Academics protest Google's role in drone murder

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Three prominent technology scholars published an open letter Monday, which has now received over 900 signatures, condemning Google's collaboration with the Pentagon's illegal "targeted killing" program.

The academics published their letter in support of over 3,100 Google employees who issued their own open letter last month protesting the company's participation in a Pentagon program called Project Maven, designed to leverage the power of artificial intelligence to analyze footage collected by US military drones.

The starting point of the letter, said Lucy Suchman, a professor of anthropology of science and technology in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University, and one of the co-authors of the statement, is the essential illegality of the US government's targeted killing program.

The US drone murder program is based on "extrajudicial killing that is not accountable either to US or international law," Suchman told the *World Socialist Web Site* Thursday.

"It's clear that the people killed through this program are targeted through profiling and guilt by association." She noted that, according to one study by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, only 1.6 percent of those killed in drone strikes in Pakistan between 2001 and 2013 were specifically identified individually.

"This is summary execution of people who have received no due process whatsoever," said Dr. Suchman. "This is not in combat zones, this is in people's homes and communities."

In areas targeted by US drone strikes, she said, people are living "in a state of constant threat of death from the sky."

The researchers made clear that Google's claims that its partnership with the Pentagon was nonviolent in nature are highly questionable.

"It is clear that the Pentagon aims to build out Project Maven to armed drones, and its functionality does not need much adjustment to become a target recognition system, carried out by an armed drone, that could function without meaningful human control," said Peter Asaro, an Associate Professor at the School of Media Studies at The New School and a co-author of the letter.

The letter's authors told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they drafted their letter in response to a request by a technology employee for support within the academic community.

"It was the Google workers who really inspired my co-authors and myself to write this letter," Dr. Asaro said. "We thought that IT researchers and academics could really add their voice to this issue. IT workers do not often organize against their employers in this way, so we realized it was an issue that really touched a nerve," he added.

"This statement makes clear that we stand behind the thousands of workers who have stuck their necks out to sign that letter" by Google employees, said Lilly Irani, an Assistant Professor at the University of California, San Diego and one of the letter's authors.

"Google collects data on a global base of users, including people in the Middle East," Dr. Irani said, and then "aligns that power with a single nation's military. These massive companies that mediate and track our everyday lives are not accountable to the democratic process."

"Google has a user base that is international, and it has a responsibility to the global constituency of its users," added Dr. Suchman. They are "the custodians of the data of billions of people. We need to call them to account for that responsibility."

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Suchman emphasized that while Google's management has sought to integrate itself into the military-intelligence apparatus, many of its employees remain committed to the defense of freedom of expression, the open Internet, and opposition to war. "Google management is attempting to slide out of this commitment that a lot of their employees have, and their employees have very rightly called them to account on that," said Dr. Suchman.

Earlier this week, Gizmodo reported that over a dozen Google employees have resigned over the company's partnership with the Pentagon.

The open letter authored by Irani, Suchman, and Asaro notes that "Google has long sought to organize and enhance the usefulness of the world's information. Beyond searching for relevant webpages on the Internet, Google has become responsible for compiling our email, videos, calendars, and photographs, and guiding us to physical destinations. Like many other digital technology companies, Google has collected vast amounts of data on the behaviors, activities and interests of their users."

The letter concludes, "We are also deeply concerned about the possible integration of Google's data on people's everyday lives with military surveillance data, and its combined application to targeted killing. Google has moved into military work without subjecting itself to public debate or deliberation, either domestically or internationally. While Google regularly decides the future of technology without democratic public engagement, its entry into military technologies casts the problems of private control of information infrastructure into high relief."

Dr. Irani, who supported the *World Socialist Web Site's* open letter opposing Google's censorship of the Internet, said that the issue of Google's integration into the military-intelligence apparatus was closely linked to the company's role in "muting political opposition through its 'search quality' policies."

Last year, Google, under pressure from the major US intelligence agencies, implemented a change in its search algorithm that slashed search traffic to left-wing, anti-war, and progressive web sites by nearly 50 percent, and to the *World Socialist Web Site* by 75 percent.

The WSWS's open letter to Google—which was never answered—raises the question: "Is Google coordinating its censorship program with the American government, or sections of its military and intelligence apparatus?" The involvement of Google with the military's drone assassination program makes clear that its support for the US military and its censorship of left-wing sites are two sides of the same process.

"I'm very supportive of the fight against Internet censorship," said Dr. Irani. "For the average person, Internet censorship is invisible: you don't know it unless your favorite YouTube channel gets taken down," she said, citing the need to raise public awareness of the issue.

She also linked the growing willingness of technology workers to speak out against censorship and militarism to mounting struggles of the working class, including educators who are engaged in a wave of strikes throughout the country. "At least one section of the tech workers," said Irani, are beginning to "understand themselves as workers with different interests than their employers."

The WSWS urges all Google workers and all those opposed to the company's integration into the military-intelligence apparatus to support the fight against Internet censorship. Sign up here.

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