

Biometrics Standards: Comments on Federal Agency Participation in Standardization

Submitted by Aware, Inc.

NIST is an active participant in the development of biometrics standards. Its activities run the gamut from direct facilitation of standards publication to testing and evaluation of commercial products. The vast majority of its efforts are beneficial to the industry in terms of increased competition, technology advancement, and overall value to end users. But there is an activity conducted by NIST that appears to contradict its stated mission “to promote U.S. innovation and industrial competitiveness,” which is its development and global distribution of free biometrics software.

One such product is “NIST Biometric Image Software” (NBIS), a family of software applications for fingerprint compression, matching, and image quality scoring. NBIS is advertised through multiple mechanisms, including press releases and dedicated web pages. NIST software is often developed as a service to, and funded by, other U.S. Government agencies, but is competitive to existing products from commercial suppliers. Because the products are free and readily available, they tend to become ubiquitous in the global marketplace.

The consequence is the artificial, premature commoditization of key biometric technologies, and ultimately, stunted innovation, because the incentive to invest in certain R&D areas necessary to advance product performance and value is reduced. The impact is particularly severe on sales by U.S. technology suppliers in high-growth emerging markets abroad, as well as on the performance of the systems in which the products deploy.

About Aware

Aware, Inc. is a supplier of standards-based biometrics software products. These products are used by system integrators to incorporate biometric functionality into their solutions, which in turn are used by the U.S. Government for military, law enforcement, and border management applications such as fingerprint-based enrollment for background checks. These products have been in operation in systems operated by the FBI, DHS, Department of State, Department of Justice, and several others agencies since 1992.