

Eric Schmidt's Rogue CIA Outfit Wants To Rape Your Mind

THE CIA IS INVESTING IN FIRMS THAT MINE YOUR TWEETS AND INSTAGRAM PHOTOS

Posted by [Olivia Russell](#)

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SOFT ROBOTS THAT can grasp delicate objects, computer algorithms designed to spot an “insider threat,” and artificial intelligence that will sift through large data sets — these are just a few of the technologies being pursued by companies with investment from In-Q-Tel, the CIA’s venture capital firm, according to a [document](#) obtained by The Intercept.

Yet among the 38 previously undisclosed companies receiving In-Q-Tel funding, the research focus that stands out is social media mining and surveillance; the portfolio document lists several tech companies pursuing work in this area, including Dataminr, Geofeedia, PATHAR, and TransVoyant.



In-Q-Tel's investment process.

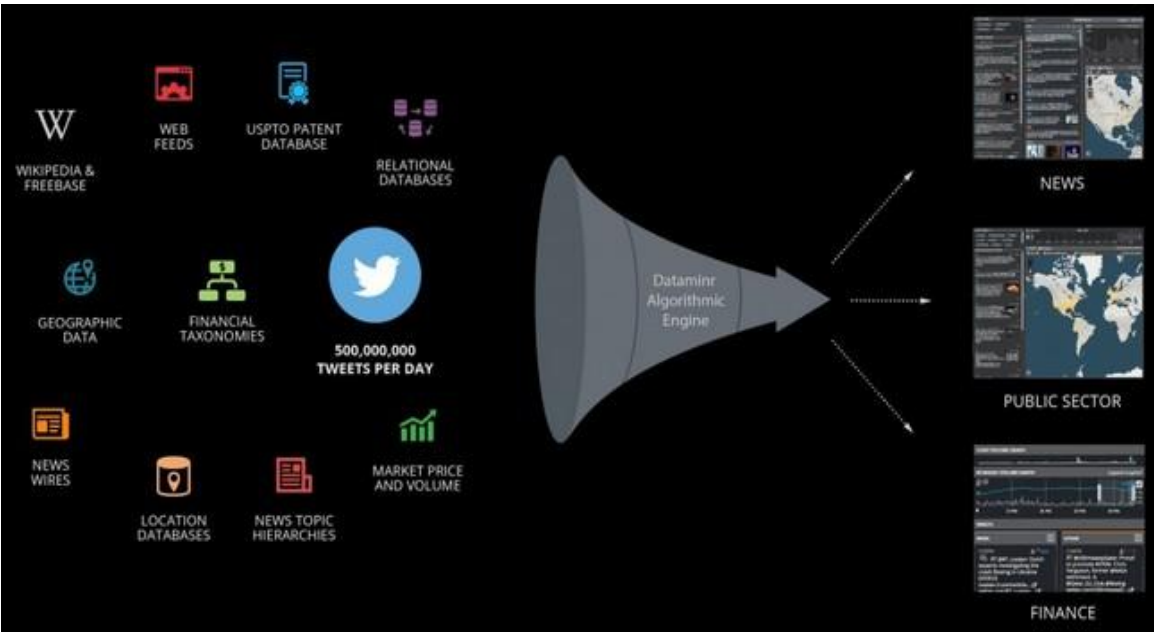
Screen grab from In-Q-Tel's website.

Those four firms, which provide unique tools to mine data from platforms such as Twitter, presented at a February "CEO Summit" in San Jose sponsored by the fund, along with other In-Q-Tel portfolio companies.

The investments appear to reflect the CIA's increasing focus on monitoring social media. Last September, David Cohen, the CIA's second-highest ranking official, spoke at length at Cornell University about a litany of [challenges](#) stemming from the new media landscape. The Islamic State's "sophisticated use of Twitter and other social media platforms is a perfect example of the malign use of these technologies," he said.

Social media also offers a wealth of potential intelligence; Cohen noted that Twitter messages from the Islamic State, sometimes called ISIL, have provided useful information. "ISIL's tweets and other social media messages publicizing their activities often produce information that, especially in the aggregate, provides real intelligence value," he said.

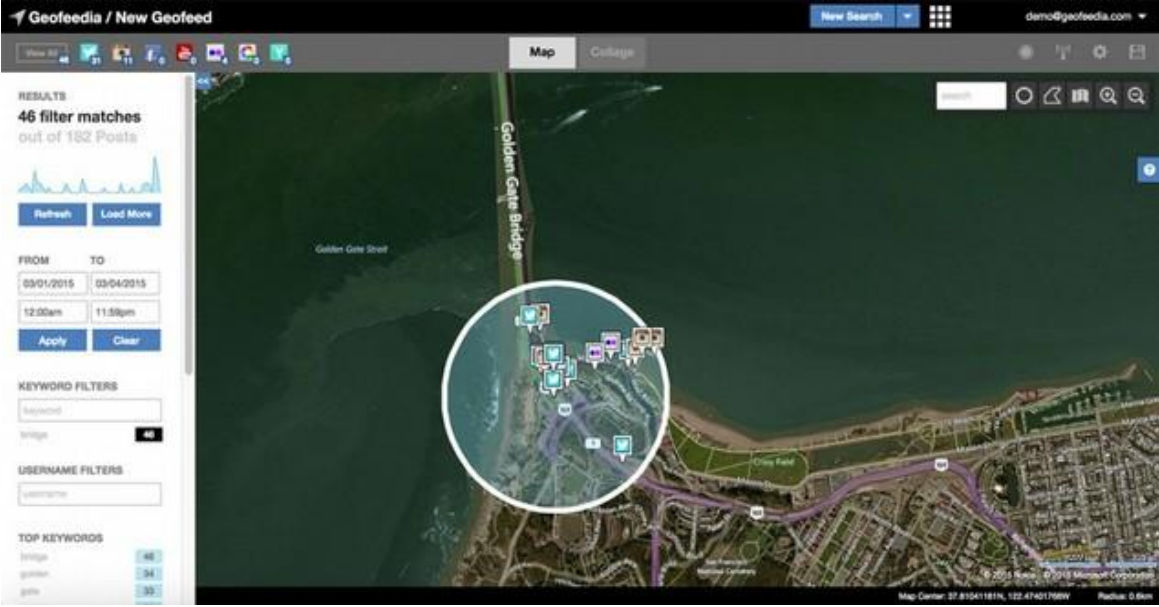
The latest round of In-Q-Tel investments comes as the CIA has revamped its outreach to Silicon Valley, [establishing](#) a new wing, the Directorate of Digital Innovation, which is tasked with developing and deploying cutting-edge solutions by directly engaging the private sector. The directorate is working closely with In-Q-Tel to integrate the latest technology into agency-wide intelligence capabilities.



Dataminr directly licenses a stream of data from Twitter to spot trends and detect emerging threats.

Screen grab from Dataminr’s website.

Dataminr directly licenses a stream of data from Twitter to visualize and quickly spot trends on behalf of law enforcement agencies and hedge funds, among other clients.



Geofeedia collects geotagged social media messages to monitor breaking news events in real time.

Screen grab from Geofeedia’s website.

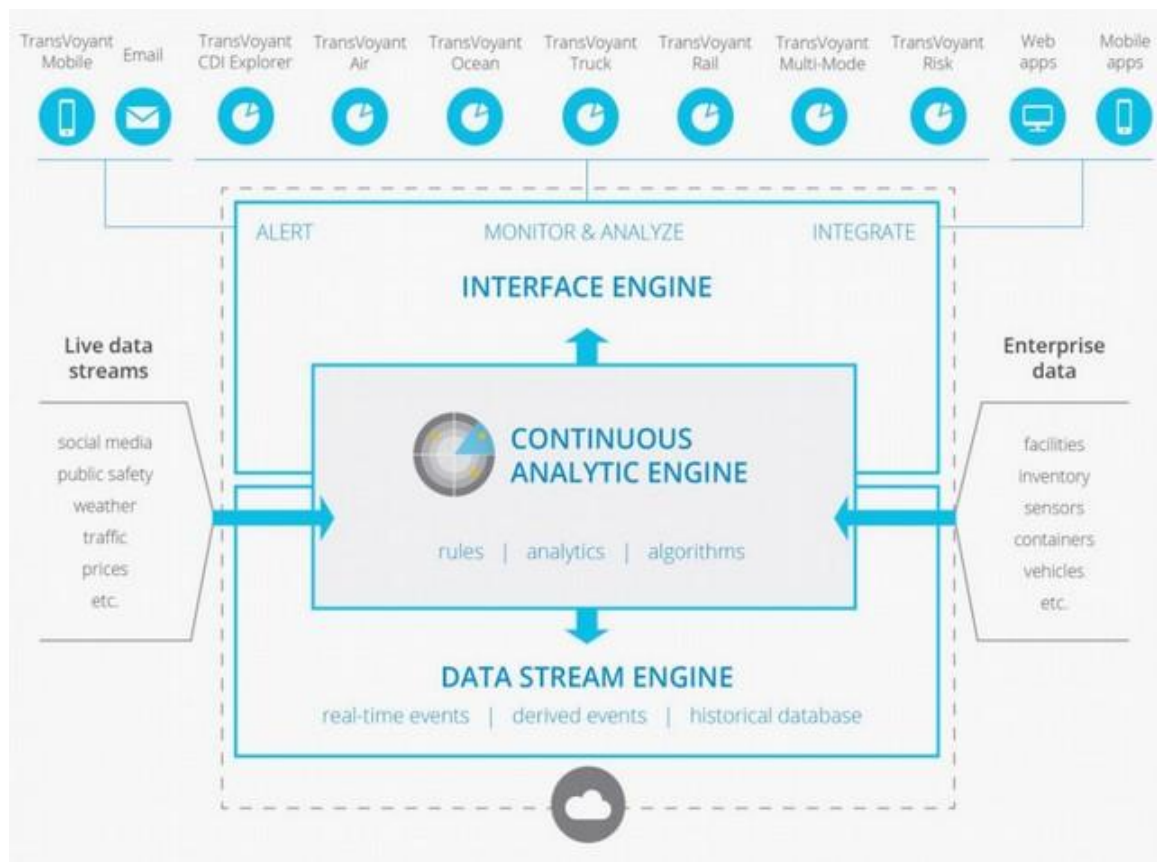
Geofeedia specializes in collecting geotagged social media messages, from platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, to monitor breaking news events in real time. The company, which counts dozens of local law enforcement agencies as clients, markets its ability to track activist protests on behalf of both corporate interests and police departments.



PATHAR mines social media to determine networks of association.

Screen grab from PATHAR’s website.

PATHAR’s product, Dunami, is used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation to “mine Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social media to determine networks of association, centers of influence and potential signs of radicalization,” according to an investigation by Reveal.



TransVoyant analyzes data points to deliver insights and predictions about global events.

Screen grab from TransVoyant’s website.

TransVoyant, founded by former Lockheed Martin Vice President Dennis Groseclose, provides a similar service by analyzing multiple data points for so-called decision-makers. The firm touts its ability to monitor Twitter to spot “gang incidents” and threats to journalists. A team from TransVoyant has worked with the U.S. military in Afghanistan to integrate data from satellites, radar, reconnaissance aircraft, and drones.

Dataminr, Geofeedia, and PATHAR did not respond to repeated requests for comment. Heather Crotty, the director of marketing at TransVoyant, acknowledged an investment from In-Q-Tel, but could not discuss the scope of the relationship. In-Q-Tel “does not disclose the financial terms of its investments,” Crotty said.

Carrie A. Sessine, the vice president for external affairs at In-Q-Tel, also declined an interview because the fund “does not participate in media interviews or opportunities.”

Over the last decade, In-Q-Tel has made a number of public investments in companies that specialize in scanning large sets of online data. In 2009, the fund partnered with Visible Technologies, which specializes in reputation management over the internet by identifying the influence of “positive” and “negative” authors on a range of platforms for a given subject. And six years ago, In-Q-Tel [formed](#) partnerships with NetBase, another social media analysis firm that touts its ability to scan “billions of sources in public and private online information,” and Recorded Future, a firm that monitors the web to [predict events](#) in the future.

Unpublicized In-Q-Tel Portfolio Companies

Company	Description	Contract
Aquifi	3D vision software solutions	
Beartooth	Decentralized mobile network	
CliQr	Hybrid cloud management platform	Contract
CloudPassage	On-demand, automated infrastructure security	
Databricks	Cloud-hosted big data analytics and processing platform	
Dataminr	Situational awareness and analysis at the speed of social media	Contract
Docker	Open platform to build, ship, and run distributed	Contract

applications

[Echodyne](#) Next-generation electronically scanning radar systems [Contract](#)

[Epiq Solutions](#) Software-defined radio platforms and applications [Contract](#)

[Geofeedia](#) Location-based social media monitoring platform [Contract](#)

[goTenna](#) Alternate network for off-grid smartphone communications [Contract](#)

[Headspin](#) Network-focused approach to improving mobile application performance [Contract](#)

[Interset](#) Inside threat detection using analytics, machine learning, and big data

[Keyssa](#) Fast, simple, and secure contactless data transfer

[Kymeta](#) Antenna technology for broadband satellite communications

[Lookout](#) Cloud-based mobile cybersecurity

[Mapbox](#) Design and publish visual, data-rich maps [Contract](#)

[Mesosphere](#) Next-generation scale, efficiency, and automation in a physical or cloud-based data center [Contract](#)

<u>Nervana</u>	Next-generation machine learning platform	
<u>Orbital Insight</u>	Satellite imagery processing and data science at scale	
<u>Orion Labs</u>	Wearable device and real-time voice communications platform	
<u>Parallel Wireless</u>	LTE radio access nodes and software stack for small cell deployment	
<u>PATHAR</u>	Channel-specific social media analytics platform	<u>Contract</u>
<u>Pneubotics</u>	Mobile material handling solutions to automate tasks	
<u>PsiKick</u>	Redefined ultra-low power wireless sensor solutions	<u>Contract</u>
<u>PubNub</u>	Build and scale real-time apps	
<u>Rocket Lab</u>	Launch provider for small satellites	<u>Contract</u>
<u>Skincential Sciences</u>	Novel materials for biological sample collection	
<u>Soft Robotics</u>	Soft robotics actuators and systems	
<u>Sonatype</u>	Software supply chain automation and security	<u>Contract</u>

<u>Spaceflight Industries</u>	Small satellite launch, network, and imagery provider	<u>Contract</u>
<u>Threatstream</u>	Leading enterprise-class threat intelligence platform	
<u>Timbr.io</u>	Accessible code-driven analysis platform	
<u>Transient Electronics</u>	Dissolvable semiconductor technology	<u>Contract</u>
<u>TransVoyant</u>	Live predictive intelligence platform	
<u>TRX Systems</u>	3D indoor location and mapping solutions	
<u>Voltaiq</u>	SaaS platform for advanced battery analysis	
<u>Zoomdata</u>	Big data exploration, visualization, and analytics platform	<u>Contract</u>

Bruce Lund, a senior member of In-Q-Tel’s technical staff, noted in a 2012 [paper](#) that “monitoring social media” is increasingly essential for government agencies seeking to keep track of “erupting political movements, crises, epidemics, and disasters, not to mention general global trends.”

The recent wave of investments in social media-related companies suggests the CIA has accelerated the drive to make collection of user-generated online data a priority. Alongside its investments in start-ups, In-Q-Tel has also developed a special technology laboratory in Silicon Valley, called Lab41, to provide tools for the intelligence community to [connect the dots](#) in large sets of data.

In February, Lab41 [published](#) an article exploring the ways in which a Twitter user's location could be predicted with a degree of certainty through the location of the user's friends. On Github, an open source website for developers, Lab41 currently has a [project](#) to ascertain the "feasibility of using architectures such as Convolutional and Recurrent Neural Networks to classify the positive, negative, or neutral sentiment of Twitter messages towards a specific topic."

Collecting intelligence on foreign adversaries has potential benefits for counterterrorism, but such CIA-supported surveillance technology is also used for domestic law enforcement and by the private sector to spy on activist groups.

Palantir, one of In-Q-Tel's earliest investments in the social media analytics realm, was exposed in 2011 by the hacker group LulzSec to be in [negotiation](#) for a proposal to track labor union activists and other critics of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the largest business lobbying group in Washington. The company, now celebrated as a "tech unicorn" — a term for start-ups that reach over \$1 billion in valuation — distanced itself from the plan after it was exposed in a cache of leaked emails from the now-defunct firm HBGary Federal.

Cover of [the document](#) obtained by The Intercept.

Yet other In-Q-Tel-backed companies are now openly embracing the practice. Geofeedia, for instance, promotes its research into Greenpeace [activists](#), student [demonstrations](#), minimum wage [advocates](#), and [other](#) political movements. Police departments in Oakland, Chicago, Detroit, and other major municipalities have [contracted](#) with Geofeedia, as well as private firms such as the Mall of America and McDonald's.

Lee Guthman, an executive at Geofeedia, [told](#) reporter John Knefel that his company could predict the potential for violence at Black Lives Matter protests just by using the location and sentiment of tweets. Guthman said the technology could gauge sentiment by attaching "positive and negative points" to certain phrases, while measuring "proximity of words to certain words."

Privacy advocates, however, have expressed concern about these sorts of automated judgments.

"When you have private companies deciding which algorithms get you a so-called threat score, or make you a person of interest, there's obviously room for

targeting people based on viewpoints or even unlawfully targeting people based on race or religion,” said Lee Rowland, a senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union.

She added that there is a dangerous trend toward government relying on tech companies to “build massive dossiers on people” using “nothing but constitutionally protected speech.”

Author : Lee Fang

Source : <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/14/in-undisclosed-cia-investments-social-media-mining-looms-large/>