

PowerPost Analysis

# The Technology 202: Nuns are leading the charge to pressure Amazon to get religion on facial recognition

By [Cat Zakrzewski](#)

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**Catholic nuns are leading an investor effort to pressure Amazon to get religion on facial recognition technology.**

At Amazon's annual shareholders' [meeting](#) today, investors will vote on a proposal from the [Sisters of Saint Joseph](#) to ban the company from selling the technology to government agencies, unless the board grants an exception. (Amazon chief executive Jeffrey P. Bezos owns the Washington Post.)

Sister Pat Mahoney, a member of the New York-based religious order, says the goal is to leverage the nuns' position as shareholders in the public company to raise awareness. They were alarmed by a [report](#) that Amazon was pitching its facial recognition technology, known as Rekognition, to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

The nuns see restricting facial recognition technology -- which they say could lead law enforcement to misidentify people, especially women of color -- as part of their religious group's broader work on immigration and criminal justice.

ADVERTISING

“It struck a light in most of us,” Mahoney told me. “It looks great when you’re watching a whodunit movie on TV and you can spot the bad guy right away, but when you think about it, it is a violation of fundamental human rights to privacy.”

**Facial recognition is confronting a public reckoning -- and the nuns' involvement highlights just how unusual is the coalition fighting its swift rollout by companies and the U.S. government.**

**They are joining a band of privacy and civil rights advocates, academics and lawmakers -- and even some tech employees who are working on the software -- who are deploying a variety of tactics to limit its use.** Mahoney said she is encouraged by recent moves: San Francisco last week passed the first city-wide [ban](#) on facial recognition, prohibiting police and city agencies from using it. And Amazon employees wrote a letter last year to Bezos [demanding](#) that the company stop selling the technology to the U.S. government.

**But turning to shareholders is a new front. And its part of a broader trend to use investor meetings to try to force Big Tech to change its ways.** Civil rights groups and tech industry employees [are increasingly deploying similar tactics](#) to get companies to bend on issues from climate change to privacy.

When it comes to facial recognition technology, Mahoney said, "There's all kinds of issues at stake here. To put it simplistically, we need to catch the bad guys, but the risk is so great of misidentification and becoming a police state. It just has to be monitored, and monitoring is not in place nor is perfection of the product itself."

In addition to the proposed sales ban, Amazon investors today will also vote on whether the company should commission an independent report examining whether Rekognition violates civil rights or a quickly-deployed rollout could ultimately hurt its bottom line. Amazon tried earlier this year to squash the proposals, but the Securities and Exchange Commission [said](#) that the company had to allow a vote. Amazon's board recommended that investors vote against both proposals.

"In the two-plus years AWS has been offering Amazon Rekognition, AWS has not received a single report of Amazon Rekognition being used in the harmful manner posited in the proposal, but is aware of many beneficial purposes of Amazon Rekognition, including by law enforcement to help improve public safety," the company said in a [filing](#).

**The nuns are using shareholder activism for social change beyond facial recognition technology.** The sisters work with a larger coalition of religious groups, known as the Tri-State Coalition for Responsible Investment, that aims to use their shareholder position to address issues related to human dignity

and the environment. The non-profit's work dates back to religious groups' efforts to influence corporations to divest from South Africa in the 1970s, according to its website.

The Sisters of Saint Joseph previously [proposed](#) a similar shareholder vote to pressure JP Morgan Chase to stop funding private prison companies. The company [announced](#) it would stop banking the prison industry in March.

"I call it the mission of the portfolio," Mahoney tells me.

Mahoney tells me that the vote faces long odds and is unlikely to win a majority. But she says it's just the beginning of the work her order may do on facial recognition.

"I think realistically we have to hope that we raise the issue and it sparks enough of the shareholders to think hard about it," Mahoney said.

**The facial recognition debate is also coming to Capitol Hill.** Today the House Committee on Oversight and Reform will host a hearing on the impact facial recognition can have on civil liberties with witnesses from non-profits and in academia.

"There's a growing consensus that this powerful surveillance technology needs to come under democratic control," said Neema Singh Guliani, ACLU senior legislative counsel, who will be testifying before the committee today. "Members of Congress need to hit the pause button on law enforcement use of this dangerous surveillance technology."

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**BITS, NIBBLES AND BYTES**

**BITS: The Trump administration is considering banning another Chinese tech firm -- a move that would intensify an escalating trade conflict, [according to my colleague David Lynch](#).**

No final decision has been made yet, but the administration is readying an action against Hikvision, a maker of video surveillance technology. The possible blacklist comes just a week after the administration moved to blacklist Huawei, preventing U.S. companies from supplying the telecommunications company without a license.

The officials are considering the same penalty against Hikvision, which would add the company to the Commerce Department's "entity list."

The U.S. has taken action against the company in the past on national security grounds. Last year, Congress banned federal agencies from purchasing equipment from Hikvision, as well as Huawei, ZTE, Hytera and Dahua. Hikvision's surveillance cameras are deployed by the Chinese government in the Muslim-majority region Xinjiang to combat what the government describes as separatist terrorism.

**NIBBLES: Hundreds of Amazon's warehouse employees are playing video games on the clock -- racing virtual dragons or sports cars. But they aren't loafing on the job and playing Fortnite, they're trying to fill customer orders, [my colleague Greg Bensinger reports.](#)**

The video games reflect a larger effort at Amazon to gamify tedious warehouse work, tracking employees' progress in a video game format. The video games are optional for thousands of workers, tasked with physically demanding jobs like plucking items from or stowing products on shelves for 10 hours per day or more.

"Developed by Amazon, the games are displayed on small screens at employees' workstations," Greg writes. "As [robots](#) wheel giant shelves up to each workstation, lights or screens indicate which item the worker needs to pluck to put into a bin. The games simultaneously register the completion of the task, which is tracked by scanning devices, and can pit individuals, teams or entire floors against one another to be fastest, simply by picking or stowing real Lego sets, cellphone cases or dish soap."

Employees win virtual badges and other goodies for playing the games. "Think Tetris, but with real boxes," Greg writes.

The games are part of a broader trend in industry to use software to mimic video game-like rewards to better retain workers for low-skilled work. Lyft and Uber have deployed such tactics to retain their fleet of drivers. Greg shared a photo of the game on Twitter:

**BYTES: Google will now require advertisers to get approval for ads referring to abortion services in the United States, Britain and Ireland, [according to Tiffany Hsu of the New York Times.](#)**

The company announced the policy change following outrage over misleading abortion ads. Google will now require any organization running abortion-related ads to be certified as providers or non-providers. Starting in June, abortion ads will contain disclosures that say if the organization running the ad provides abortions. Companies and organizations can begin applying for certifications now.

Google [said](#) in a statement that "this added transparency will help ensure that users have the necessary information to decide which abortion-related ads are most relevant to them."

Google's policy changes come after an organization opposing abortion appeared to pose as an abortion provider on the site. The company has faced criticism in the past for enabling so-called crisis pregnancy centers to

appear as abortion providers in an attempt to convince women not to undergo the procedure. The new changes are intended to make it clear what services an organization provides.

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Chinese company dealt "insurmountable" blow as chip designer says it must comply with US trade ban.

**BBC News**

### **At all-hands meeting Jeff Bezos tells employees he's 'very excited' about the auto industry**

Bezos's comments give a rare glimpse into his interest in the auto industry. Amazon recently invested in two self-driving start-ups.

**CNBC**

**@innovations Blog**

### **E-scooter company Spin will place dozens of start-up's solar-powered docking stations in two cities this summer**

Two U.S. cities, have agreed to a 60-day pilot program installing dozens of electric docking stations on sidewalks. The stations give riders a designated place to park their devices, keeping sidewalks free of clutter.

**Peter Holley**

-- Tech news from the public sector:

## **Technology**

# **Rift emerges between federal agencies reviewing the Sprint and T-Mobile merger**

A merger between T-Mobile and Sprint, the nation's third- and fourth-largest wireless carriers, entered uncertain legal territory this week, after the two federal agencies reviewing the \$26 billion deal appeared to split in their thinking about the transaction.

**Tony Romm**

# **Judge Rules Qualcomm's Practices Violate Antitrust Law, Orders Changes**

Qualcomm unlawfully suppressed competition in the market for cellphone chips and used its dominant position to exact excessive licensing fees, a judge ruled in a decision that could shake up the smartphone industry.

**Wall Street Journal**

# **GOP senators split over antitrust remedies for big tech**

GOP senators on Tuesday signaled they are divided over whether to pursue antitrust enforcement against the country's largest tech companies.

**The Hill**

# Huawei Accuses U.S. of Bullying as It Seeks Support From Europe

Huawei denounced U.S. actions against the company as “bullying” and implored European governments to resist American pressure to follow suit in a bid to safeguard one of its most lucrative markets.

Wall Street Journal

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New York Times

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Cat Zakrzewski is a technology policy reporter and will author the Washington Post's upcoming Technology 202 newsletter. Follow 

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