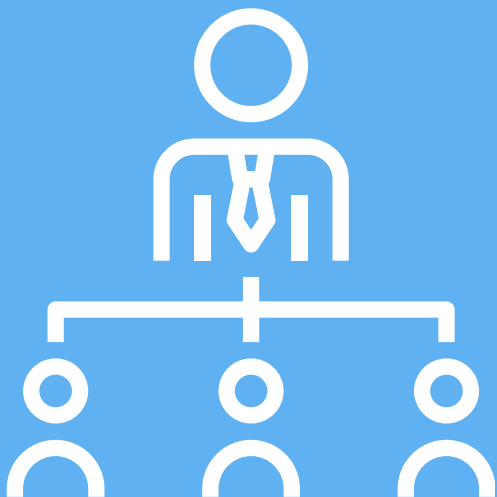# SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

WHAT IS IT?

Social media monitoring software is utilised to keep track of what people say and post on social media. It has commercial and law enforcement uses. The software allows the user to search for certain keywords across the web. In commerce, these words could relate to topics, specific products, brands, services, markets and so forth. Hashtag searches are also possible. Various platforms can be searched in this way, including Youtube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Social media monitoring also covers websites (such as news websites), discussion forums, and blogs – as long as the information is publicly available on the web.

GLOBAL USE

Social media monitoring is used globally for commercial purposes to assist marketers to gauge the attitudes, perceptions, sentiments and interest of customers or potential customers. Monitoring can be active, with keyword searches set up to listen out for specific brand names. It can also be passive, monitoring keywords showing people's general opinions and interests. This information can help marketers to find out what customers think about products and services, and if their advertising is reaching the intended target market.

Another use for social media monitoring is found in the workplace. Employers are able to use the software to see what employees are saying through their private social media accounts. This practice is part of guarding against employees' social posts negatively impacting the company image. It also aims to ensure that workers do not lose productivity because of the time they spend on social media. In addition, it can be used by companies to profile a job applicant, which would then assist in the decision to appoint that person.
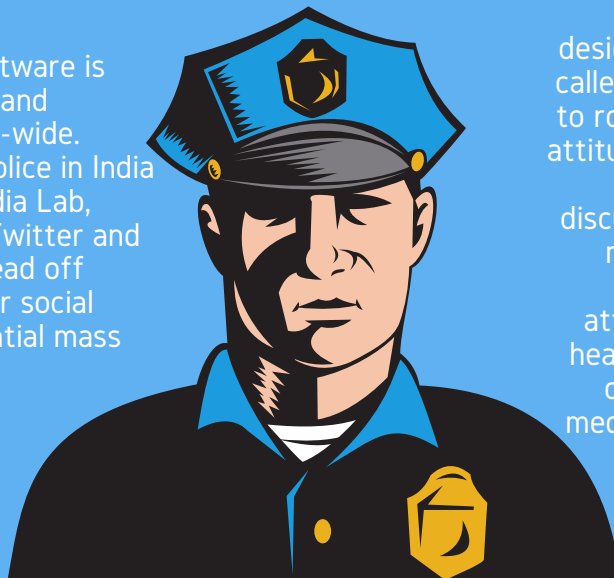
SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

GLOBAL USE

Social media monitoring software is utilised by law enforcement agencies to keep track of social media posts that may provide an indication of terror or criminal activities. The software allows law enforcement to monitor the public social media posts of citizens within a specific geographic area. Examples of social media platforms that can be monitored include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube.
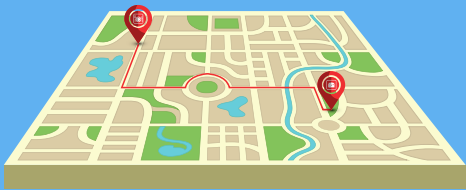
Police can also use social media monitoring tools to identity suspicious individuals through their public social media posts. Police can use the software to, for example, receive alerts of any social media posts within a certain geographic area that mention keywords related to a protest that is in progress. The result is that people will land on the police's radar simply by mentioning these key words.

It is possible to monitor (in real-time) the posts of people taking part in a protest gathering by searching for posts made by people who are physically present at the gathering. This method uses GPS to demarcate the geographic area of interest, and is known as geofencing.

Social media monitoring software is utilised by both democratic and authoritarian regimes world-wide. For instance, the Mumbai police in India have a dedicated Social Media Lab, which monitors Facebook, Twitter and Google. The Lab aims to "head off unruly crowd sentiment over social media" and to predict potential mass gatherings.

In the United States, a company by the name of OssaLabs offers software designed for law enforcement agencies called Social Impact Pro. It allows police to routinely harvest data on community attitudes and perception about local law enforcement and to monitor public discussions and conversations on social media. The software aims to "assist police to understand community attitudes before they become a news headline." Social Impact Pro is just one of many commercial software social media monitoring products available to police globally.
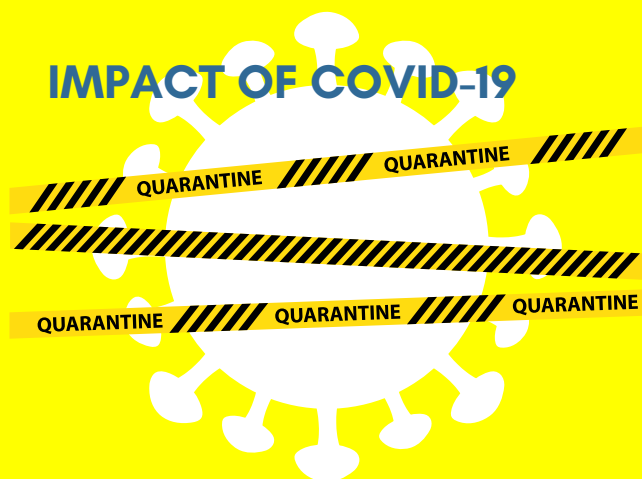
SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

SOUTH AFRICA

Social media monitoring software is commercially available in South Africa, and there is nothing prohibiting government agencies or businesses from purchasing and utilising it. Alternately, government bodies, law enforcement, or private businesses can contract a private company to use the software to monitor social media posts on their behalf.

It is not known if police or intelligence services are currently using social media monitoring software to monitor protests or predict criminal activity. In 2016, SAPS obtained quotations for the purchase of monitoring software from a company by the name of RIPJAR. RIPJAR provides powerful web-based data analysis software, including social media monitoring software. However, it appears that SAPS has not been using the software, and that the eventual purchase of RIPJAR was fraudulent.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Some countries have turned to social media monitoring to enforce Covid-19 regulations. In September 2020, Philippine police announced that they would monitor social media to ensure that people heeded quarantine regulations. In Italy, a research agency reportedly scraped more than 500 000 instagram profiles to see if people were adhering to lockdown rules.
It is not known if South African authorities have utilised social media monitoring software to police adherence to Covid-19 restrictions.
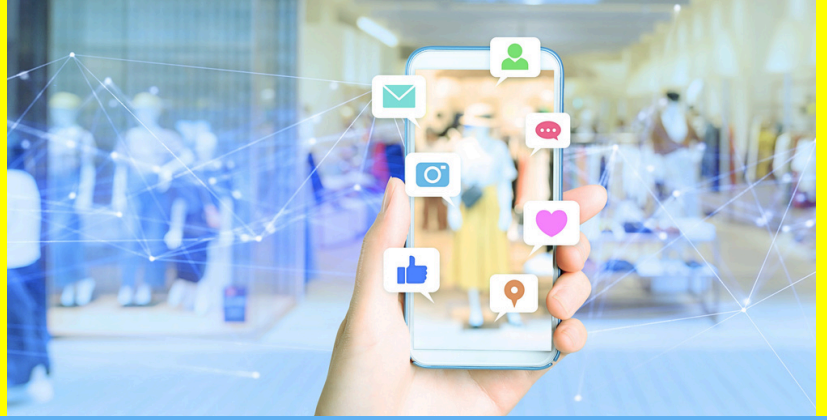
HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE LAW

Social media monitoring software utilises sophisticated algorithms to collect an analyse personal data about individuals. The data is gathered from across various social networking platforms. This analysis provides authorities and private businesses with detailed insights into people's lives, including their relationships, emotions, beliefs, political leanings and future plans.

Advocacy groups warn that the invasive technology can be used to monitor protestors and target political leaders and influencers, as well as monitor people's movements in real-time. Since the technology primarily aims to predict unwanted behaviour, it necessarily monitors innocent people. Advocacy groups argue that the software threatens people's right to freedom of expression and association, and the right to privacy.
The same can be said of employers' use of social media monitoring to monitor workers' personal online conduct.

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE LAW

Social media monitoring software involves the collection and processing of personal data. Even if social media posts are made publicly available, those post still constitute the personal information of the user. That means that the processing of social media posts and conversations are still regulated by the Protection of Personal Information Act. Because the Act allows for data processing for security purposes, it is possible that police and intelligence services could utilise such software despite POPIA restrictions.

Proponents of social media monitoring maintain that they should be free to collect and analyse information posted on social media if those posts are made public. They say that once you choose to make your information public, you can no longer enjoy any sort of privacy protections. In South Africa, legal advisers are telling the public that their public social media posts are unlikely to be protected by the Protection of Personal Information Act, since they chose to disclose the information. This is a dangerous argument, because it fails to take into account the impact of Big Data analytics - including analytics used by police to monitor social media. Data privacy laws are also meant to protect us from Big Data analytics.

As is the case with geolocation data gathered by apps and sold to third parties, publicly available social media posts can potentially be sold legally to third parties. This is possible because anyone using a social media platform must consent to certain conditions before using the platform. These conditions include granting permission to have certain data and content from one's social media page shared with third parties. This information can again be sold on to police and intelligence agencies. In South Africa, there is little transparency as to the manner in which police and intelligence services utilise this type of commercially available software.

Big data refers to the phenomenon whereby information is produced in vast quantities, thanks largely to the Internet and the increased processing capacity of computers. Data comes in many different formats, including text, audio, images, video and the like. Analytics such as that used by social media monitoring software allow police or private companies to create a detailed picture of one's personal life very quickly, since the automated process can search for, aggregate, store, categorise and interpret data much faster than a human being. A collection of all publicly available data about someone provides a far more accurate picture of that person than any one piece of data on its own.