

OK GOOGLE, IS THIS A TERRORIST? —

Google helps Pentagon analyze military drone footage—employees “outraged”

"Project Maven" applies Google's image recognition tech to drone footage.

RON AMADEO - 3/6/2018, 11:08 AM

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A report from [Gizmodo](#) says that Google is partnering with the United States Department of Defense and building drone software. The project will reportedly apply Google's usual machine learning prowess to identify objects in drone footage. Google's involvement in the project wasn't public, but it was apparently discussed internally at Google last week and leaked.

The project is called "Project Maven," also known as the "[Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team](#) (AWCFT)." The project started in April of last year with a mission to “accelerate DoD’s integration of big data and machine learning.”

A DoD press release on [Project Maven](#) says the project aims to help deal with the "millions of hours of video" the military collects. Drone footage is pouring into the Pentagon at a rate faster than human analysts can keep up with, so the hope is that machine learning could help do some of the heavy lifting and identify interesting footage. As the owner of YouTube, Google is probably the world's foremost expert on having more video footage than you know what to do with.

The press release said Maven's initial focus was to detect "38 classes of objects that represent the kinds of things the department needs to detect, especially in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria." Gizmodo claims it now provides the military with "the ability to track individuals as they come and go from different locations."

According to the Gizmodo report, some Google employees are not taking the news well: "Some Google employees were outraged that the company would offer resources to the military for surveillance technology involved in drone operations... while others argued that the project raised important ethical questions about the development and use of machine learning."

A Google spokesperson responded to the report, saying, "We have long worked with government agencies to provide technology solutions. This specific project is a pilot with the Department of Defense, to provide open source TensorFlow APIs that can assist in object recognition on unclassified data."

The spokesperson added, "The technology flags images for human review and is for non-offensive uses only. Military use of machine learning

naturally raises valid concerns. We’re actively discussing this important topic internally and with others as we continue to develop policies and safeguards around the development and use of our machine learning technologies.”

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Ron is the Reviews Editor at Ars Technica, where he specializes in Android OS and Google products. He is always on the hunt for a new gadget and loves to rip things apart to see how they work.

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