

IBM's decision to abandon facial recognition technology fueled by years of debate

For digital rights advocates, the company's move is a step toward 'algorithmic justice'

By **Hannah Denham**

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When IBM's newly promoted chief executive announced the company would abandon its facial recognition technology, it did so amid a national reckoning over race and justice, foreshadowing similar re-evaluations among its peers.

In his letter Monday to members of Congress, CEO Arvind Krishna cited the potential for police to use the technology to violate "basic human rights and freedoms" in its decision to end all research, development and production. A person familiar with the matter said Krishna's move wasn't made overnight, but had been the culmination of more than two years of criticism about such technology from human rights and privacy advocates over accuracy, racial profiling and mass surveillance concerns.

Two days later, Amazon announced in a company blog post that it would suspend police use of its facial recognition software, Rekognition, for one year. Microsoft followed suit Thursday, saying it would suspend sales of its technology to law enforcement agencies until federal regulations are in place. (Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

IBM's move has received positive responses from members of Congress, civil liberty defenders and employees. But Morningstar equity analyst Julie Bhusal Sharma noted that facial recognition technology accounts for just a sliver of its business. IBM is one of the world's biggest technology and consulting companies, with a market capitalization of \$105 billion.

“I think partially, from an equity point of view, IBM is such a massive company, so even within their AI realm, they don’t break out, even in their facial recognition revenue,” she said. “Financially, I don’t think it’s going to have much of an impact.”

IBM will retain other kinds of recognition technology, a person familiar with the company’s thinking said, such as using a facial scan to authenticate a device, as well as object detection, like crop inspection for farmers or security staff identifying an abandoned suitcase in an airport.

[Federal study confirms racial bias of many facial-recognition systems, casts doubt on their expanding use]

Questions about the use of facial recognition and other technologies in law enforcement have attracted renewed attention since George Floyd’s death last month in police custody sparked calls for wholesale police reform. Researchers Joy Buolamwini and Timnit Gebru first dove into the issue in 2018 with their Gender Shades project, which revealed that facial recognition systems by IBM, Microsoft and Face++ misidentify people of color and women more often than white men. More studies followed that confirmed the results, including a federal study by the National Institute of Standards and Technology in 2019.

Last year, the ACLU sued the FBI, the Department of Justice and other agencies that contract with facial recognition providers to block its use.

Former 2020 presidential candidate Julián Castro called the use of facial recognition software for mass surveillance a “dangerous violation of human rights” in a tweet Tuesday. Rep. Jimmy Gomez (D-Calif.) echoed the sentiment, noting in a tweet that he and other members of Congress were misidentified by Amazon facial recognition software in 2018.

“This tech needs legislative guardrails NOW,” Gomez wrote in the tweet.

[Amazon’s facial-recognition tool misidentified 28 lawmakers as people arrested for a crime, study finds]

Government and law enforcement officials contend the technology is worth reforming because it provides powerful aid in quickly identifying criminal suspects. Ultimately, by this week, IBM joined the side of digital rights activists like those at the Algorithmic Justice League in concluding that the technology couldn’t be reformed.

National Police Foundation President Jim Burch said in an email that the foundation applauds IBM's decision and hopes the company will continue to work with law enforcement in developing infrastructure for accountability and evaluating performance.

"We applaud IBM for making decisions that they feel are best to protect the rights and equity of all people and certainly they would best know if their technology was being used in ways counter to this message," Burch said. "We also applaud IBM's statement and support for police reform and hope that IBM will work to ensure that its solutions and capabilities are able to be used by police organizations attempting to do the right thing and pursue pathways to reform."

Krishna's letter was addressed to Rep. Karen Bass (D-Calif.), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus; Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.); Sen. Kamala D. Harris (D-Calif.); House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.); and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.), who introduced and co-sponsored the Justice in Policing Act of 2020 on Monday to enforce law enforcement accountability.

Krishna, who became CEO in April, expressed support for the Justice in Policing Act in his letter and said IBM hopes to work with Congress on police reform, responsible technology use and the expansion of educational opportunities and skills-based training for communities of color.

"What we are witnessing is the birth of a new movement in our country with thousands coming together in every state marching to demand a change that ends police brutality, holds police officers accountable, and calls for transparency," Bass said in a news release about the proposed legislation. "Never again should the world be subjected to witnessing what we saw on the streets in Minnesota with George Floyd."

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