

BITE chews over the ethics of biometrics

Background description

Many Europeans will have received the new biometric passports that are currently being introduced. While they are harder to forge, making it easier to catch criminals travelling on falsified documents, they raise certain ethical questions. Biometrics is the application of technologies that make use of certain physical characteristics – such as hand geometry, facial and voice recognition, iris and retinal scans – or personal behavioural traits to recognise or verify identity. They are currently being used by airports, government agencies, hospitals, banks, schools, and beyond. One concern voiced about this sort of technology is the privacy surrounding biometric information contained on central databases. Another is the growing interdependence between technology and the human body, which is becoming known as the ‘informatisation of the body’.

Project profile

As biometric identification devices become ever more sophisticated, the need in Europe is growing for a bioethical code to determine the future acceptability of emerging biometric technologies. The BITE project seeks to assess the ethical ramifications of emerging technologies in the field. Grouping partners from academia and industry in five European countries – Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the United Kingdom and Switzerland – as well as international organisations, the groundbreaking project aims to “prompt research and to launch a public debate on [the] ethics of biometric technology”. Given the global nature of biometric applications, the project intends to promote an international dialogue around the related issues by setting up an ‘international dialogue platform’. It will also stimulate innovation strategies that take these ethical considerations into account. BITE will be divided into three main phases: fact finding, public consultation, and reporting.

Full project title: Promoting Research and Public Debate on Bioethical Implications of Emerging Biometric Identification Technologies

Project acronym: BITE

EU funding: €290 000

Project launch: 1 October 2004

Duration: 24 months

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Science in society significance

As the controversy surrounding biometric passports demonstrates, biometric technologies are issues of serious public concern. The benefits of biometrics are widely recognised in the field of security, combating terrorism and fighting fraud. However, members of the European public are concerned about the privacy and security issues related to biometric technologies and they worry about the possibility of 'function creep' (when data collected for one purpose is used for others for which it was not designed). They also fear the potential misuse of such information by governments, employers, insurance companies, and other interest groups. Given such widespread public concerns, it is important for the EU to engage in the public debate and help to forge an acceptable bioethical framework. This commitment is outlined in Actions 30 and 33 – which seek to promote public and international dialogues on scientific ethics – of the Commission's 2001 Science and Society Action Plan. BITE will help facilitate the public debate and flesh out policy and regulatory proposals.

Expected results/outcomes

- ▲ Conduct a thorough review of the scientific evidence in three fields of biometric technologies
- ▲ Produce policy papers
- ▲ Convene five expert forums
- ▲ Conduct an on-line public consultation on the issues raised by the project
- ▲ Raise public awareness of the scientific and ethical issues related to biometrics
- ▲ Contribute to setting the agenda for public and political debates on emerging biometric technologies