



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on July 23, 2018

Facebook Under Fire

Under mounting pressure to account for the exposure of its users to data-mining companies, Facebook suspended another analytics company that uses the social-media giant's user information.

But that [report in the Washington Post](#) is only the latest that documents the role Facebook might have played, or still plays, not only in campaign shenanigans but also in the government's ability to code and trace the activities and lifestyles of every citizen.



The concern, as a writer for *Forbes* put it, is that Facebook might be an avenue through which government can persecute — or prosecute — those whom government bureaucrats and officials view as threatening their power.

Latest Suspension

Last week, Facebook “suspended a longtime partner that had used data from Facebook and other social networks to assist governments — including Russia, Turkey, and the United States — in monitoring public sentiment, a more cautious approach in the aftermath of a data privacy scandal,” the *Post* reported.

The company, Crimson Hexagon, apparently did nothing wrong, but Facebook didn't want the analytics concern to continue its access to data.

The suspension occurred as federal authorities scrutinize the activities of Facebook vis-à-vis data mining companies, in particular Cambridge Analytica. That company collected data on 80 million Facebook users. “The idea was to map personality traits based on what people had liked on Facebook,” [the New York Times explained](#) in March, “and then use that information to target audiences with digital ads.”

Crimson Hexagon was different, however, and “primarily used public, aggregated data from people who made their profiles available for anyone to see, [and is] the largest of this new wave of suspensions.”

According to the *Post*, Crimson Hexagon's chief technology officer, Chris Bingham, said in a statement Friday, “Crimson Hexagon is fully cooperating with Facebook who has publicly stated its investigation to date has found no wrongdoing.”

Government Agent

The question is whether governments are using Facebook for law enforcement and other purposes, as the *Post* noted.

[The Wall Street Journal reported](#) on documents “stating Crimson Hexagon worked with a Russian nonprofit entity, the Civil Society Development Foundation, that had Kremlin ties and used the data to study the Russian people's opinion of President Vladimir Putin's government. The company also used Twitter's data feed, called a ‘Firehose,’ to assist in a decision to shut down Twitter during pro-democracy protests in 2014.”

After police used Facebook to monitor protesters in Baltimore and in Ferguson, Missouri, who took to



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the streets after the deaths of Freddie Gray and Michael Brown, the *Post* reported, Facebook prohibited using its data for “surveillance.”

[According to](#) the *Post*:

Twitter and Facebook both offer public data for what is known as “sentiment analysis” or “social listening.” The tech companies aggregate people’s posts, comments, likes, locations, general demographic and other information into anonymous data feeds that many startups purchase to analyze and sell to clients including corporations, brands and governments. Privacy advocates have raised concerns that sometimes data can be linked to individuals, particularly when it is being used to monitor sentiment in real time during events such as concerts or protests.

Tracking Dissidents

In other words, as [Forbes reported](#), a major concern is a government’s targeting of dissidents.

Earlier this month it came out that among Facebook’s myriad algorithmically induced advertising categories was an entry for users whom the platform’s data mining systems believed might be interested in treason against their government. The label had been applied to more than 65,000 Russian citizens, placing them at grave risk should their government discover the label.

Although Facebook has eliminated the “treason” category, *Forbes* reported, government is using Facebook’s advertising tools to “identify geographic areas and demographics to target for further surveillance.”

Forbes was particularly concerned with the potential for governments to identify homosexuals, which could be something of a problem for someone in a country [where sodomy is a capital crime](#). The writer didn’t say it, but that would mainly be a problem in Muslim countries. Neither the United States nor any European country is executing homosexuals.

Yet tracking homosexuals isn’t the only way Facebook’s data could be used. A radical leftist government might use data to track and harass religious groups or citizens [who oppose](#) mandates for health insurance to cover contraception and abortion, or extremist “diversity training” imposed upon employees or contractors.

As [Facebook faces](#) a three-agency government probe of its data-gathering and alleged use as a platform for Russian disinformation, the question is this: Will Facebook continue to permit governments to use the social-media platform to track the activities of citizens the government doesn’t like?

If so, as *Forbes* put it, “welcome to a world even Orwell could not have imagined.”

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