

Opinion: The IRS should not make you scan your face to see your tax returns

The Internal Revenue Service headquarters in D.C. (Samuel Corum/Bloomberg)

By Editorial Board

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The Internal Revenue Service might soon force every American who wants to access their taxes online to record a selfie of themselves and submit to facial recognition to verify their identity. The IRS wants to start this extra verification procedure [this summer](#). That would be a mistake. This cannot be the only way to access an account online, as [90 percent](#) of tax filers currently do.

Requiring facial recognition could prevent a substantial number of people from accessing their accounts. Low-income Americans often lack the necessary technology, and research shows people of color are [more likely to be misidentified](#). There are equally serious concerns about privacy and what will happen to the potentially more than 100 million selfies the IRS will collect.

Cutting down on fraud is a worthy goal, but facial recognition should not be introduced so swiftly without clear guardrails around the data. The IRS hired a private company, ID.me, to handle the facial verification system, and it is currently required to store data [for at least seven years](#) due to IRS auditing requirements. While the company promises not to do anything with the data beyond share taxpayers' selfies with authorities if a fraud issue comes up, there is no federal law regulating how this sensitive information can be used. And let's not forget that [hackers exposed](#) the personal information of more than 140 million Americans when they broke into Equifax — itself once an [IRS verification company](#). If hackers were able to obtain the ID.me selfie records, it could be especially damaging, with potential uses ranging from committing fraud and identity theft to blackmailing people — or the company.

Some try to compare what the IRS wants to do to people using Face ID to unlock their cellphone. But there's a big difference between the two. First, it is not a requirement to use facial recognition to unlock an Apple iPhone. People get to opt in, and there are clear and easy alternatives, such as using a passcode. Second, Apple is very clear that your facial image "[doesn't leave your device](#)." Apple is not storing it anywhere, nor is Apple checking it against a bigger database of images in the way ID.me [describes](#) (a process known as "[one to many](#)" matching).

It's true that someone could still file a paper return or mail in a letter about their tax account. But the reality is more than 152 million tax returns were [filed online](#) last year. The IRS has been urging people not only to file online but also to use the IRS website to check the status of their return, their refund, their child tax credit and more due to a

massive backlog in processing paper returns. IRS call centers have been equally useless, answering only [1 in 10 calls](#) last tax season.

There have been encouraging reports that the IRS is [reconsidering](#) its sole reliance on ID.me for online verification for website access. At a minimum, the IRS must offer other verification options and clearly articulate guidelines on what happens to all facial data. The government is already warning of “[enormous challenges](#)” this tax filing season. Rushing into facial recognition is likely to make them worse.

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