

February 4, 2022

Welcome again to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore key issues at the intersection of tech, ethics, and society. I'm Damon Beres.

Today... Big Brother is watching.

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What we're thinking about

The present and future of surveillance, from government agencies to social media.

👁️ Last week, the computer scientist Joy Buolamwini [published a column](#) for the *Atlantic* calling for the IRS to stop using facial recognition technology. The government agency currently contracts with the controversial firm ID.me, which uses facial recognition to verify identities. ([Here's more context](#) about what this might mean for you.)

👁️ “The IRS is pushing individuals to submit to facial recognition in exchange for being able to complete a range of basic tax-related activities online,” Buolamwini writes. “Though ID.me asserts that ‘significant benefits’ come from the use of one-to-one facial recognition, the company fails to adequately address its known harms or deeply engage with specific findings that indicate substantial racial bias, as documented in a [2019 U.S. Department of Commerce report](#).”

👁️ [Buolamwini](#) is best known for her landmark work exposing algorithmic bias in facial recognition tech. (We've [previously recommended](#) a

documentary about her work, *Coded Bias*, which is [now streaming on Netflix](#).) Facial recognition tech has historically worked best for white men, while failing at disproportionately high rates for people of color—and especially women of color.

👁️ One way to think about the IRS’s adoption of ID.me is that it normalizes a technology commonly used for surveillance purposes—again, with worse outcomes for people of color. “The use of face recognition technology (FRT) by the federal government in policing and the enabling of its use in other areas of public life, as in schools and public housing, is posing a profound and unprecedented threat to our core civil rights—and is particularly dangerous for communities of color and other marginalized groups,” [the ACLU argues](#).

👁️ ID.me has also been used by state governments to vet unemployment claims. In 2021, a [report from OneZero](#) described that “along with any alleged fraudsters, legitimate claimants have also been rejected by the company’s machine learning and facial recognition systems — leading to massive delays in life-sustaining funds.”

👁️ Even if the technology were perfect, there would be a broader ethical context to consider. “Beyond false positives or false negatives is something even more important—the right not to use biometric technology at all, regardless of its accuracy,” Buolamwini writes. “Government pressure on citizens to share their biometric data with the government affects all of us—no matter your race, gender, or political affiliations.”

👁️ Elsewhere in the surveill-o-verse, [Motherboard’s Gita Jackson reported](#) on an unsettling trend: Content creators are asking Amazon delivery drivers to dance when dropping off packages, recording them through Ring security cameras, and publishing the footage on TikTok. “Technically if the delivery associate doesn’t follow the instructions they can get dinged on their metrics for not doing so,” one delivery company owner told Jackson. It’s a reminder that surveillance now comes in many forms: A consumer security camera, customer feedback for gig workers, and public social media posts number among them. It’s also worth noting, per the journalist Taylor Lorenz, that the official Amazon TikTok account [endorses the trend](#).

👁️ One consistent problem with these ethically questionable technologies: They seem to emerge in public life without input from the people who are subjected to (or victimized by) them. On this note, recall the wisdom of Albert Fox Cahn, the executive director of the nonprofit Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, [who spoke at last year’s Unfinished Live event](#): “We have to have the tools to make the choices collectively about what we’re allowing to govern our lives, or we lose that control that is indispensable to having a republic.”

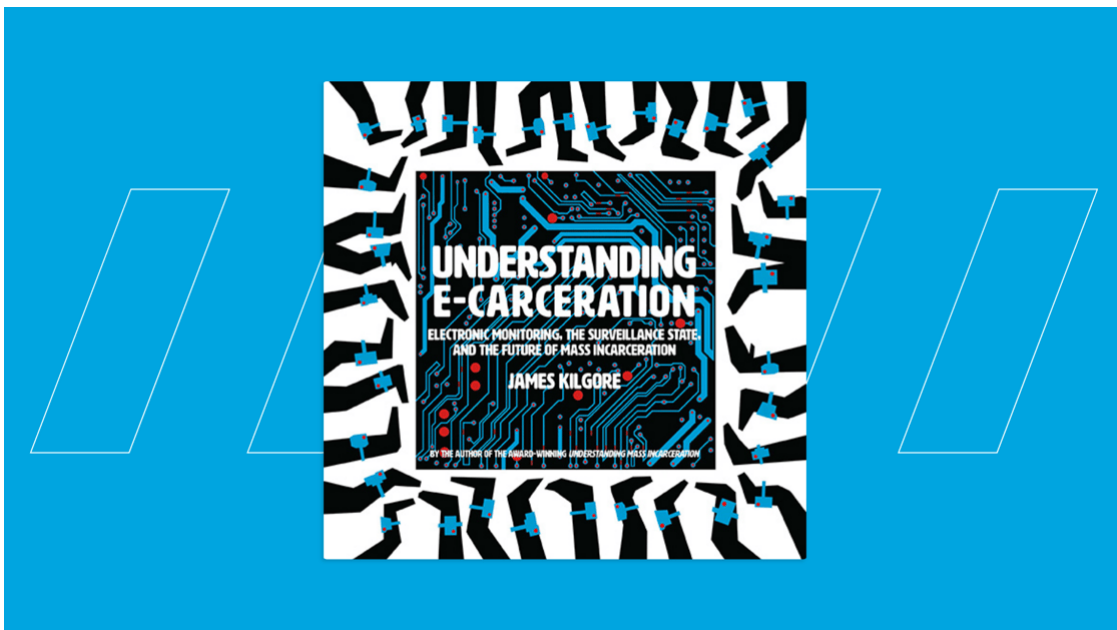
👁️ Wrapping this all up, on Thursday, U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, D-Ore., Senator Cory Booker, D-N.J., and Representative Yvette Clarke, D-N.Y. [introduced the Algorithmic Accountability Act of 2022](#), “a landmark bill to

bring new transparency and oversight of software, algorithms and other automated systems that are used to make critical decisions about nearly every aspect of Americans' lives.”

🧠 A quick update on Facebook

Meta reported this week that Facebook has lost users for the first time in its history. As the *Washington Post* [described](#), “The loss was greatest in Africa and Latin America, suggesting that the company’s product is saturated globally — and that its long quest to add as many users as possible [has peaked](#).”

Considering the spread of polarizing content on Facebook in this context, the tech journalist Brian Merchant [tweeted](#): “Faced with a declining audience for the first time, Facebook has a choice; clean up its platform so that it is usable and even enjoyable for a cohort outside of enraged uncles, or double down on letting folks like this juice its algorithm. I have a hunch which path they will go.”



The unfinished work of the week

If you're interested in learning more about modern surveillance technologies, check out the new book [*Understanding E-Carceration: Electronic Monitoring, the Surveillance State, and the Future of Mass Incarceration*](#)

by the researcher James Kilgore. Included among its 200 pages are explorations of consumer products from tech companies like Amazon, Alibaba, and Facebook.

Thank you for reading!

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#)) and me ([@dlberes](#)) on Twitter for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

Damon + the Unfinished team

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