

Massachusetts police tweet lets slip scale of leftwing surveillance

An image of a police computer screen posted during Thursday's gas emergency showed bookmarks for several activist groups



▲ Policeman Photograph: Luiz Felipe Castro/Getty Images/Flickr RF

Sarah Betancourt in
Boston

🐦 @sweetadelinevt

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At the height of **Thursday night's gas emergency** that affected 8,000 people and in which one person was killed, Massachusetts state police

posted to Twitter a map of responses to fires and explosions.

Berkeley police posted activists' mugshots on Twitter and celebrated retweets, emails reveal



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It was an image of a computer monitor, showing locations of 39 incidents as confirmed “by MSP Watch Center”, and it included a vital message: “Reminder: all residents of Lawrence/Andover/N[orth] Andover who have Columbia Gas must evacuate, as should anyone else who smells gas.”

But the image also showed something else: a bookmarks bar at the top of the browser window which listed several leftwing groups.

The bookmarks included a Facebook group for Mass Action Against Police Brutality (MAAPB); the Coalition to Organize and Mobilize **Boston** Against Trump (Combat); Facebook 413; Facebook MA Activism; and Resistance Calendar, which notes timings for canvassing for Democratic or progressive candidates and anti-Trump rallies.

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The state police’s official Twitter account shared the image at 6.26pm. Less than half an hour later it deleted it and shared a new one, which had been **cropped**. But the first tweet had already drawn the attention of activists and reporters, who shared screenshots and began a social media debate about online police surveillance.

The MSP Watch Center is the information-gathering **Commonwealth Fusion Center**, formed in 2005 to facilitate the “collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence relevant to terrorism and public safety”. There are more than 100 such centers nationwide.

The **Massachusetts** state police director of media communications, David Procopio, told the Guardian police have a “responsibility to know about all large public gatherings of any type and by any group, regardless of their purpose and position, for public safety reasons”.

He added: “We do not collect information about – nor, frankly, do we care about – any group’s beliefs or opinions.”

 **The screen shot posted by Massachusetts police containing the revealing bookmarks for leftwing groups.**

▲ The screen shot posted by Massachusetts police containing the revealing bookmarks for leftwing groups. Photograph: Sarah Betancourt for the Guardian



Pressed about the organizations bookmarked, the circumstances of the post and the role of intelligence analysts within MSP, he declined to comment further.

Tom Arabia, a co-founder of Combat, said: “No one can deny the Massachusetts state police are surveilling leftwing organizations.”

He added that the image on the state police tweet “was both unsurprising and also a bit scary, because of how intimate it is in a sense to see your own organization listed in a police browser’s bookmarks”.

Combat's [Facebook page](#) had not had a new post since November 2017, when it shared a post about a gathering for racial justice. Founded shortly after the election of Donald Trump and in protest against his policies, the group describes itself as an intersectional coalition of students, artists and workers "organizing creatively to resist all forms of oppression". It has not met for some time.

In a message to the Guardian, the group's leadership said: "The fact that state police, who are funded by our taxpayer dollars, are spending time monitoring groups on Facebook that opposed racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic violence, instead of those groups who perpetuate such violence, is abhorrent and should be examined under scrutiny."

The group added that it had no plans to reactivate. Nonetheless, former members were "deeply disconcerted", it said.

An organizer for one of the other bookmarked organizations called for transparency on who made the post and what kind of surveillance was being carried out.

Brock Satter is a member of MAAPB, a group that focuses on police-involved deaths and altercations in communities of color. Launched after the death of Michael Brown Jr in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the group seeks to put political pressure on government to prosecute police brutality.

"We didn't realize we were such a high priority to state police," Satter said. He added that the organization had been aware of past monitoring because of police presence at public events.

Though MAAPB has not held any political rallies in more than five months, Satter said, there were rumblings about responding publicly to the state police tweet.

"Whoever was behind this should be denounced," he said.

Surveillance of activist groups is not new in Massachusetts, said Kade Crockford, director of the Technology for Liberty Program at the

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Massachusetts, who has been tracking the issue for almost a decade.

Crockford was “appalled” but “not surprised” by the tweet, adding that MSP [monitored Black Lives Matter](#) on social media in 2015 through the same fusion center during a protest in Boston.

One dead in
Massachusetts
after gas
explosions ignite
dozens of fires



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The ACLU of Massachusetts obtained through [public records requests](#) documents, also reviewed by the Guardian, that show the Boston police department’s Boston Regional Intelligence Center, the only other fusion center in the state, [used](#) a social media surveillance system called Geofeedia from 2014 to 2016. Thousands of social media posts involving activism were assessed. The ACLU said these were “irrelevant” to law enforcement concerns.

Efforts have been made to curtail surveillance of leftwing groups. A 2017 [bill in the Massachusetts legislature](#), “The Fundamental Freedoms Act”, proposed a prohibition on public agencies collecting information about first-amendment protected activities and speech. The one allowance would be reasonable grounds to believe a person had committed a crime. The legislative session ended on 31 July without the bill passing.

“They should disclose the groups they’re monitoring,” Crockford said. “I encourage the ... state police to release a list of all organizations’ Facebook pages they monitor for policing large events.”