

**[TRANSCRIPT-02] What privacy issues does AI surveillance at southern border raise?**,  
NewsNation Now, December 12, 2023 [5 min]  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhvqX1XQ53o>

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Note: *This transcript was converted into paragraph format (and headings were added) by Claude AI.*

## **High-Tech Border Surveillance**

And the southern border wall is going high-tech, deploying artificial intelligence. Now the U.S. government is building a virtual wall, using about 3,100 surveillance towers from the California coast to the tip of Texas. These new towers, marked in red on the map, use autonomous surveillance to help fill in surveillance gaps. They are solar-powered towers that track objects more than 7 miles away. The new AI software can distinguish people from animals and its private ranches.

## **Expert Commentary on AI Towers**

Joining us now is Russell Contreras, Justice and Race Reporter for Axios. Russell, thank you so much for being here. Thank you for having me. It was wonderful to have you. So as you know, there have been surveillance towers at the border for several years. The new autonomous towers, though, can apparently better detect abnormal activity. So in light of your research, and I know you researched this extensively, what aspects of this technology do you think serve as the greatest assistance to border security?

## **Benefits of AI Surveillance**

That's a good question. As you said, we've had towers for decades on the border, many of them near checkpoints and ports of entry. These towers are different. They're equipped with AI to distinguish between animals and humans. Before, that technology would pick up some movement and agents were rushed to the scene only to find coyotes or other animals. This gives personnel the information it needs to say, "Look, there's some people crossing the border. They may be holding some sort of equipment, possibly drugs or in distress." They can send information back to personnel so agents could be dispatched. This is important because the Border Patrol is facing staffing challenges. So right now, they are dedicated to the surge as you just showed in your last piece. They are right now busy. So it's very important that the Border Patrol make use of this staff, and these towers, according to Border Patrol, help them.

## **Privacy Concerns and Bipartisan Support**

And to take a little bit deeper into that aspect in just a moment. But first, Russell, this technology, it appears to have bipartisan support. There have been questions, though, about whether or not these towers are monitoring everyday civilians. There are some privacy concerns essentially.

## **Addressing Privacy Issues**

That's right. All law enforcement is going high-tech, even in police departments in metropolitan areas. You have equipment like ShotSpotter that detects gunshots and can distinguish shots from car doors slamming so that police can get to a scene. The Border Patrol is no different than any other agency looking at technology. However, anytime you introduce that, residents and some civil liberties advocates will get concerned. Some of these towers are located in busy areas next to cities or on tribal lands and on ranches. The companies, however, say they can block out sections of private land. They don't want their houses to be under surveillance or areas where their cows are grazing. So it's equipped with a lot of technology. What advocates say, though, is to be transparent and open about how this technology is being used. You're going to have concerns, especially on the borders where residents are saying, "Are you monitoring me when I'm going about my business?" These are things that need to be discussed openly, or we're also going to continue to have these anxieties.

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### **Data Collection and Policy Implications**

Transparency will certainly be key. So we've talked to so many on U.S. Customs and Border Patrol. So many are frustrated by what they're calling a lack of action from the Biden administration. Some saying there isn't a willingness to take immediate action at the border. Do you think this technology may at the very least present the administration with more data and the very specific needs right now? Yeah. Data is the new oil. What these towers can do is give the administration or the Border Patrol the data it needs to distinguish patterns. It can see how patterns are going. It's going to the towers and inspectors that are being placed at the border to distinguish and try to find vehicles that are keep going through that may be connected to the fentanyl trade or maybe have something that they shouldn't have trying to cross the border. That is important.

### **Asylum and Migration Patterns**

What's happening now is a debate over the asylum aspect of our law. There are a lot of migrants coming over from Honduras and Guatemala, and I've talked to some of those migrants, and they say, "Yes, for sure, we're escaping violence." There's also people looking for economic opportunity. Now, that's a little different. Right now, the smugglers are exploiting this part of the law where they say migrants cross over to claim asylum, but it's also more cost-effective for them because they don't have to be on the other side to capture the migrants and then give them jobs in, say, North Dakota and Colorado.