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How policing surveillance technology impacts your rights

SOCIAL MEDIA INTELLIGENCE

WHAT IS SOCMINT?

Social media intelligence – often shortened to SOCMINT – refers to the monitoring and gathering of information on social media platforms.

SOCMINT may include snooping on content posted to public or private groups or pages. It may also involve "scraping" – grabbing all the data from a social media platform, including content you post and data about your behaviour (such as what you like and share). Through scraping and other tools, SOCMINT permits the collection and analysis of a large pool of social media data, which can be used to generate profiles and predictions about users.

WHO USES SOCMINT?

We know that police forces in the UK use SOCMINT.

The Metropolitan Police's National Domestic Extremism Unit and Online Hate Crime Hub reportedly use SOCMINT to monitor and analyse our social media activity. In 2017, South Yorkshire Police reportedly spent £55,000 on a two-year contract for a SOCMINT monitoring tool.

We also know that UK police use SOCMINT to monitor protests.

In 2011, the Association of Chief Police Officers produced guidance on the policing of anti-fracking protests, which stated that "social media is a vital part of any …intelligence picture."

Protests over the widespread culling of badgers in 2013 were also closely monitored through social media analysis and reports suggested that a team of officers in the National Domestic Extremism Unit was scanning the public's tweets, YouTube videos and Facebook profiles.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

It is not clear what law allows the police to monitor us in this way.

And the Chief Surveillance Commissioner has said that "just because this material is out in the open, does not render it fair game".



WHAT ABOUT MY RIGHTS?

Privacy

The use of social media intelligence is a significant invasion of our privacy.

SOCMINT can offer a disturbing level of insight into a social media user's life. The government can use analytical tools in combination with SOCMINT to evaluate your mood, attitude and opinions, as well as who you know and how you know them.

You can also be profiled from your likes and dislikes alone.

All of this information can be used to make predictions about how you will behave – including whether you might commit a crime. These profiles and predictions may not be accurate.

Facial recognition technology can also be combined with SOCMINT to track you down and pinpoint your whereabouts.

Police officers even create fake profiles, covertly adding users as 'friends' to get access to information that is otherwise private.

And SOCMINT doesn't just affect the person being monitored – everyone within their social network risks being caught up in this invasive surveillance.

Freedom of expression

Use of SOCMINT can cause you to self-censor and avoid using certain words that you think are being monitored – or avoid interacting with people or organisations that may be subject to SOCMINT surveillance.

Discrimination

SOCMINT can feed databases and watch lists that stigmatise certain groups.

The Metropolitan Police have confirmed that YouTube videos and "other Social Media activity" are used to justify adding people to the Gangs Matrix – a database of people the police think are likely to join gangs or be at risk of gang violence.

The matrix is known to discriminate against young black men, while the majority of people on it do not pose a risk of violent crime.



HAVE YOUR SAY ABOUT SOCMINT

Each police force across England and Wales has an elected Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC). PCCs should be a vital way for the local community to hold their local police force to account. Your PCC should listen to and represent your views about how the police work in your area.

Find out who your local PCC is and how to contact them here. In Scotland, you can contact the Scottish Police Authority.

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