



BITE:Promoting Research and Public Debate on Bioethical Implications of Emerging Biometric Identification Technologies

The main strategic impact of the BITE Project will be to initiate a public debate on ethical and policy aspects of emerging biometrics. In the short term, the BITE Project will act as a working party aiming to promote international – European and transEuropean - dialogue on bioethics of biometric identification technologies. In the long term, BITE Project will contribute to promote innovative strategies and collaborative research in this field.

BITE aims to prompt research and to launch a public debate on bioethics of biometric technology. The number of biometric devices in use in Europe has jumped from 8,550 in 1996 to more than to 150,000 in 2004 and biometric industries revenues are expected to more than triple in the next two years. “Biometrics seem headed for dramatic growth in the next few years. But calm, public discussion of their benefits and drawbacks has been lamentably lacking” (The Economist, Prepare to be scanned, Monday December 8th 2003). The BITE project aims to launch such a discussion.

Biometrics evoke several social, legal and ethical concerns. Concerns are based on a variety of factors, including fears about the centralization of biometric identification information and the potential for misuse of these data. From 1998 to 2003 the European Commission has funded 28 research projects on biometrics in the scope of its ICT programmes. Most of them mentioned the need to produce research in the field of ethics of biomedical implications of biometrics. The main strategic impact of the BITE Project is to initiate such a research.

After years of false starts, security systems based on biometrics—human characteristics such as faces, hand shapes and fingerprints—are finally taking off. No longer a science fiction solution, biometric technologies are the most important innovation in the IT industry for the next few years and the biometric industry is projected to grow from \$600 million in 2002 to \$4 billion by 2007.

According to Professor Emilio Mordini, the coordinator of the project and director of the Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship (Rome) “As biometric becomes important, also its medical implications are becoming critical; and its bioethical impact will be crucial to determine the future acceptance/refusal of this technology”.

At the moment there is no clear ethical framework for the development and use of biometrics. To some extent this will be determined by individual societies and cultures.

However, currently the agenda is set by cost-benefit analysis for improved security, without reference to a more fundamental assessment of the advisability of cross-application unique identification of individual citizens and

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The BITE project aims to fill this gap. BITE involves 9 partners (Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship, University of Rome La Sapienza, University of Lancaster, Erasmus University, International Organisation of Migration, International Biometric Group, HumanScan, Optel, Esa Communication) which are a unique combination of academic centres, industries and international organisations, with the aim to help industry and researchers to confront ethical issues that arise in biometrics.

The BITE project offers a unique combination of academic centres, industries and international organisations with the aim to help industry and researchers to confront ethical issues that arise in biometrics. The project is coordinated by Prof. Emilio Mordini, director of the Centre for Science, Society and Citizenship (Rome).

The project, which will be based on five expert meetings (Lancaster, Rome, Geneva, Nuremberg, Wroclaw) and an online public consultation, will be concluded in October 2006 with a public conference in Brussels.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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