March 12, 2020

Michael Mulgrew  
President  
United Federation of Teachers  
52 Broadway  
New York, NY. 10004

Dear President Mulgrew,

We’re writing to you on behalf of 30 racial justice, education justice, and civil rights groups regarding the disturbing news that the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has reportedly used experimental real-time facial recognition technology provided by Clearview AI and Insight Camera.¹ The racial bias baked into facial recognition technology, especially real-time applications of it, presents significant real world harm to Black, Asian, and Latinx students, families, and educators. In light of the harm this technology causes, we’re calling on the UFT to cancel any current contracts with Clearview AI and Insight Camera and to commit to opposing the use of this technology in NYC schools and education facilities.

Clearview AI facial recognition software combined with Insight Camera’s live feed technology has the potential to exacerbate racial bias and school pushout, and lead to civil rights violations. The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) found that facial recognition systems produced a false match for Black women ten times as often as they do for white counterparts.² Clearview has not submitted their algorithm for public testing, but it is likely that it exhibits similar rates of racial bias as other facial recognition systems. Other independent tests show that these systems suffer from significant racial bias that results in falsely identifying people of color, particularly Black and Asian people. Related, facial classification systems are largely incapable of accurately classifying trans and non-binary people.³

Those disturbingly high error rates come from government facial recognition systems that are paired with similar quality photos such as mugshots, driver's licenses, and passport photos. Since Clearview’s system compares a vast array of online photos of unknown quality and consistency, including incorrectly tagged photos, their system is far more likely to generate additional false positives.

³ “Demographic Effects in Facial Recognition and Their Dependence on Image Acquisition: An Evaluation of Eleven Commercial Systems,” IEEE, February 06, 2019  
In an education setting, false positives could lead to a Black student being detained because the system mistook them for a suspended student; or an Asian teacher having the police called on her because the system incorrectly tagged her as someone in a sex offender registry. And because Clearview AI has a partnership with Customs and Border Patrol and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the system could automatically flag undocumented students to CBP and ICE agents.

The threats Clearview AI poses are so significant that earlier this year, New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal issued a statewide moratorium, prohibiting law enforcement use of Clearview AI’s facial recognition software. In an era where law enforcement is almost never denied access to new surveillance technologies, this type of action from an Attorney General speaks to the significant harm Clearview AI poses to our communities.

Lastly, other teacher unions are taking active stands against this discriminatory technology. Just this week, the Boston Teachers Union announced their support for a ban on facial recognition technology in schools. We hope that the United Federation of Teachers will join the movement of teachers and students around the country championing efforts to protect students and teachers from discriminatory surveillance systems by ending all relationships with Clearview AI and Insight Camera, and supporting proposed New York state legislation prohibiting the use of this technology in schools.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these significant threats to our communities in greater detail.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Quality Education
Color Of Change
Surveillance Technology Oversight Project (S.T.O.P.)
AI Now Institute
DRUM- Desis Rising Up and Moving
The Black Institute
New York Civil Liberties Union
Center on Privacy & Technology
Fight for the Future
Journey for Justice Alliance- National
Sisters Organizing for Understanding and Leadership

5 Boston Teachers Union, March 02, 2020 https://twitter.com/BTU66/status/1234593709267865603
Leaders Igniting Transformation
Citizen Action of New York
The Gathering for Justice
Girls for Gender Equity
New Settlement Parent Action Committee
Teachers Unite
Urban Word NYC
Dignity in Schools Campaign NYC
Communities for Police Reform
New York Collective of Radical Educators
Coalition for Asian American Children and Families
BYP100-NYC
Movement of Rank and File Educators
Integrate NYC
MASA
VOCAL-NY
Free Press
Data for Black Lives
MediaJustice