

New York Police Department caught whitewashing police crimes on Wikipedia

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16 March 2015

The New York Police Department (NYPD) has been caught rewriting accounts of its own actions on the popular web encyclopedia, Wikipedia.

Capital NY reported on Friday that IP addresses traced to NYPD headquarters at One Police Plaza have been used to alter pages on high profile cases of police brutality, including entries for Eric Garner, Amadou Diallo and Shawn Bell, all of whom were killed by NYPD officers.

Users from NYPD headquarters also edited entries for stop-and-frisk and police misconduct. The department has said it is investigating the matter and has declined further comment.

Capital reported significant changes were made to the entry on Eric Garner, for example:

- * “Garner raised both his arms in the air” was changed to “Garner flailed his arms about as he spoke.”

- * “[P]ush Garner’s face into the sidewalk” was changed to “push Garner’s head down into the sidewalk.”

- * “Use of the chokehold has been prohibited” was changed to “Use of the chokehold is legal, but has been prohibited.”

The clear aim is to alter Wikipedia entries to make the actions of victims appear violent and those of the officers involved reasonable and restrained. The NYPD is, in effect, engaging in a covert public relations campaign that attempts to bias public opinion in its favor, and to improve its image in a city where it is hated by broad layers of the population.

These latest revelations of NYPD tampering on the Internet are part of a broader trend of active police involvement online and in social media.

An NYPD social media monitoring unit has existed since 2011. Last November, Police Commissioner William Bratton announced that the police department

would significantly broaden surveillance on social media to catch potential “lone wolf” terrorists following an earlier attack with a hatchet on four police officers.

After the shooting of two Brooklyn police officers on December 20, dozens of people in New York and around the United States were arrested for making threats on Facebook and other social media platforms.

In February, a Brooklyn grand jury refused to indict Osiris Aristy, 17, of making terrorist threats against the NYPD for a cartoon he posted on Facebook.

The NYPD also has a well-defined procedure for “catfishing” on social media, in which a police officer assumes a false identity in order to befriend someone under investigation.

The ostensible purpose of this activity is to combat terrorism and gang activity. Given the police department’s history, and the immense social tensions building up in the city, there is little doubt that the NYPD is spying on a broad array of political organizations.

For at least a decade, the police department has had a practice of spying on Muslim citizens and immigrants in the greater New York City area. Police informants have been used repeatedly in cases of entrapment involving alleged terror plots.

Spying by the NYPD is by no means limited to the Muslim community, however. During the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in Lower Manhattan, police spied on activists and carried out arrests for a variety of trivial or otherwise trumped up charges. In addition to video recording and photographing protesters, police carefully monitored Twitter and Facebook feeds from Zuccotti Park, the center of the protests.

Social media is being scrutinized by the police departments throughout the United States. The

comments, contacts, personal associations, and approvals or “likes” generated by users are being analyzed to create in depth profiles on users. Police departments have begun to use new technologies and practices to scour social media to collect data on people within their jurisdictions.

Reuters has reported that the Los Angeles Police Department, for example, is using a service called Geofeedia to track social media feeds from narrowly targeted groups or areas.

By using this service police can monitor live social media data from a single building or park, or from an entire neighborhood—the area around a protest or meeting, for example. Geofeedia also allows for collected data to be stored indefinitely.

In Lowell, Massachusetts the local police department is looking into subscribing to Geofeedia or another similar service called “Social Sentinel” that would give it the ability to monitor and record every comment posted on social media made from within the confines of that city.

Across the country a number of police departments are reportedly looking into using a service called Recorded Future, a web intelligence service that scans blogs, news publications and social media, interpreting the data to predict the occurrence of future events based on a series of algorithms designed to predict how social relationships evolve over time.



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