

Warts of high-tech facial scanning

We need to consider the consequences of using this life-altering technology



William F.B. O'Reilly

I had lunch in Washington, D.C., a few weeks ago with a woman who told me an unremarkable story that I can't get out of my head.

She had been in Asheville, North Carolina, shopping for shoes with a friend who suffers from Morton's neuroma or planter fasciitis — I can't remember which. The idea was to find a shoe with ameliorative properties, and she stumbled onto a brand promising just that.

"How about this one?" she called to her friend an aisle or two away. She was instantly waved off. "Ug-ly," her friend mouthed. And that was that.

Until the next day when the woman who had held the shoe began getting online ads for it. Wherever she browsed, the shoe ad followed. At first, she couldn't figure it out. It would be one thing if she had done an online search for the brand — the shoe company would then

be able to identify her as a potential customer — but she hadn't. What she had done, though, was stand by a particular shoe rack in a particular store while holding her mobile phone. The company had geo-tagged it, and, subsequently, her. Her hobbling friend, who had stood just 15 feet away from her in the store, got no ads.

We've all been aware of technology like this for some time, but this woman's tale still startled me. It forced me to consider how much data I give away to Google, my seven Alexas (yes, I have a problem) and in my business trips through GPS and other transportation records. Each of us leaves a digital trail that could be misappropriated in a sinister world. But rather than think too much about that, I typically whisper one of three things to myself and keep kicking it to Alexa: "My life isn't that interesting," "I have nothing to hide" or "This is how they catch the terrorists and crooks." I suspect most of us do that.

Last week in California, though, something titillating



every two years — it's hard to imagine what 2030 or 2040 might look like.

Already, we're tracked pretty much everywhere we go. The average Londoner is reportedly caught on camera more than 300 times per day; city dwellers in the United States go relatively unscathed with just 70 daily camera appearances, according to estimates. Our license plates are routinely logged on highways, and speed cameras are so accurate that they can catch you picking your nose if you're not careful. (A portrait of yours truly was mailed to me by Iceland's Reykjavik Police Department a couple of years back. Only scratching it — swear!)

When we read about this type of technology in China or North Korea, we gasp at the thought of what a totalitarian state might do with the data. But here, we tell ourselves it's all about catching bad guys, rarely thinking that officials looking to inhibit our freedoms could one day be peering through those camera lenses, making Morton's neuroma seem like a walk in the park.

William F.B. O'Reilly is a consultant to Republicans.

happened that's already kicking off a larger conversation. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors banned government use of facial recognition software within city limits. In typical San Francisco fashion, the ban was enacted for a far-out, left-wing reason — to stymie Immigration and Customs Enforcement, in this case — but I can't help feeling joyful about the vote just the same. It's a reminder that we're still allowed to push back in this country. Just because it's possible to do

something, doesn't mean we have to do it, or have it done to us. Shortly after the San Francisco vote, a bill was introduced in Albany that would ban the use of facial recognition technology by landlords in residential buildings.

This will be an increasingly important consideration in the immediate years ahead as surveillance, bioengineering and other life-altering technologies proliferate. When you consider the efficacy of Moore's law — computer chips doubling in capacity



Suffolk County Community College culinary student Ayesha Ramsey, left, works with chef Laureen Gauthier. Suffolk, the state's second-largest community college, charges residents \$2,735 a semester, plus fees.

lives by providing a path to higher education. A better, and less costly, approach is free community college, which is being implemented in Tennessee and Chicago — with early encouraging results, although more remains to be done.

More important, the 2017 tax cuts for big corporations and wealthy Americans are drain-

ing revenue from government coffers, revenue that could be used to improve educational opportunities for middle- and lower-income Americans. Our young people are our future, and they need college degrees or trades if we are going to compete in a global market.

Miriam Chua, Huntington

Lots of plastic garbage all around

The ban on plastic bags statewide starting March 1 is something I support ["Bag ban debate," News, May 12]. Under the new state law, cities and counties can decide whether to charge consumers 5 cents for paper bags. Although I would like to see everyone use reusable bags, the new law is a big step in the right direction.

As a Boy Scout in my community, I have participated in several events where we go to a park, lake area or beach and do a cleanup. People would be amazed at the amount of plastic bags and plastic materials we typically pick up. They are stuck in marshes, low-water areas, bushes and trees.

If more people saw what is out there, I think more would be in full support of the plastic bag ban.

Jack Haggerty, Smithtown

Cut carbon emissions from transportation

Transportation is a tough nut to crack when it comes to reducing dangerous greenhouse gas emissions ["Lawmaker: No 'middle ground' on climate woes," News, May 15]. But we don't have to wait for all the durable cars to be replaced by electric vehicles. We need to shift away from single-driver vehicles and embrace public transit and other low-carbon solutions.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has taken on switching our electric grid to renewable power, closing down coal plants and ramping up wind and solar projects. He has not put the same effort into reducing transportation emissions.

Yes, we need financial incentives to buy electric vehicles and a state-wide charging infrastructure. But beyond that, let the governor create a widespread public education campaign about the benefits of low

carbon transit. Improve mass transit and access to walking and bike lanes. Zone for density near transit stops.

Let us decarbonize our method of transit long before 2040, when the last drivers will finally rid themselves of their gasoline-guzzling cars.

Jay Blackman, East Meadow

July Fourth speech a campaign event

President Donald Trump wants to change the venue of fireworks to celebrate the Fourth of July in the nation's capital ["The year July Fourth became a dud," Opinion, May 18]. He wants to give a speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Will anyone be surprised to see videos and photos of the event in his 2020 campaign?

Margaret Dunn, St. James

EMAIL letters@newsday.com.