

# Privacy Corner: Sajid backs commercial surveillance reparations fund

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Rumsha Sajid, a national field organizer with Media Justice, says the Federal Trade Commission should create a reparations fund for communities of color with proceeds from enforcing commercial surveillance rules.

Media Justice is a national organization that demands accountability from large tech platforms, with a network of more than 80 grassroots groups who say they're fighting for justice in the digital age. Sajid has worked on campaigns to abolish surveillance and coordinated with activists on how to fight disinformation.

Sajid said the FTC shouldn't delay its rulemaking to curb lax data security practices, limit privacy abuses, and ensure that algorithmic decision-making doesn't result in unlawful discrimination. (See *FTCWatch*, No. 1022, Feb. 28, 2022).

Violators should be fined, and victims should get redress, Sajid said.

"While commercial surveillance affects us all, the direct harms of control, criminalization and punishment are often directed at communities of color. So any money that the government receives as part of its enforcement of commercial surveillance should go to a fund that focuses on reparations and redress for communities of color and other communities that have been directly harmed by commercial surveillance," Sajid said.

Media Justice also seeks to push forward Consensual Tech Project's digital consent framework adapted from Planned Parenthood's definition of sexual consent.

The framework says if people are compelled to give up data to access services, instead of because they want to, "that is not consensual." A "consensual app only uses data the person has directly given, not data acquired through other means like scraping or buying." Good consent in the digital technology context is freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific, according to the framework.

The framework says that if an interface is designed to mislead people into doing something they normally wouldn't do, the application is not consensual. It also calls for clear and accessible language to inform about risks instead of burying them in fine print.

According to Sajid, FTC commissioners' regulation of privacy abuses and discriminatory algorithmic decision-making can't wait.

"I would want them to know that the harms of commercial surveillance are deeply felt by the Media Justice Network and our communities that we work with," Sajid said. "And many of these companies engage in a pattern of unfair and deceptive practices that are especially harmful to historically marginalized communities. And so what I want the FTC to know is that we urgently need them to regulate these corporations and stop the normalization of surveillance everywhere."

## Youth-led murals

Sajid's earlier work as a youth organizer inspired her interest in online discrimination. She facilitated projects like youth-led murals in Michigan with the aim of using "restorative justice in schools as an alternative to police."

"And that work really shaped the rest of my career because I learned the value of media and storytelling in our justice movements, and I also worked with previously incarcerated folks in West Michigan as well, doing storytelling during that time," Sajid said.

After earning a bachelor's degree in English Creative Writing from Kalamazoo College with a focus on Black feminist literature, Sajid earned her master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning from UCLA.

## Harmful algorithms

Sajid's affiliation with UCLA's Institute on Inequality and Democracy connected her with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, where she interviewed social workers and families who had their children taken away from them. She concluded social workers relied on algorithms to bring biased cases against low-income Black and brown communities. Sajid said she conducted political education to abolish the surveillance of families by child protective services in Los Angeles.

"Social workers admitted that there was bias," Sajid said. "And so this meant that marginalized communities often had their children taken away from them at a disproportionate rate than others in the community."

"I think since privacy is not often granted to Black, brown and immigrant communities, I often have to approach the issue not as a request for privacy but a demand for anti-surveillance," Sajid said.

"And the stakes for being surveilled for Black and brown communities is often mass criminalization, which leads to disproportionate numbers of marginalized communities being incarcerated and over policed," she told *FTCWatch*. "And I think that's why at Media Justice, we concentrate on immediate and effective surveillance self-defense strategies, whether that is challenging incarceration, protecting Black dissent and protest, or bringing together organizers to pressure the FTC to use their authority to rein in abusive commercial practices."

Media Justice submitted comments to the FTC on its consideration of rulemaking on commercial surveillance, saying it's high time to create rules that assert rights and power in an environment where they are bought and sold largely without our informed knowledge or consent, compounding the exploitation of Black and brown communities.

Last year, Media Justice won a grant to develop a "Train the Trainer" program, with Harvard researchers, to disrupt the spread of disinformation in communities of color. The project includes creating curriculum to train 500 grassroots activists on how to fight disinformation, with a focus "on police-generated propaganda," and how to resource communities to reclaim their narrative power.

"In a world where mainstream media is often stuck in binary narratives of right versus left, or good versus evil, I believe we need political education to fill those gaps that neither mainstream media or public education is adequately filling. So to be able to train and facilitate political education with hundreds of people has been some of my most fulfilling work," Sajid said.

### References:

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— Kathleen Murphy

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