

Police department in Mississippi pilots program linked to home security cameras

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In an expansion of the relationship between big tech and the US military-police apparatus, new software has been developed by Facebook that allows police to register locations of home security cameras and livestream footage, including Amazon Ring doorbells.

Taking advantage of design features in Amazon Ring, such as local “crime and safety” neighborhood networks, Facebook has gone one step further and integrated home security products with police in “Real-Time Crime Centers” (RTCC) that combine feeds from public and private security cameras.

Facebook advertises itself as the “first company to unify live video, data and sensor feeds from virtually any source ... that enhances the situational awareness and investigative capabilities of law enforcement and public safety agencies.” It is already testing pilot programs in Jackson, Mississippi and West Palm Beach Florida, and has other contracts with police in Minnesota, Georgia, California and Illinois.

Police departments and home security companies are required to obtain agreements from users to allow their camera footage to be accessed in this way. However, the tech companies typically market the feature as a system to provide police with helpful information to reduce local petty crime, like package theft.

Once a homeowner signs the agreement, law enforcement can tap into users’ security cameras at any time through the Real-Time Crime Center, without notification. Thus, law enforcement is able to access, share and store vast amounts of private data collected from homes and businesses without oversight. The fact that this activity is largely unregulated opens the door for unconstitutional invasion of privacy and violations of other democratic rights, including free speech and restrictions against unreasonable searches and seizures.

A look at the Facebook website and how they market to

law enforcement is revealing. The company writes, “We create a public safety ecosystem that includes a registry map of all the public and private cameras in your region, a multi-media tips line for the public, and a cloud-based digital evidence vault for investigators.”

The company is also promoting the solution as a means of responding to the decline in police recruits and early retirements which have resulted in a “shortage” of officers. Facebook’s solution to this “problem” is an Orwellian scenario with a vast array of relatively inexpensive cameras blanketing society, allowing police to respond more efficiently with the aid of real-time information.

On top of the expanded access to live footage of every neighborhood, the new program would free up money for police departments to spend on other things like crowd control equipment or hiring more officers. “It would save [us] from having to buy a camera for every place across the city,” said Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba in a statement reported by the local network WLBT. “If someone says, ‘I want my Ring door camera to be used,’ we’ll be able to use it.”

Matthew Guariglia of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) stated, “We’re concerned with pretty much all of this.” He explained the intrusive nature of these programs. “The footage from your front door includes you coming and going from your house, your neighbors taking out the trash, and the dog walkers and delivery people who do their jobs in your street. In Jackson, this footage can now be live streamed directly onto a dozen monitors scrutinized by police around the clock. Even if you refuse to allow your footage to be used that way, your neighbor’s camera pointed at your house may still be transmitting directly to the police.”

Amazon Ring already has partnerships with roughly 1,300 police departments across the United States,

according to Guariglia, an increase from 400 in July of last year. Amazon Ring video footage and snapshots can already be accessed by those police departments through cloud storage databases, often without any oversight or needing to request a warrant.

In 2019, Democratic Party Senator Ed Markey of Massachusetts launched an investigation into the partnership between police and Ring that was widely reported in the corporate media at the time. He said, “the lack of privacy and civil rights protections for innocent residents is nothing short of chilling,” and “Amazon Ring’s policies are an open door for privacy and civil liberty violations.” However, nothing ever came of Markey’s investigation.

In some cases, free devices are now being offered to police departments as an incentive, and some cities have even subsidized the purchase of these devices, a clear sign that they are more beneficial to the police and authorities than they are to homeowners.

This is not the first time Amazon has partnered with law enforcement under the rubric of public safety. In 2016, Amazon Web Solutions (AWS) released the artificial intelligence software Rekognition, providing access to photos by law enforcement. But by 2017 AWS incorporated facial recognition, video tracking algorithms and law enforcement databases to allow the identification and tracking of individuals in real-time.

A particularly chilling video demonstrating Rekognition’s capabilities shows a policeman walking down a crowded street with facial recognition automatically “boxing” faces and “identifying” a missing person, which automatically flags nearby officers to respond. Such technology could easily be used to target and collect information on undocumented immigrants on the streets, protesters in a crowd, or specific workers at a picket line or protest.

After the meaning of these systems came to public attention—along with an open letter from Amazon employees opposing their company’s cooperation with police, US Immigration, Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—Amazon attempted to publicly distance itself from the project, although it continues to further enhance and refine its surveillance capabilities.

The integration of the major technology corporations with the state has developed in tandem with the growing inequality and instability of the capitalist

system. Whatever marketing tools are used to encourage users to sign misleading agreements, the real aim of “Real-Time Crime Centers” is to develop more advanced systems of tracking that will be used to target the poor and working class, especially those engaged in oppositional and socialist political activity.

Technology, which carries immense potential for the progressive development of society, cannot be left in the hands of the ruling class for its interests in defending profits and suppression opposition. Tech workers, united with the whole working class, must demand these corporations be transformed into public utilities, and that the scientific and technological resources available be democratically directed to meet the urgent needs confronting humanity.



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