

Law enforcement arm of the US Postal Service tracking social media activity

Kevin Reed
25 April 2021

The law enforcement arm of the United States Postal Service (USPS) has been monitoring the social media activity of the US public and sharing its findings with local, state and federal police agencies and private security firms connected to the state.

The covert surveillance program—known as the Internet Covert Operations Program (iCOP)—involves USPS analysts combing through the social media pages and events looking for “inflammatory” posts, according to a March 16, 2021 “Situational Awareness Bulletin” obtained and published by Yahoo News on Wednesday.

The iCOP program has been operating under the direction of the United States Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) and specifically “monitored significant activity regarding planned protests occurring internationally and domestically on March 20, 2021,” according to the bulletin, which is marked “law enforcement sensitive.” The document was circulated through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) fusion centers, which serve as a “primary conduit” of federal law enforcement information to states and major urban areas as well as “private sector partners” across the US.

The significance of March 20 is that this is the date that two national and international political demonstrations were being planned. One was a far-right anti-vaccine “Worldwide Rally for Freedom” promoted by QAnon groups. The other was a global campaign called “Stop 5G” promoted by radical anti-science groups decrying the alleged harmful effects of radio waves used by the latest generation of wireless networks.

The bulletin included details about both events as they were promoted on social media, including the date that the events were first published on Facebook and the hashtags used on Twitter to promote them. The

iCOP report also provides the number of Facebook followers for each as of March 16. It states, “Locations and times have been identified for these protests, which are being distributed online across multiple social media platforms.”

The document provides screenshots of both Facebook event pages and says, “Online inflammatory material has been identified, which suggests potential violence may occur; however, there is currently no intelligence to suggest specific threats.” The report says that a “prominent Proud Boys North Carolina based member [name redacted] known as NobleBeard made a comment regarding the event stating it would take place at ‘Every state capital on March 20th.’ This information was found on the right-wing platform Parler.

While most of the detailed information in the iCOP bulletin pertains to “inflammatory or violent messages” from participants in the extreme right-wing demonstration who discussed plans to “confront BLM” and “do some serious damage,” the document also states that the “Global Action to Stop 5G” rallies were being held in California, Denver, Virginia and Vermont.

When asked about the iCOP program by Yahoo News, the law enforcement arm of the Postal Service responded with boilerplate language saying, “The Internet Covert Operations Program is a function within the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, which assesses threats to Postal Service employees and its infrastructure by monitoring publicly available open source information.” The statement went on, “In order to preserve operational effectiveness, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service does not discuss its protocols, investigative methods, or tools.”

Yahoo News also spoke with Rachel Levinson-

Waldman, deputy director of the Brennan Center for Justice’s liberty and national security program. She questioned the legal authority of the USPS to monitor social media activity, saying, “If they’re simply engaging in lawfully protected speech, even if it’s odious or objectionable, then monitoring them on that basis raises serious constitutional concerns.”

University of Chicago law professor Geoffrey Stone, one of President Barack Obama’s advisers involved in reviewing the National Security Agency’s bulk data collection in the wake of the Edward Snowden leaks said, “It’s a mystery. I don’t understand why the government would go to the Postal Service for examining the internet for security issues.”

Going back to 2001, with the creation of the Mail Isolation and Control Tracking System (MICT), the USPS can “retroactively track mail correspondence at the request of law enforcement.” Since that time the USPS has been scanning every piece of mail that is delivered to each mailbox. With the integration of digital technologies into the process, the USPS has been capturing exterior images of letter-size mail and storing these images in a database.

Among the information being captured are names, addresses, return addresses and postmark locations, and this information is very similar to the email and phone call metadata that was previously being captured and stored as part of the NSA mass surveillance program. The existence of the MICT system was inadvertently revealed on June 7, 2013 when the FBI was discussing an investigation into the ricin-laced letters sent to President Barack Obama and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The program was confirmed by Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe in an Associated Press interview nine weeks later.

In 2014, the USPS began marketing the MICT system to the public as “Informed Delivery,” a service that enables individuals to view the exterior of the mail arriving in their mailbox before it arrives or before they have a chance to check their mailbox. By 2017 this program had been rolled out to the majority of ZIP codes in the US. Concerns raised by privacy advocates about the surveillance were dismissed with the explanation that the information is only kept for 30 days and the integrity of the data is guaranteed by the USPIS, the very same postal department agency in charge of iCOP.

Given that millions of people have been using end-to-end encryption technologies on their smartphones and computers following the Snowden revelations, the surveillance apparatus has been working on alternative methods of gathering information in violation of basic democratic rights, such as AI-based facial recognition cameras and systems located in public and private spaces across the country. The scanning and monitoring of the USPS mail being delivered to homes and businesses is another way to continue such surveillance.

Fraudulently posturing as upholders of democratic rights, 30 House Republicans are calling for a briefing from the USPS about its social media monitoring. Among the Republicans on the House Oversight Committee demanding a hearing by April 28 are those who attempted to block the congressional certification of the 2020 elections and abetted the January 6 fascist insurrection at the US Capitol, including Representatives Jim Jordan (Ohio), Matt Gaetz (Florida) and Mo Brooks (Alabama).

As with all previous references to “extremism,” the exposure of a social media surveillance operation by the USPS shows that an effort is underway to brand all political opposition and protest as “inflammatory and violent.” While nothing is being done to expose the political, organizational and financial connections between the Republican Party and Donald Trump with fascist groups such as the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters militia, the real target of the surveillance and attack on democratic rights is the working class, left-wing and socialist political organizations and individuals.

Although the revelations of USPS spying on the public and the surveillance itself has taken place during the Biden administration, no statements have been issued by Democrats or by the White House as of this writing.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact