

FBI presses for social media surveillance “early alerting tool” in aftermath of mass shootings

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In the aftermath of the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio last weekend, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is pushing for the development of a “social media early alerting tool” that will enable the agency “to proactively identify and reactively monitor threats to the United States and its interests.”

According to an FBI request for proposals from government contractors, among the information to be scraped from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media platforms is user IDs, email and IP addresses and telephone numbers as well as location, “persistent keyword” usage, photographic tagging and personal social media histories.

Although the FBI issued the request on July 8, weeks before the recent mass shootings, the agency extended the dates for the contractors to review the specifications as well as the final selection process early this week. The deadline for submission of offers has been set for August 27 and the FBI intends to award the social media surveillance contract by August 30.

In the request for proposals from the FBI’s Public Source Program Office (PSPO), the social media alert system is described in outline form. It says, “With increased use of social media platforms by subjects of current FBI investigations and individuals that pose a threat to the United States, it is critical to obtain a service which will allow the FBI to identify relevant information from Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other Social media platforms in a timely fashion.”

While the description of the program does not specify precisely what constitutes a “threat to the United States,” the FBI is clearly seeking the ability to monitor the thoughts, activities and relationships of anyone and

everyone who is a user of the most popular social media platforms. The request for proposal goes on, “Consequently, the FBI needs near real time access to a full range of social media exchanges in order to obtain the most current information available in furtherance of its law enforcement and intelligence missions.”

In several accompanying documents, the FBI elaborates on the technical details of its desired Big Brother-like surveillance tool. In the second attachment called “Statement of Objectives,” for example, the FBI explains that “an increasing number of threats to U.S. national interests that are identifiable, with ever-greater frequency, through social media platforms” and that “virtually every incident and subject of FBI investigative interest has a presence online.”

The statement says that the tool is not just for domestic FBI case work but must be accessible by all headquarters division and field office personnel via web browsers and through multiple devices such as smartphones and tablets. “FBI personnel are deployed internationally and sometimes in areas of press censorship. A social media exploitation tool with international reach and paired with a strong language translation capability, can become crucial to their operations and more importantly their safety.”

That the proposed system will include continuous round-the-clock surveillance of all activity on social media—a globalized technology with no borders—is spelled out in the objectives attachment in paragraph 3.3.1.2.1 that says, “Information constituting advanced notification is derived from constant monitoring of social media platforms based on keywords relevant to national security and location.”

Indicating that the purpose of the tool is to monitor

both individuals and organizations, under a section called “Analysis, display and sourcing,” the objectives document says, “The FBI accesses historic data to identify profiles and ramifications to derogatory groups.”

Meanwhile, the FBI is planning to link the activity of individuals and organizations between different social media platforms, saying it will have the ability to, “Obtain the full social media profile of persons-of-interest and their affiliation to any organization or groups through the corroboration of multiple social media sources.”

Interested FBI vendors must have the capabilities to set filters around the specific content they see, send immediate and custom alerts and notifications around “mission-relevant” incidents, have broad international reach and a strong language translation capability and allow for real-time geolocation-based monitoring that can be refined as events develop.

The PSPO is a group within the Enterprise License Agreement Management Unit of the FBI’s Chief Information Officer, Gordon Bitko. The intent of the request for proposals from private partners of the FBI is “the acquisition of subscriptions” to the real-time “situational awareness” alert system. In other words, the FBI will be partnering with a tech company that will build—or more likely has already built—a custom solution that will be used on a subscription basis by agency offices around the world to monitor all social media accounts.

The FBI’s request also, of course, includes multiple references to “the exploitation of lawfully collected/acquired data from social media platforms,” “access that is authorized, appropriate, and consistent with applicable law and policy” and “ensuring all privacy and civil liberties compliance requirements are met.” However, the technology the FBI is attempting to create in partnership with a private developer would violate a substantial portion of the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution.

It is also clear that the intelligence agencies are attempting to make use of the recent mass shootings for a vast increase in the abrogation of democratic rights through the implementation of social media surveillance—on an unprecedented scope and scale—that the public has not been informed about.

As was the case following the terrorist attacks of

September 11, 2001, the police and military apparatus of the US government is seeking to exploit the confusion and fear generated by the gunning down of 22 people in El Paso and 9 people in Dayton as justification for rushing through police state measures before the public is aware of what is happening.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the proposed social media alert system appears to violate Facebook’s publicly stated ban against the use of user profile and post content. In a Facebook US Public Policy statement published on March 13, 2017, the social media company said it was adding to Facebook and Instagram platform policies a provision so that developers could not “use data obtained from us to provide tools that are used for surveillance.” Clearly, any third-party software contract with the FBI that would scrape Facebook and Instagram data 24/7 would contradict this promise.

It is significant that terms used in the FBI documentation—situational awareness, mission critical and operations-driven tactical teams—is similar to language used by the Pentagon. The preparations for the implementation of a social media surveillance tool by the FBI is part of the militarization of law enforcement within the United States and is further evidence that the government is preparing for a confrontation with the majority of the population, the working class.



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