Firm linked to social media surveillance loses data access (Update)

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Facebook, which also owns Instagram, said it cut off Geofeedia from access to its "developer" platform after learning the firm violated terms of service for using its application program interface

 Twitter and Facebook on Tuesday revoked data access for an analytics firm which according to a civil liberties group helped law enforcement track protesters in social movements in US cities.

The announcements came after the American Civil Liberties Union reported that the analytics firm Geofeedia had been marketing its services to US police agencies to help track activists using social media posts and location data.

According to internal documents published by the ACLU, Geofeedia boasted that it "covered Ferguson/Mike Brown nationally with great success," referring to the wave of protests in the Missouri community after the police shooting of an unarmed African-American man.

"The ACLU of California has obtained records showing that Twitter, Facebook and Instagram provided user data access to Geofeedia, a developer of a social media monitoring product that we have seen marketed to law enforcement as a tool to monitor activists and protesters," the civil liberties group said in a statement.

"We know for a fact that in Oakland (California) and Baltimore (Maryland), law enforcement has used Geofeedia to monitor protests."

The ACLU documents showed Geofeedia claimed to have access to the Twitter "firehose" or full stream of data which can be analyzed and interpreted by location and other factors.

It also said Geofeedia claimed to be "the only social media monitoring firm to have (a) partnership with Instagram."

Shortly after the ACLU announcement, Twitter said it was cutting off access.

"Based on information in the @ACLU's report, we are immediately suspending @Geofeedia's commercial access to Twitter data," a Twitter Policy tweet said.

Facebook, which also owns Instagram, said it cut off Geofeedia from access to its "developer" platform after learning the firm violated terms of service for using its API, or application program interface.

"If a developer uses our APIs in a way that has not been authorized, we will take swift action to stop them and we will end our relationship altogether if necessary," a Facebook spokesman said in an email to AFP.

'Further steps' needed

The ACLU called on the social networks to take "further steps" to "live up to their principles and policies by protecting users of all backgrounds engaging in political and social discourse."

Geofeedia told AFP in a statement that its software platform delivers many benefits to public safety "while protecting civil rights and liberties."

"Notably, our software has also been used in response and recovery efforts—from the Boston Marathon to the effects of Hurricane Matthew that we saw this past weekend—to assist millions of people affected by both manmade and natural events," company chief executive Phil Harris said.

"Geofeedia has in place clear policies and guidelines to prevent the inappropriate use of our software; these include protections related to free speech and ensuring that end-users do not seek to inappropriately identify individuals based on race, ethnicity, religious, sexual orientation or political beliefs, among other factors."

Harris added that "we understand, given the ever-changing nature of digital technology, that we must continue to work to build on these critical protections of civil rights" and would "engage with key civil

liberty stakeholders, including the ACLU" to address concerns.

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