

U.S. Spies Buy Stake in Firm That Monitors Blogs, Tweets

by Noah Shachtman via Kismo - Wired *Tuesday, Oct 20 2009, 6:09pm*

international / social/political / other press

And they galloped to their doom blissfully unaware of the consequences of their apathy, narcissism and fear.

Oz police have been making arrests using social networking sites since their inception. They have often referred to these sites as the best thing since finger printing. And who are the desperate morons assisting BIG BROTHER?

The team 'affectionately' refers to these sites as 'Facefuck' and 'Myarse' -- good luck doodles, you'll need it!

The sorry joke is real data has replaced aliases and nicks -- the first rule of digital security has been broken! NEVER EVER divulge PERSONAL DETAILS to the world at large -- u brainless bovines!

America's spy agencies want to read your blog posts, keep track of your Twitter updates — even check out your book reviews on Amazon. [In-Q-Tel](#), the investment arm of the CIA and the wider intelligence community, is putting cash into [Visible Technologies](#), a software firm that specializes in monitoring social media. It's part of a larger movement within the spy services to get better at using "[open source intelligence](#)" — information that's publicly available, but often hidden in the flood of TV shows, newspaper articles, blog posts, online videos and radio reports generated every day.

Visible crawls over half a million web 2.0 sites a day, scraping more than a million posts and conversations taking place on blogs, online forums, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter and Amazon. (It doesn't touch closed social networks, like Facebook, at the moment.) Customers get customized, real-time feeds of what's being said on these sites, based on a series of keywords.

"That's kind of the basic step — get in and monitor," says company senior vice president Blake Cahill.

Then Visible "scores" each post, labeling it as positive or negative, mixed or neutral. It examines how influential a conversation or an author is. ("Trying to determine who really matters," as Cahill puts it.) Finally, Visible gives users a chance to tag posts, forward them to colleagues and allow them to response through a web interface.

In-Q-Tel says it wants Visible to keep track of foreign social media, and give spooks "early-warning detection on how issues are playing internationally," spokesperson Donald Tighe tells Danger Room.

Of course, such a tool can also be pointed inward, at domestic bloggers or tweeters. Visible already keeps tabs on web 2.0 sites for Dell, AT&T and Verizon. For Microsoft, the company is monitoring the buzz on its Windows 7 rollout. For Spam-maker Hormel, Visible is tracking animal-right activists' online campaigns against the company.

"Anything that is out in the open is fair game for collection," says [Steven Aftergood](#), who tracks intelligence issues at the Federation of American Scientists. But "even if information is openly gathered by intelligence agencies it would still be problematic if it were used for unauthorized domestic investigations or operations. Intelligence agencies or employees might be tempted to use the tools at their disposal to compile information on political figures, critics, journalists or others, and to exploit such information for political advantage. That is not permissible even if all of the information in question is technically 'open source.'"

Visible chief executive officer Dan Vetras says the CIA is now an "end customer," thanks to the In-Q-Tel investment.

And more government clients are now on the horizon. "We just got awarded another one in the last few days," Vetras adds.

Tighe disputes this — sort of. "This contract, this deal, this investment has nothing to do with any agency of government and this company," he says. But Tighe quickly notes that In-Q-Tel does have "an interested end customer" in the intelligence community for Visible. And if all goes well, the company's software will be used in pilot programs at that agency. "In pilots, we use real data. And during the adoption phase, we use it real missions."

Neither party would disclose the size of In-Q-Tel's investment in Visible, a 90-person company with expected revenues of about \$20 million in 2010. But a source familiar with the deal says the In-Q-Tel cash will be used to boost Visible's foreign languages capabilities, which already include Arabic, French, Spanish and nine other languages.

trupulse2Visible has been trying for nearly a year to break into the government field. In late 2008, the company teamed up with the Washington, DC, consulting firm Concepts & Strategies, which has handled media monitoring and translation services for U.S. Strategic Command and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, among others. On its website, Concepts & Strategies is recruiting "social media engagement specialists" with Defense Department experience and a high proficiency in Arabic, Farsi, French, Urdu or Russian. The company is also looking for an "information system security engineer" who already has a "Top Secret SCI [Sensitive Compartmentalized Information] with NSA Full Scope Polygraph" security clearance.

The intelligence community has been interested in social media for years. In-Q-Tel has sunk money into companies like Attensity, which recently announced its own web 2.0-monitoring service. The agencies have their own, password-protected blogs and wikis — even a MySpace for spooks. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence maintains an Open Source Center, which combs publicly available information, including web 2.0 sites. Doug Naquin, the Center's Director, told an audience of intelligence professionals in October 2007 that "we're looking now at YouTube, which carries some unique and honest-to-goodness intelligence.... We have groups looking at what they call 'citizens media': people taking pictures with their cell phones and posting them on the internet. Then there's social media, phenomena like MySpace and blogs."

But, "the CIA specifically needs the help of innovative tech firms to keep up with the pace of innovation in social media. Experienced IC [intelligence community] analysts may not be the best at detecting the incessant shift in popularity of social-networking sites. They need help in following young international internet user-herds as they move their allegiance from one site to another," Lewis Shepherd, the former senior technology officer at the Defense Intelligence Agency, says in an e-mail. "Facebook says that more than 70 percent of its users are outside the U.S., in more than 180 countries. There are more than 200 non-U.S., non-English-language microblogging Twitter-clone sites today. If the intelligence community ignored that tsunami of real-time information, we'd call them incompetent."

© 2009 Wired Condé Nast Digital.

<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/10/exclusive-us-spies-buy-stake-in-twitter-blog-monitoring-firm/>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-1699.html>