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The inventor responsible for smartphone cameras says selfies and cat videos were the biggest surprise

SHONA GHOSH

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The technology that powers your nude selfies and cat videos was originally intended for taking pictures in space.

When Eric Fossum was working for NASA's jet propulsion lab in 1993, he and his team found cosmic radiation ruined camera sensors on spacecraft. He came up with "complementary metal oxide semiconductor" (CMOS) technology as a result.



Camera tech pioneers Michael Tompsett, Eric Fossum and Nobukazu Teranishi.

QEPrize

Not only did that make high-quality space pictures possible, it also paved the way for the "camera on a chip" tech used on most smartphones today.

Fossum is one of four engineers to be awarded the £1 million Queen Elizabeth Prize on Tuesday for his invention.

The other winners are George Smith, who invented the charge coupled device used in early smartphone cameras; Michael Tompsett, who used the device for imaging; and Nobukazu Teranishi, who improved the quality of images.

The annual prize is handed to global pioneers in engineering, and has previously been won by world wide web inventor Tim Berners-Lee; Vint Cerf, often deemed the father of the internet; and Netscape co-founder Marc Andreessen for their role in shaping the internet.

Asked by Business Insider what the most surprising application of his technology was, Fossum said: "Selfies and silly cat videos were something I didn't really think about."

He added: "One of the things that gives me a lot of satisfaction is seeing people enjoy themselves using the technology. If it's taking selfies or pictures of their cats — I'm not a cat person — it's fun."

Fossum isn't totally positive about the fact there are at least 2 billion cameras on the planet on smartphones, saying he was uncomfortable with the idea of constant surveillance.

"This idea of putting cameras on drones — who would have thought that would be an issue," he said. He added that "privacy zones" should be baked into law, and that people should know when they were being recorded.

"One of the things I did not like about Google Glass is that [there was] was no indication things were being recorded. Some sort of blinking red light is a reasonable ask," he said.

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