



Repression as a service

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A manual for ICE's immigrant-targeting computer system, Palantir ELITE, was leaked today via 404 media. Let's look at it, then step back to evaluate how far we've come along a dangerous road and where that road might take us.

The app features gamified neighborhood maps, like Pokémon Go for hunting immigrants. Palantir warns the software is "not for mass prioritization of locations where lots of people it [ICE] might detain could be based." But this is what actually happens when you give ICE a map and a quota:

> In testimony 404 Media obtained from a case in Oregon, an ICE official said ELITE is what ICE sometimes uses to track the apparent density of people at a particular location to target. "You're going to go to a more dense population rather than [...] like, if there's one pin at a house and the likelihood of them actually living there is like 10 percent [...] you're not going to go there," the official said. "It's basically a map of the United States. It's kind of like Google Maps."

Dispatching ICE agents to hit "groups of pre-defined aliens specifically targeted by Leadership for action," the software allows the administration to order up a goon squad wherever they want, at the touch of a button. Like Uber for authoritarians. Let's call it repression as a service.

To target a "criminal or immigration nexus" the software pulls Americans' personal data from across the government, including data from Health and Human Services and other agencies unrelated to law enforcement. How did ICE and Palantir get all this data together?

This leaked video of a presentation by DOGE at GSA headquarters 10 months ago outlines the plan. Couched as a part of their AI strategy, Musk's people said they needed to scoop up all government data so AI could use it.

When we talk about DOGE stealing data, a lot of people picture a guy sneaking hard drives out under the cover of darkness. But that's not how you build a repression tool like ELITE. A hard drive is only a data snapshot; it will go out of date. Fascism needs a *continuous data connection*.

At the time of the GSA DOGE presentation I feared that the goal of this AI strategy was to make a continuous pushbutton repression system patterned on the metaphor of Palantir from LotR.

A few days later, Wired reported that DOGE was building exactly this: cross-government data connections with Palantir — the literal company with that name, not just the metaphor.

As sure as walking off with hard drives is illegal, what DOGE did with Palantir is illegal. The laws they violated have boring names like the Antideficiency Act, the Privacy Act, and Federal Acquisition Regulation. These are laws the government used to enforce *on itself*. Not anymore.

The theft isn't over. ICE thugs are now demanding state-level voter data at gunpoint. If they get that data, presumably, they will throw it into the mix with all the other stolen data available to repression as a service.

Voter data unlocks the possibility of ICE targeting key polling precincts, swing districts, election officials or individual voters. ICE leadership could conceivably order voter repression up at any address, like an Uber.

To avoid obviously targeting voters, another layer of data can be used to provide deniability, however flimsy. For example, IRS data could be used to map key voters who also owe back taxes.

Something like this is already happening in Minneapolis where half-forgotten allegations of childcare funding fraud are the excuse for an occupation of the city. With enough data ICE could find similar justification anywhere. Simply ignore the "not for mass prioritization" warning label.

My fellow civil servants would object that the order "find the 'nexus' of Democratic voters under tax audit" is illegal. But software need not raise these objections. Hence brologarchs dream of software allowing them to order up repression without pesky civil servants in the loop.

At GSA we built an AI tool with safeguards against data consolidation to avoid violations exactly like these. After firing the people who made it, DOGE rolled a version of it out all over government, including at DHS.

Fascists quickly tire of safeguards. Three days ago the head of CISA (🤪!!!) got busted circumventing these safety measures, throwing sensitive government documents into the growing pile of privatized data.

In spite of their apparent enthusiasm for AI, the brologarchs within government seem to be giving up on boring, law-abiding internal AI tools like the one we built. They only want software that can dispatch goon squads.

I am not saying they will be able to build the fully automated repression tool of their dreams. Bureaucracy is largely made of humans who can't be wished away by men with a near-religious belief in AI and a delusionally negative view of government workers.

But consider how far they've already come. DOGE bros used AI tools to list thousands of "woke" "DEI" government grants for cancellation per Musk's conspiracy theories. Legitimate civil servants would have refused to compile such a list, but not AI.

Takeaway

Any time the Trump administration says "AI" or anything about software or data, what you should hear is "repression as a service"

This has 2 parts:

1. AI as an excuse to consolidate data
2. AI to execute orders that humans would refuse

Neither part is complete, yet. Of the repression machine that I feared 10 months ago, the administration has implemented to only to a midpoint. The more data they consolidate, the further we travel down this dangerous road.

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