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ODU research to help fight terrorism

Stephanie Kern *Mace&Crown*
 Posted 11.05.04

Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, there has been an ongoing battle to fight terrorism not only in Iraq, but here in the U.S. as well.

Vijayan K. Asari, an associate professor of electrical and computer engineering at Old Dominion University, is one of the many experts working to develop technology to improve the U.S.'s chances of finding terrorists before they enter the country.

He's currently putting the finishing touches on a new facial-recognition system — which he's spent the past three years working on — that could make fighting the war on terror much easier.

After Sept. 11, 2001, the Pentagon invited proposals from many different institutions to find a solution for homeland security. ODU was one of seven recipients — including universities such as Carnegie Mellon and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute — to receive a grant from the Department of Defense to further its research.

The initial grant was for \$68,000 and was recently renewed for \$300,000, according to ODU News. The corrections department is also working on a prototype of a similar system.

The computer-based facial image detection and recognition system will consist of a network of cameras that will be able to focus on an individual's face and create a three-dimensional image that will automatically be sent to different embassies around the world. The embassies will then compare the image to entries in their databases and forward any and all information regarding that person. Almost instantly, the U.S. will know exactly where this person came from, where they've been and what they did in other countries.

Asari points out, however, that the images the system produces are not like regular images.

"Images are not stored in the database," he said. "Only 64 key features of a person's face [are]."

Those key features, which are expressed in numbers, calculate such things as the diameter of someone's eyes, the amount of space in between their eyes or the height of their nose. The only thing that is required is one photo of someone's face, and the database can recognize that person from then on. As a result, the computer cannot be deceived if someone changes the color of their hair or wears an excessive amount of makeup.

This new technology is ideal for many situations, Asari said.

It was Asari's initial goal to make the system for international airports, to make sure that they could properly identify and deal with terrorists. This could possibly make the wait at airports shorter, he said, since the immigration officials can find out everything about a person as they are walking up to the desk. As a result, there is no need for question and answer, and a potential terrorist cannot hide information from immigration.

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Eventually, the system may become common enough to use on a local level, too, Asari said. For example, someone could install it in their home, so that when someone knocked on their door, they could find out if the person outside is dangerous or not.

Craig Holgate, a first-year student, said such technology would make him feel safer.

"I would definitely feel safer because I would know who was [outside my home]," he said. "I would also have more faith in the government on a national level."

Although many see it as a good idea, there are those who oppose it.

Dante Brooks, a first-year English major, said he considers the technology a violation of one's privacy rights.

"It's an invasion of privacy," he said. "They shouldn't be able to share your information — just like telemarketers."

As with any system, of course, it isn't failsafe.

Asari said he fears that the system will be flawed as more people get plastic surgery or their faces change with age. He also said the way it maps out the face and recognizes it can be problematic.

"The system needs to see the whole face in order to recognize it," he said. "It will not be able to detect facial features of someone who has their face covered."

It can, however, recognize faces in different lighting conditions and backgrounds.

Another drawback is that the information can only be shared with cooperating embassies, which limits the gathering of information critical to identifying individuals.

Asari said he plans for a prototype to be out within the next two years.

ODU is actively collaborating with a university in Singapore to develop the prototype. Asari and those working with him hope the technology can begin being used soon after in international airports to catch terrorists and fugitives. Asari said he predicts that one unit — including computer networking and cameras — will cost around \$4,000, depending on the size and number of terminals in the airport.

He said he feels, however, that this is a small price to pay for the added security.

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