

Flock and Boston Dynamics illustrate the slippery slope of data gathering and surveillance

By Peyton Fleming

Trust.

It's in dangerously short supply as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and its corporate supporters are dropping the hammer on immigrants and ramping up surveillance on American citizens.

We're seeing it on two fronts in Massachusetts, where the license plate reader Flock is being widely rebuked for violating privacy protections in helping ICE, and Boston Dynamics is being criticized for selling data-sniffing robot dogs to ICE.



Spot, a sensing robot dog made by Boston Dynamics, is sold for many uses, including limitless data gathering and surveillance.

Both cases have enormous implications as ICE and private tech companies build a massive, AI-powered surveillance machine that tracks far more than undocumented immigrants.

We're already seeing instances in which protesters, legal observers and innocent bystanders are being monitored, targeted and harassed.

Boston's recent dispute with Flock Safety for misusing license plate data collected from 45 cameras in the city last year is only the tip of the iceberg.

In a report released in September, Boston officials learned that Flock had been sharing license plate data with other external law enforcement agencies after promising it would not do so. It still isn't clear which outside agencies accessed the data, or how many drivers in Massachusetts were exposed, but thousands of agencies have access to Flock's national network.

Holyoke, which has a large Latino population, had a similar experience. As recently as August, police departments from around the country were tapping into the city's Flock data, searching plates for immigration investigations, including some referencing ICE in their justification, The Republican reported.

It's no wonder that Boston, Holyoke and two dozen other Massachusetts communities are pausing or cutting ties with Flock, citing data privacy and police misuse concerns. On Monday, the group DeFlock Springfield called on city councilors to cancel a contract with the company. Nationally, hundreds of cities and counties are doing the same.

While Flock has no direct contracts with ICE, the agency is gaining access to the company's vast network of cameras in 5,000 communities nationally through an informal pipeline enabled by local law enforcement. Local police departments across the U.S. have performed thousands of Flock lookups explicitly on behalf of ICE, according to 404 Media reporting.

The slippery slope of surveillance is also at the heart of recent protests targeting Boston Dynamics over its sale of Spot robot dogs to ICE. The \$1.3 million contract was finalized last week.

While the robot's name sounds benign, the product is not. The four-legged, remote-controlled dogs — each costing \$250,000 — are data-gathering maws. Boston Dynamics boasts that Spot can “capture limitless data and explore without boundaries.”

To its credit, the company has strict ethical principles stating that government use of its devices must not involve “violation of privacy and civil rights laws.” But can ICE be trusted to abide by those standards?

This is an agency that indiscriminately targets immigrants, disobeys court orders and considers protesters to be domestic terrorists.

In Maine and Minnesota, observers and protesters at ICE raids say they have been targeted by ICE in numerous ways: agents photographing their faces and license plates; calling them out by name; and calling them at their homes.

Dozens of these individuals have joined multiple lawsuits alleging that ICE is illegally filming and tracking ICE observers. In one of the lawsuits, plaintiff Colleen Fagan recalled seeing an ICE agent filming her face and license plate while she was taking a video of an ICE raid in Portland, Maine. When she asked why she was being filmed, the masked agent responded, “We have a nice little database. And now you're considered a domestic terrorist, so have fun with that.”

A red flag, for sure.

Americans should not stand idly as ICE and corporate enablers are building a surveillance machine unparalleled in its power and reach. Just as Americans distrust ICE, we should not trust companies, such as Flock and Boston Dynamics, that are helping them.

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