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CIA-BACKED FIRM TOUTED SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEILLANCE OF STUDENTS TO SELL SERVICES TO EVANSTON POLICE

10 SEP

WILL PIERCE

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Photo by Ryan Adams on Flickr.

Emails obtained by Lucy Parsons Labs reveal that Geofeedia touted social media surveillance of middle and high school students by its suburban Chicago police customers in an effort to sell their services to Evanston police.

Geofeedia provides law enforcement with tools to monitor social media use by mapping location and other data. It has [received](#) funding from the investment arm of the CIA, In-Q-Tel.

The company became infamous after the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) published a report in 2016 on the use of their products by police to monitor demonstrations against police violence.

Geofeedia's courting of the Evanston Police Department (EPD) goes back to 2013, and as emails show, the company developed a relationship with police at a time when the sale of surveillance technology to law enforcement became ubiquitous.

“Skokie Police has been very successful in identifying drug related crimes as well as monitoring local middle and high schools 24/7,” wrote Jon Newman of Geofeedia in an email to EPD Commander Jay Parrott sent on October 23, 2013.

Parrott responded to that email by writing, “Thanks for the email, and I will speak with our analyst and intelligence officers about setting up a time to look over your product.”

The Skokie Police Department previously denied the existence of any emails between them and Geofeedia for the years 2012 through 2014.

The social media surveillance company was founded in 2011 and moved to Evanston in 2012.

In October 2013, Parrott spoke with Newman at the International Association of Chiefs of Police conference in Philadelphia. Parrott received a follow-up email from Newman after the conference.

“Thank you for taking the time to speak with me during IACP. Sorry I grabbed you out of nowhere,” wrote Newman. “I just noticed the Evanston on your badge.” He hoped to visit the department to show off his company’s technology.

After a presentation by Geofeedia in November 2013, Parrott contacted the company to express EPD’s interest. “Thank you for the presentation and all personnel were impressed. We are now trying to figure out how to work it into our operations and budget.”

“But I can say there is a need for this intelligence with our current policing strategy,” Parrott added.

In April 2018, a [Freedom of Information Act \(FOIA\) request](#) by [Lucy Parsons Labs](#) led to the release of a January 2014 contract between Evanston and Geofeedia. At a [town hall meeting](#) later that month, Evanston police representatives were asked about their use of social media surveillance. They claimed Evanston no longer used the technology, which allows police to monitor social media activity by geographical location.

Department officials did not discuss the “need” for social media surveillance, which they had identified in 2013.

“What if I say something unsavory in that geography to somebody, and it’s none of your business?” one resident wanted to know. “So how am I protected?”

Commander Joseph Dugan responded by saying that EPD had only used the service for a short time, calling it “a marketing and law enforcement tool.” Evanston’s 2016 budget report included a payment to Geofeedia.

EPD limited their comments at the April 26 town hall to their use of Geofeedia to monitor large events and do “community outreach.”

“We don’t find necessarily it’s very useful in Evanston,” said EPD intelligence officer Christopher Tortorello.

Detective Thomas Giese contrasted policing in Evanston with the neighboring Chicago Police Department’s approach to large events like the Taste of Chicago.

At those events, “CPD will have a van set up,” he began, then stopped. “Don’t quote me on a van.”

Selling its customers on the surveillance of children was only part of Geofeedia’s business strategy.

In January 2013, Evanston’s Digital Services Coordinator Luke Stowe started received promotional emails from Geofeedia. (Stowe later joined the Department of Homeland Security’s “Social Media Working Group for Emergency Services and Disaster Management” while working as the city’s Chief Information Officer.)

The emails showcased “live user-generated content” from major events like the Super Bowl and the first inauguration of Barack Obama.

Other emails promised access to different information, delivering links to “map and collage” and “geostream” pages for incidents of mass violence (on the day they occurred) to current and potential customers.

Another email included a link, without further comment or explanation, to social media data collected by the company after a fire at a Brazilian nightclub killed 242 people. It was signed “Best regards, The Geofeedia Team.”

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| WILL PIERCE

Will Pierce is a writer, researcher, and member of Lucy Parsons Labs (<https://lucyparsonslabs.com>)



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