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BITE project initiates a European debate on the ethics of biometrics

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Biometrics technology is increasingly being discussed as a means to tackle fraud and theft. National debates are underway in several countries on how desirable this technology is. A wider examination of its implications, involving all potential stakeholders, is yet to take place.

This gap is to be addressed by the BITE project. Funded under the Science and Society section of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6), BITE (biometric identification technology ethics) brings together nine partners from a range of backgrounds. The partners intend to make it easier for industry and academics to confront ethical issues highlighted by biometrics, and to initiate a public debate on its implications.

Biometrics uses physical or behavioural information to identify a person. The data used can range from fingerprints, to iris scans, to DNA. The most likely application of the technology will involve comparing the information obtained from someone on the spot with that stored in a databank in order to verify identity. Proponents claim that biometrics could thus contribute significantly towards security at a time when global terrorism is a credible threat to countries around the world. In this context, airports and border control centres have been touted as the first potential users.

On a more individual level, biometrics could be used to prevent theft, for example by verifying identity before allowing cash withdrawals or allowing access to buildings or cars.

But the collection and storage of such personal data raises huge ethical questions, as BITE coordinator, Professor Emilio Mordini, explained to CORDIS News. The concerns are diverse in nature: persons who find it more difficult to prove their identity, such as immigrants, may be unjustly targeted under such a system, disabled people who are unable to undergo biometrics tests may become stigmatised, and personal medical information may be obtainable. On a practical level, privacy laws differ from country to country, which will have implications for the sharing of data and the interrelation of databanks.

'We need to protect weaker groups, which are expected to be the main targets of biometrics technology. Their identities are less defined and less easy to prove and they may not have papers. This cannot mean that their privacy is less protected,' said Professor Mordini.

It is also imperative that a solution is found for the minority that cannot undergo biometrics tests. If a person is blind or short, or has lost a hand, this cannot be a reason to refuse entry. 'This technology will be used soon and we need to address this immediately,' said Professor Mordini.

Professor Mordini describes access to medical information through biometrics data as the most controversial issue surrounding the technology. 'At the moment this is not a real risk, but this could happen in the short term,' he says. Data could provide information on whether a person has a medical condition, has used drugs, or is pregnant, for example. In the case of DNA, scientists insist that they would only analyse known coding and not genetic information. While Professor Mordini is confident that there is no intention by scientists to garner medical information, there is still the question of how data could be used later on. This raises the question of trust.



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Since starting work in October 2004, the BITE consortium has already had two expert meetings focusing on different ethical considerations relating to biometrics. Three more meetings will follow, and a public consultation will be launched in June 2006.

The meetings have already illustrated that not all concerns are shared equally by all stakeholders. Participants failed to reach a consensus at one of the meetings on the risk that biometrics pose to privacy. 'Engineers said that other technologies are more intrusive. We from the ethical field have some doubts about this,' said Professor Mordini.

On the other hand, at a meeting on the use of DNA and genetics as identifiers, participants agreed that while such techniques have already been used in forensics, new problems will arise if they are used more generally. One of the principal problems is likely to be alarm among those who fear a surveillance society such as that portrayed in the film *Minority Report*.

'In reality it will not happen the day after tomorrow, but in 15 years DNA could be a biometric identifier,' said Professor Mordini.

Future meetings will hear from representatives of migrant organisations, and will address industrial issues as well as future technologies.

In addition to the issues of trust and misuse of data, Professor Mordini also highlighted a number of less predictable consequences that must be addressed. For example, the reliability of biometrics data could depend on the source that provided it. He gave the example of a biometrics ID card issued by a rogue regime. The biometrics may be correct, but the cardholder could nonetheless be dangerous.

The introduction of biometrics technology to prevent car theft in Malaysia also had one unexpected result. As access to a car was only possible if the owner placed his finger on the car to unlock it and start it, thieves cut off the owner's finger in order to steal the car. 'This is a technology that can be perceived as a bad technology. We must take into account feelings and worries,' said Professor Mordini.

The BITE coordinator believes that the public sector has an important role to play in the biometrics debate, in particular in building up trust. This task is not a simple one however: 'While the public sector tends to be trusted more than the private sector, when security issues are raised, people are more suspicious.' In spite of this, Professor Mordini expects the public sector to lead the way in implementing biometrics technologies, and for the commercial sector to follow.

Asked whether he agrees with the findings of a recent report from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), which claimed that the introduction of biometrics is both 'inevitable and necessary', Professor Mordini said that while it is now inevitable, the necessity of introducing biometrics is more questionable. 'It is necessary from an industrial point of view if not from a security point of view,' he told CORDIS News.

The BITE project is just the start of the biometrics debate. When the project comes to an end, Professor Mordini and his team hope to have 'built the core of a future, wider network and to have produced an inventory of current issues and have a wider perspective on future issues.'

For further information on BITE, please visit:
<http://www.biteproject.org>

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