

May 22, 2018

Jeffrey P. Bezos
Founder and Chief Executive Officer
Amazon.com, Inc.
Seattle, WA

Dear Mr. Bezos,

The undersigned coalition of organizations are dedicated to protecting civil rights and liberties and safeguarding communities. We write today to express our profound concerns about your company's facial recognition system, Rekognition. We demand that Amazon stop powering a government surveillance infrastructure that poses a grave threat to customers and communities across the country. Amazon should not be in the business of providing surveillance systems like Rekognition to the government.

Amazon touts itself as a customer-centric company and directs its leadership to "work vigorously to earn and keep customer trust."¹ In the past, Amazon has opposed secret government surveillance.² And you have personally supported First Amendment freedoms and spoken out against the discriminatory Muslim Ban.³ But Amazon's Rekognition product runs counter to these values. As advertised, Rekognition is a powerful surveillance system readily available to violate rights and target communities of color.

Amazon states that Rekognition can identify people in real-time by instantaneously searching databases containing tens of millions of faces.⁴ Amazon offers a "person tracking" feature that it says "makes investigation and monitoring of individuals easy and accurate" for "surveillance applications."⁵ Amazon says Rekognition can be used to identify "all faces in group photos, crowded events, and public places such as airports"—at a time when Americans are joining public protests at unprecedented levels.⁶

Amazon also encourages the use of Rekognition to monitor "people of interest," raising the possibility that those labeled suspicious by governments—such as undocumented immigrants or Black activists—will be targeted for Rekognition surveillance. Amazon has even advertised Rekognition for use with officer body cameras, which would fully transform those devices into mobile surveillance cameras aimed at the public.⁷

People should be free to walk down the street without being watched by the government. Facial recognition in American communities threatens this freedom. In overpoliced communities of color, it could effectively eliminate it. The federal government could use this facial recognition technology to continuously track immigrants as they embark on new lives. Local police could use it to identify political protesters captured by officer body cameras. With Rekognition, Amazon delivers these dangerous surveillance powers directly to the government.

Rather than restrict government use of Rekognition, Amazon is helping governments deploy it on both coasts, according to documents obtained by ACLU affiliates in three states.⁸ It has provided product support and offered free consulting services to government customers. Amazon has solicited feedback on new product features for law enforcement. Amazon even signed a secrecy agreement with a prominent law enforcement customer. Despite all of this, Amazon imposes no meaningful restrictions on how governments can use Rekognition.

Amazon Rekognition is primed for abuse in the hands of governments. This product poses a grave threat to communities, including people of color and immigrants, and to the trust and respect Amazon has worked to build. Amazon must act swiftly to stand up for civil rights and civil liberties, including those of its own customers, and take Rekognition off the table for governments.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
ACLU Foundations of California
ACLU of Florida
ACLU of Massachusetts
ACLU of Oregon
ACLU of Washington
18MillionRising.org
AI Now
API Chaya
CAIR Massachusetts
CAIR San Francisco Bay Area
CAIR Washington
Center for Media Justice
Charles Hamilton Houston Institute - Harvard Law School
Color of Change
CREDO Action
Data for Black Lives
Defending Rights and Dissent
Demand Progress Action
El Centro de la Raza
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Faith Action Network
Families for Justice as Healing
Freedom of the Press Foundation
Human Rights Watch
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice
Legacy of Equality, Leadership, and Organizing (LELO)
MAPS-AMEN (American Muslim Empowerment Network)
Media Alliance
Muslim Advocates
Muslim Justice League
National Day Laborer Organizing Network
National Lawyers Guild – Massachusetts Chapter
Oakland Privacy
OneAmerica
Restore the Fourth, Inc.
Seattle Japanese American Citizens League
Student Immigrant Movement
Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network
WITNESS
Youth Justice & Power Union

¹ *Amazon Leadership Principles*, <https://www.amazon.jobs/principles>.

² Tom Mendelsohn, *Amazon, Google, Apple join Microsoft in US gag orders fight*, Sept. 5, 2016, Ars Technica, <https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2016/09/microsoft-amazon-google-apple-fox-news-us-gagging-orders/>.

³ Press Release, *Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press announces \$1 million gift from Jeff Bezos; new partnership with First Look Media*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.rcfp.org/reporters-committee-freedom-press-announces-1-million-gift-jeff-bezos-new-partnership-first-look-med>; Ben Popper, *Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos: 'we do not support' Trump immigration order*, Jan. 30, 2017, The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/1/30/14445390/amazon-ceo-jeff-bezos-oppose-trump-immigration-order>.

⁴ Press Release, *Amazon Rekognition announces real-time face recognition, Text in Image recognition, and improved face*

detection, Nov. 21, 2017, <https://aws.amazon.com/about-aws/whats-new/2017/11/amazon-rekognition-announces-real-time-face-recognition-text-in-image-recognition-and-improved-face-detection> (archive).

⁵ Q: *What is Person Tracking*, Rekognition FAQ, https://aws.amazon.com/rekognition/faqs/#Video_Analytics (archive).

⁶ *Amazon Rekognition Announces Real-Time Face Recognition, Support for Recognition of Text in Image, and Improved Face Detection*, AWS AI Blog, Nov. 21, 2017, <https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/machine-learning/amazon-rekognition-announces-real-time-face-recognition-support-for-recognition-of-text-in-image-and-improved-face-detection/> (archive); Press Release, *Amazon Rekognition announces real-time face recognition, Text in Image recognition, and improved face detection*, Nov. 21, 2017, <https://aws.amazon.com/about-aws/whats-new/2017/11/amazon-rekognition-announces-real-time-face-recognition-text-in-image-recognition-and-improved-face-detection> (archive).

⁷ See Amazon Rekognition product page (archived on Feb. 25, 2018), <https://web.archive.org/web/20180225100337/https://aws.amazon.com/rekognition/>; *Letter to Axon AI Ethics Board regarding Ethical Product Development and Law Enforcement*, Apr. 26, 2018, <http://civilrightsdocs.info/pdf/policy/letters/2018/Axon%20AI%20Ethics%20Board%20Letter%20FINAL.pdf>.

⁸ Matt Cagle & Nicole Ozer, *Amazon Teams Up with Law Enforcement to Deploy Dangerous New Facial Recognition Technology*, ACLU of Northern California, May 22, 2018, www.aclunc.org/rekognition-analysis.