify my identity, perhaps granting me access to a secure facility or comparing me against a list of suspected terrorists.

DAVID, TUNNELL, VICE PRESIDENT, GENEX TECHNOLOGIES: If you're looking for a terrorist, and we all are, how are you going to identify them if all you have is a single photo? Well, with our technology we can take that single photo, convert that into a 3D image and manipulate it in a variety of ways.

GERSH: The federal government is pouring money into biometrics. Here at Genex Technologies, the Defense Department is funding work on 3D imaging that adjusts lighting, pose and even expression, reducing the variations that now trip up current two dimensional face recognition technology. Genex hopes to release its software this summer, making it available for use at the border, in airports and at nuclear power plants.

TUNNELL: We want this kind of technology to say, hey, who is lingering outside the fence with a rocket launcher?

MARC ROTENBERG, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ELECTRONIC PRIVACY INFORMATION CENTER: These are all government cameras.

GERSH: But privacy advocates like Marc Rotenberg are concerned technology that might be appropriate at the border or top security facilities is being considered for domestic use. One big concern, using facial recognition systems on city streets.

ROTENBERG: These camera systems that have been placed in Virginia Beach and Tampa and elsewhere are basically saying to everybody on the street we don't particularly care if you're a suspect or a wanted felon or just a tourist visiting our town, we will treat you all as potential criminals.

GERSH: The biometrics firm Identix (IDNX) provides the facial recognition technology now being used by police in Virginia Beach. CEO Joseph Atick says the only privacy that is being invaded is the privacy of the criminal.

JOSEPH ATICK, CEO, IDENTIX: You have to keep in mind is that the system is not an identification system. It does not identify you or me. It simply matches faces that it sees in front of the camera against a very limited watch list of faces of known criminals. If there is no match, there's absolutely no memory.

GERSH: The industry argues biometrics can protect privacy, preventing identity theft and safeguarding patient records.

ATICK: We're not saying that it should be used everywhere and in every aspect of people's lives. We believe used judiciously it enhances people's sense of security, it reduces crime, it safeguards us against more terrorist attacks.

GERSH: In the next five years, the business of facial recognition is expected to grow more than six fold, from \$57 million to more than \$400 million. And as it grows, privacy groups and Congress will be keeping a close watch. Darren Gersh, NIGHTLY BUSINESS REPORT, Washington.

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