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ARTICLE 29 DATA PROTECTION WORKING PARTY

European data protection authorities adopt opinion on developments in biometric technologies

The European data protection authorities represented in the Article 29 Working Party have adopted an opinion on recent developments in biometric technologies. The opinion provides an updated legal analysis of the use of biometric data and best practice recommendations. The opinion identifies technical and organizational measures to mitigate data protection and privacy risks and also offers guidance on how to prevent negative consequences on data subjects' privacy and their fundamental right to data protection.

Biometric data are successfully and efficiently used in scientific research, are a key element of forensic science and are a valuable element of access control systems. They can help raise the security level and make identification and authentication procedures easier, quicker and more convenient. Biometric systems however use unique properties of an individual, such as fingerprints, vein patterns and DNA. While a person's biometric data can be deleted or altered, the source from which they have been extracted can in general neither be altered nor deleted. Therefore biometric technologies pose specific risks to the privacy and data protection of the individual concerned.

Technological progress has made storage space and computing power cheaper. This has made online picture galleries and social networks containing billions of photographs possible, allowed fingerprint readers and video surveillance devices to become inexpensive gadgets and made DNA analysis faster and more affordable.

Where such commonly available biometric technologies are used without adequate safeguards the right to data protection of the concerned individual is at risk. In addition, many types of biometric data can be collected without the individual's cooperation or knowledge, such as through video surveillance and facial recognition systems, and many violations could occur unnoticed.

The abovementioned benefits, risks and other recent developments are addressed in the Opinion. The legal implications of the use of biometric data and systems are examined from a general and a technology specific point of view.

Background information

The Article 29 Working Party on the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Processing of Personal Data is an independent advisory body on data protection and privacy, set up under Article 29 of the Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC. It is composed of representatives from the national data protection authorities of the EU Member States, the European Data Protection Supervisor and the European Commission. Its tasks are described in Article 30 of Directive 95/46/EC and Article 15 of Directive 2002/58/EC. The Article 29 Working Party is competent to examine any question covering the application of the data protection directives in order to contribute to the uniform application of the directives. It carries out this task by issuing recommendations, opinions and working documents.

http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/article-29/index_en.htm