Will Microsoft’s Police Surveillance System Violate Your Privacy?

The Microsoft-powered police surveillance system being installed in New York City is an impressive bit of innovation: It connects a wide variety of technology already in use by the New York Police Department in a way that gives police a powerful new tool in preventing and solving crime. The system, dubbed the Domain Awareness System (DAS), sounds like science fiction: Part Minority Report, part 1984. It connects thousands of security cameras in the city owned by the NYPD and private businesses, collecting and archiving up to 30 days worth of their archival footage at a time. Meaning: If there’s a crime committed, police can use the system to see the crime but also backtrack, easily following the movement of people involved in an incident before it even occurred. It can do the same for vehicles, which can also be tracked by law enforcement’s smart license plate readers. Microsoft’s business plan for the system involves selling it to other cities worldwide. The City of New York has an interest in this too, as it receives a 30% cut in future sales. But if it came to your city, would it be a violation of your privacy? City of New York officials, including Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, are hailing the system as a state-of-the-art counter-terrorism tool. But per the City’s guidelines, it can also be used for any “legitimate law enforcement or public safety purpose.” Additionally, the City’s guidelines stress that the system will be used “only to monitor public areas and public activities where no legally protected reasonable expectation of privacy exists” based on previous court decisions including Katz v. United States. Its use will be also subject to periodic audits — but those audits will be carried out by the NYPD’s own Counterterrorism Bureau. For some privacy advocates, that’s not good enough. NYCLU Associate Legal Director Christopher Dunn argued that the system ought to be overseen by a non-police entity. “We fully support the police using technology to combat crime and terrorism, but law-abiding New Yorkers should not end up in a police database every time they walk their dog, go to the doctor or drive around Manhattan,” said Dunn in a statement. “The NYPD’s massive surveillance systems should have strict privacy protections and independent oversight.”

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