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By Darwin Bond-Graham and Ali Winston
Wednesday, Oct 30 2013

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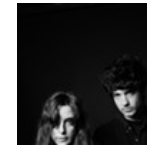
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With *Is the Is Are*, DIIV Frontman Zachary Cole Smith Finally Sees The Light at the End of the Tunnel



The day before Halloween in 2012, Donnie Fowler, a lobbyist from a little-known tech start-up called PredPol, e-mailed a confidential login and password to the San Francisco Police Department's chief information officer, Susan Merritt. The password allowed Merritt to log into an online mapping tool that, according to Fowler and his business



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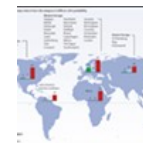
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THE SNITCH



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partners, was already predicting where crimes are likely to happen across San Francisco.

Fowler was, if his company is to be believed, giving the SFPD the keys to the next generation of crime-fighting, a program that draws from the past to help police, presumably, change the future. PredPol was hoping San Francisco would be wooed by the sci-fi promise of its product. After all, the media certainly has been.

Every other news article and TV clip about PredPol to appear over the past year, from Al Jazeera to the *Wall Street Journal*, has showcased the company and its software as if it were straight out of Philip K. Dick's short story, "The Minority Report." An algorithm, the exact nature of which is a proprietary secret closely guarded by PredPol, processes the inputted data and spits out 500-by-500 square-foot boxes on a map of the city. In these boxes, according to PredPol, the risk of crimes like auto-theft or battery are more likely to occur. Police access the program through a web browser. Its display is similar to Google maps, and features allowing cops to toggle different crimes, and zoom in on particular blocks, are simple and intuitive. For more than a year, the SFPD has quietly handed over troves of crime data to PredPol and allowed the company to integrate this software with the city's new police information technology systems.

Thousands of tech start-ups are popping up in the Bay Area these days, so it should come as little surprise that a few are selling apps to the police. PredPol, short for "predictive policing," is riding this wave of techno-mania and capitalizing on the belief, especially here in San Francisco, that there's a killer app for everything, including crime-fighting.

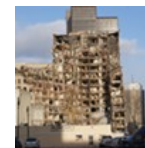


AP PHOTO/DAMIAN DOVARGANES

Jeff Brantingham demonstrating predictive policing at an LAPD command post in 2012.



Predpol



**Millennial Problems: Most
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This is a shift for the SFPD, a department that finally issued e-mail addresses to all of its officers and equipped its precincts with Internet connections in 2011.

The SFPD has yet to sign a contract with PredPol, but the company has aggressively marketed its software throughout the United States and overseas, winning hundreds of thousands of dollars in contracts. The company is run by politically connected individuals with ties to local and national Democratic Party leadership. It is backed by powerful Silicon Valley investors, and while the company's executives say the software originates from earthquake research, it actually is derived more from Army research into insurgencies and battlefield casualties.

And it's got a marketing strategy that recalls a military conquest. PredPol has required police departments that sign on to refer the company to other law enforcement agencies, and to appear in flashy press conferences, endorsing the software as a crime-reducer — despite the fact that its effectiveness hasn't yet been proven.

While PredPol is promoting its software and ginning up reams of good press for itself, veteran cops and prominent academics are skeptical about this latest crime-fighting gadget. Some say predictive policing doesn't work. Some even say specifically that PredPol's algorithm doesn't accurately predict future crimes, and that it has no proven record of reducing crime rates. Yet, without a contract, without public notice, even without most members of the Police Commission — the civilian body that oversees SFPD — knowing, the SFPD and PredPol have prepared to launch the company's controversial crime prediction software. As PredPol engineer Omar Qazi told SFPD staff back in February in an e-mail, "we can literally start generating predictions for you tomorrow."

Others worry that gadget-obsessed police and their contractors will not just waste public dollars on snake-oil solutions, but that in the process they'll actually undermine public safety. Kade Crockford, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts' Technology for Liberty Project, warns against the trend towards data and statistical software as a panacea. "People are excited about technological solutions for

vexing social problems," Crockford says. "This is technophilia that's taken over. People assume if computers are involved, then it's smarter, more efficient."

PredPol's first inroads into San Francisco came at the initiative of Police Commissioner Suzy Loftus, a former prosecutor and policy specialist with the San Francisco District Attorney and the California Attorney General's Office. On May 17, 2012, Loftus was introduced to PredPol CEO Caleb Baskin and lobbyist Fowler. Loftus says that she first heard of predictive policing while working at the California Department of Justice.

"As a Police Commissioner, one of my primary goals is to support the department in adopting technology as a tool to solve, as well as prevent, crime," Loftus says in an e-mail. "After hearing more about this technology, I thought that SFPD and the Chief [Greg Suhr] should learn about it and decide if they thought it would be a good fit for the department. I called the Chief and told him what I thought about the potential and gave Donnie [Fowler] Greg's e-mail."

The civilian San Francisco Police Commission does not usually get involved with awarding contracts. While Loftus' contact with PredPol is not prohibited by her position as police commissioner, it is outside the scope of her official duties. Neither commission President Thomas Mazzucco nor Commissioner Angela Chan were aware of SFPD's relationship with PredPol, or of Loftus' introduction of the firm to SFPD's higher-ups.

"Good to meet both of you today," Loftus wrote Baskin and Fowler. "I am fascinated by what is possible here. I called [C]hief Suhr about it and told him that I met with you guys and think that if he likes it, it could be great for [San Francisco]."

After listening to Loftus, Suhr put PredPol's Fowler in touch with SFPD's Chief Information Officer, Susan Merritt. Thus began a year and a half of negotiation between the SFPD and PredPol over implementing the crime forecasting technology in the city — first as a no-cost demonstration in the Mission District, and then on a city-wide basis.

Tags: Feature, Featured Stories, Donnie Fowler, San Francisco Police Department, Los Angeles Police Department, Susan Merritt

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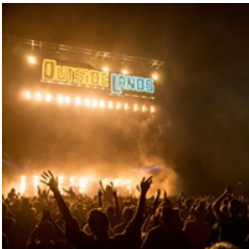
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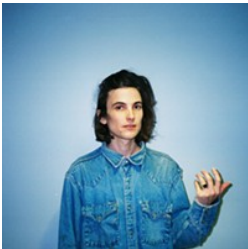
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