US schools hiring private companies to spy on students' social media

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The following article is part of a series of articles dedicated to exposing the militarization of schools and universities. To read more about the issues facing young people and to join the IYSSE, visit iysse.com.

More than 100 school districts and public universities have hired social media monitoring companies over the past five years to spy on students' social media accounts under the pretext of "school safety" and preventing school shootings, according to a report in the *New York Times.*

The private companies exploit social tragedy, recruiting more institutions after every mass shooting despite little evidence that the spying programs have any effect on violence.

The customers of these companies include school districts experiencing school shootings, such as the Newtown Public Schools in Connecticut, as well as some of the largest school districts in the nation, including in Los Angeles and Chicago. Large universities like Michigan State and Florida State have also contracted services from the companies.

The latest surge of contracts has come in the aftermath of the school shooting in Parkland, in which 17 people were killed, on February 14, 2018.

Monitoring students' social media accounts is a violation of privacy and another layer in the intimate partnership between the US government and tech companies for mass surveillance and censorship of the internet.

Most of the companies offering spying services hold or have previously held contracts with police departments. In 2016, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) exposed one of the companies, Media Sonar, for recommending police officers follow hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter, #DontShoot, and #ImUnarmed during the Ferguson protests. In late 2015, Media Sonar also worked with the Ferguson-Florissant School District, which asked for alerts on the terms "protest" and "walkout."

The monitoring companies maintain a high level of secrecy on every aspect of their work. Many have direct ties to the military and intelligence agencies.

One of the early companies to offer spying services, GEOCOP, is perhaps the most ominous. The company's owner, Bob Dowling, worked for the Naval Criminal Intelligence Service as a civilian special agent for 13 years. He was then assigned to work with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the US military's technology development branch, and later the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. GEOCOP was hired initially to monitor various schools in New York, including CUNY. It is unclear how active the company remains today.

Another example is Social Sentinel, run by Gary Margolis, who served as chief of police at the University of Vermont for 11 years. His company's web site declares, "Don't miss out on the chance to listen."

GEO Listening, one of the few companies without a CEO directly connected to the state, is just as secretive about its operations. It lists its address in California, but no operations are conducted at the physical address and the credited testimonials are all, admittedly, pseudonyms.

These companies are often contracted without notifying students or parents.

The companies employ crafty methods to keep track of students' posts. One method, called "geofencing," is used to sweep up posts within a given geographic area by using keywords to narrow the search pool. The companies also use a person's hometown and other personal information to determine whose content

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should be flagged.

Social Sentinel is based in Vermont, with contracts in more than 30 states. The company has worked with police departments but has more recently shifted its focus to schools. It actively seeks schools affected by gun violence to offer its services and was one of many to immediately approach school districts in Florida after the Parkland shooting. Margolis, the company's chief executive, likened Social Sentinel to a "carbon monoxide detector."

Despite claims that the programs helped identify students at risk of self-harm, a review of school documents shows that hundreds of harmless posts are what are often flagged.

The monitoring services have led to at least one student's expulsion in 2013. Auseel Yousefi, now 22, was expelled from his high school for posting a Twitter message he insists was an inside joke between a teacher and students in the class. Yousefi said he was going to "chop" a teacher "in the throat," which his school viewed as a threat.

One student had been accused of "holding too much money" in photographs, and another was suspended for an Instagram post in which she wore a sweatshirt with an image of her father, who was a murder victim. School officials alleged the sweatshirt's colors and a hand symbol the student was using were evidence of gang ties.

Other posts flagged consist of typical student banter: "Ok so all day I've wanted my bio grade up online and now that it's up I've decided I want to die," one Twitter post said.

"Hangnails make me want to die," said another. In many cases, the algorithms target individuals they are not intended to. Patrick Larkin, an assistant superintendent in Burlington, Massachusetts, told the *New York Times* he receives alerts on his phone in real time from Social Sentinel. He said "19 out of 20" come from people who are not even his students.

Observing social media posts is just one of many products and services being pushed in the wake of the Parkland massacre. Other proposals being adopted at schools across the country include active shooter insurance, facial recognition technology, bulletproof school supplies, arming teachers, and active shooter drills that involve sending SWAT teams onto campuses to stage an active shooter situation without informing teachers, students or parents.

Over the last two decades, school shootings have been exploited to strengthen the state. The political establishment has worked to obscure the fundamental issues at the root of the epidemic of mass violence in schools: over a quarter century of state-sanctioned US militarist violence, growing social inequality, and the destruction of social services.

The fact that police employ the services of these companies to monitor protests is a serious security issue to workers and students opposed to war, inequality and police violence. This effort is one aspect of a broader process of militarization taking place on campuses throughout the country. It poses immense dangers to the democratic rights of youth, students, and workers everywhere.

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