

Bono Mack alarmed by Facebook tool

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By [TONY ROMM](#) | 6/8/11 5:46 PM EDT

New privacy concerns surrounding Facebook's use of facial recognition technology to help users tag their friends in photos have Republican Rep. Mary Bono Mack's subcommittee asking the social network for more information.

Staff on the chairwoman's Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade panel soon plan to huddle with Facebook to find out more about the feature, which recognizes users' faces and recommends to friends their names be tagged in photos uploaded to the site. The mechanism, which Facebook began to roll out in December, is turned on by default.

A spokesman for Bono Mack (R-Calif.) told POLITICO on Wednesday that the lawmaker wants to know if the feature has any use outside of photo tagging, and how many users have opted out of it.

Subcommittee staff further plan to inquire whether an opt out of the system still means the user's face is scanned, but does not suggest a potential name to tag, and whether Facebook fears the technology could easily be exploited.

"While facial recognition technology has exciting possibilities, and is already being utilized to some extent by Google and Apple, there are some obvious privacy concerns as well, and we intend to examine them as part of the broader online privacy debate," the spokesman said.

As that inquiry unfolds, the aide added Bono Mack plans to pose "the same questions to all companies utilizing facial recognition technology."

Bono Mack's interest is significant because she heads the House subcommittee with jurisdiction over consumer privacy issues.

But the chairwoman is the second top lawmaker so far to call attention to Facebook's "tag suggestions" tool. Earlier on Wednesday, Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) questioned Facebook for opting all users into the system by default.

Facebook's tag suggestions tool is hardly new: The site began to roll out the mechanism to U.S. users in December. In fact, it was only after the feature was expanded to millions more users worldwide this week that some regulators began to take notice.

That includes Europe's top data-protection group, which has signaled it is taking a closer look at the matter. Regulators in Ireland are opening their own inquiry as well.

The FTC, meanwhile, declined to say whether or not it is investigating, citing agency policy.

Facebook stands by the technology. A spokesman today noted that "millions of people have used it to add hundreds of millions of tags." Users can opt out of the system, and the social networking site has always allowed photo subjects to untag themselves, the spokesman added.

"This data, and the fact that we've had almost no user complaints, suggest people are enjoying the feature and are finding it useful," the spokesman said. "For those who don't, we made turning off tag suggestions easy and explained how to do so on our blog, in our help center, and within the interface."