



Use of “Beware” Software by Police Is Raising Concerns

For more than a year the Fresno, California, police department [has been using “Beware” software](#) for free before deciding to spend the \$2,000 monthly fee for it. It is being touted by its maker, Intrado, as a way to inform officers responding to a 911 call about potential risks they might be facing. As Police Chief Jerry Dyer put it: “Our officers are expected to know the unknown and see the unseen. They are making split-second decisions based on limited facts. The more [we] can provide in terms of intelligence ... the more safely [we] can respond to calls.”



As software that collects information and intelligence becomes cheaper and more popular (two years ago it was estimated that more than 90 percent of the 14,000 police departments in the country were using at least some of the available software), concerns about errors have grown, along with using such software or its progeny to surveil citizens and profile them to anticipate criminal behavior.

Rob Nabarro, a Fresno civil rights lawyer, is concerned about how Intrada’s proprietary software rates each suspect entered into its search engine. Only Intrado knows how it takes the vast amount of data it scours and turns it into a score — green, yellow, or red — which he calls “disconcerting.” He also thinks there’s a risk of “misinterpreting” some of the data that gets collected, which could trigger police “going in heavy” where it was not justified. He called it a “very unrefined, gross technique,” adding that “a police call is something that can be very dangerous to a citizen.”

Beware scours billions of data points from various publicly available sources, including arrest records, property records, commercial databases (similar to sources used by banks to create a “credit” score), deep Web searches, as well as innocuous comments posted to a suspect’s social media pages. The software also scours recent credit card purchases. When quizzed about the depth of the search performed by Beware, Intrada’s president Steve Reed added: “Any comments that could be construed as offensive all contribute to the threat score.”

In Fresno, a city of 500,000, the police department receives more than 1,200 911 calls every day. Justin Jovenal of the *Washington Post* was allowed what he called a “rare glimpse” into the department’s Real Time Control Center. He counted 57 monitors covering the walls of the center buried deep in the department’s basement, panning and scanning 200 police cameras mounted across the city. Any of the five operators could, in a moment’s notice, call up the feeds from another 800 cameras from the city’s schools and traffic cameras. In addition the center can pull up feeds from cameras installed at private businesses. And, shortly, feeds from the 400 body cameras being issued to police officers will flow into the center as well. The center also has access to a private database that has recorded more than a billion scans of license plates across the country. If gunshots are fired, a system called ShotSpotter can triangulate the location using microphones mounted across the city. And police can monitor social media, using Media Sonar, looking for potentially illicit activity such as threats to schools and hashtags



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related to gangs.

When Fresno citizens became aware that the police were experimenting with the Beware program, they protested about not being informed in advance. In November the Fresno City Council called a hearing where they were informed of the experiment. One citizen whose threat level was apparently raised because of her tweets about a card game called “Rage” joined with others expressing outrage. One of the others was a member of the council who asked Police Chief Dyer: “Could you run my threat level now?” Dyer agreed, and although the scan returned him as a “green,” his home address came back as “yellow,” possibly because a previous tenant living there had a background that triggered the Beware software. The councilman, Clinton Olivier, exclaimed: “Even though it’s not me that’s the ‘yellow’ guy, your officers are going to treat whoever comes out of that house in his boxer shorts as ‘yellow’ — that may not be fair to me.”

Although Fresno officials have said that they are only employing the software after a suspect has been identified, the jump to proactive suspect identification is a short one. Called “predictive policing” by a speaker at a recent national law-enforcement conference, he referred to the 2002 film *Minority Report* as the possible future of law enforcement. In that science-fiction movie directed by Steven Spielberg, a specialized police department, staffed by “precogs,” apprehends criminals before they commit a crime. The main protagonist in the film is accused of a crime he has not committed and becomes a fugitive.

Even more concerning is the eerie similarities between Beware and Big Brother in George Orwell’s *1984* where every movement of every citizen was monitored by the Thought Police:

The inhabitants of Oceania, particularly the Outer Party members, have no real privacy. Many of them live in apartments equipped with two-way telescreens, so that they may be watched or listened to at any time. Similar telescreens are found at workstations and in public places, along with hidden microphones. Written correspondence is routinely opened and read by the government before it is delivered.

The Thought Police employ undercover agents, who pose as normal citizens and report any person with subversive tendencies. Children are encouraged to report suspicious persons to the government, and some even denounce their parents.

Surveillance controls the citizenry and the smallest sign of rebellion, even something as small as a facial expression, can result in immediate arrest and imprisonment. Thus, citizens (and particularly party members) are compelled to obedience.

Any similarities, or even the use of cameras to coerce proper behavior, were denied vehemently by Fresno police Sergeant Steve Casto, who said that all Beware does is collect information that is already publicly and commercially available in order to monitor violent crime, terrorism, and to give police responding to a 911 call an information edge. He added that Fresno PD never searched for “Black Lives Matter”-related keywords.

As access to private personal information becomes cheaper, tools like Beware could become a surveillance tool, much like the “precogs” in *Minority Report*.

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