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Cobwebs Technologies - Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Interview conducted on September 01, 2022

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD. Expert has used OSINT in various cases for the past decade. Expert is familiar with Cobwebs, Babel Street, Voyager Labs, Zerofox, Scopenow, and Digital Stakeout. Expert can speak to the value prop and competitive landscape surrounding OSINT solutions.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD. Expert is responsible for Monitoring, Collecting, Analyzing, and Disseminates Threat Related Information. Expert reviews and evaluates offense reports for trends. Screens information platforms for possible threats and or security risks for school districts. Monitors social media accounts to provide case support for investigations. Monitors Life Safety Systems including security cameras, and fire and intrusion alarm systems. Provides quality assurance for offense reports for state NIBRS reporting. Train officers on NIBRS and RMS systems.

Prior to Fort Bend ISD, the expert was the Criminal Analyst-Sheriff's Office-Retired at Fort Bend County, leaving October 2021. Expert was responsible for Conducting research using both law enforcement resources and open source intelligence to aid in criminal investigations. Provided case support for detectives through analysis, mapping, and evaluation of call detail records. Assists in Cold Case investigations. Collected and analyzed criminal data and disseminates reports to assist in criminal investigations. Liaison with the Houston Regional Intelligence Service (Fusion Center) in the identification of local terrorism affiliations. Consults with Homeland Security officials for local threats and analysis. Identified and disseminated information about crime patterns and crime series so that the agency can intercede and stop them as soon as possible. Researched the modus operandi and characteristics of known offenders to determine who may have committed a crime or a crime series. Worked with surrounding agencies to thwart criminal episodes through the use of tactical analysis.

Q: What is your familiarity with the Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) Industry?
A: I have been using OSINT in various cases for about a decade.

Q: From your experience, who are the primary players within the OSINT Industry? Are there any new entrants to note?
A: SpokeNow, Cobwebs and Palantir are probably the primary ones. There is another one called Digital Stakeout that wasn't on your list.

Q: Would you be able to help educate our client on the value prop and/or competitive landscape surrounding OSINT solutions such as Dataminr, Babel Street, Cobwebs, Palantir, SkopeNow, etc? If so, which companies can you speak to?
A: I can certainly educate your client if they are wanting more information. I used Digital Stakeout for a short time, and I am familiar with SpokeNow and Cobwebs.

Tegus Client

Hi, thank you for taking this call today. To give you a quick context, we are trying to understand the market around open source intelligence. So I have a bunch of questions that we will go through. But if you can start a little bit with your background and your exposure to this space and the vendors you have worked with, that would be a great starting point.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Sure. I've been working as a crime analyst in the law enforcement field for about 12 years. And during that time, obviously, social media has kind of abstained to be a lot more prevalent. And as the time has gone on,

there's been more and more social media platforms coming into play.

I've worked with Geofeedia when it first started out, but they kind of went defunct. They got into some trouble with the ACLU. And then most of the time, to be honest, I worked doing it kind of manually because I work in public sector, there's a price point for these things. And so I did a lot of the open source stuff kind of manually, but I'm glad that there's a lot more platforms coming out there because the space is definitely for the taking for sure.

Tegus Client

And when you mentioned you worked as a crime analyst, was that at a police department or which firm were you working as crime analyst for?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I worked for a medium-sized Sheriff's department. And so there my job basically entailed helping the detectives with their cases. And by doing that, sometimes they would bring me like a social media handle or something, and then I would kind of go about doing my investigation through the various different social media platforms.

Tegus Client

Got it. And when you said medium size, like can you give me like how many officers, how many detectives, how many analysts?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes. There was probably, at the time, 500 sworn officers, not including the jail we had. And within that, probably 50 of those were detectives. And then I was actually the only crime analyst working there. Unfortunately, most departments have a much larger crime analyst base, but they didn't really have that there. I recently left to go to a new position last October, and I'm now working for a school district police department here in Fort Bend, where I'm starting the analyst capability there.

Tegus Client

Got it. So when you were at the police department, how often did your work involve using this OSINT products?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Well, I mean I had to go kind of do it manually, and it was pretty much for all our big cases like our robberies and homicides and some burglaries, but for the most part, we had a big whodunnit shortly before I left, and we basically threw everything we had at it at the wall. I was looking at Instagram post and looking at Facebook and Twitter and things like that.

Tegus Client

And so out o if there are 100 cases that the police department works on, how often or how many cases of the 100 would require you to do this OSINT work on the social media?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

That's a good question. Let me think for a second. Basically, I mean if there's 100 cases and they're spread out between all the different types of crimes, let's say 10% of this and 10% of that, I would think that pretty much every homicide, we looked at it and probably half of the robberies we looked at it.

Tegus Client

Got it. And that would be a good 20%, 25% of the overall cases you guys look at?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think so. Probably 20%, yes.

Tegus Client

Got it. And when you use these products, like can you talk about your process like before you start using these products, what information do you start with? And how do these products help you?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

So basically, when you start an investigation into a target, you have to kind of determine what you're trying to prove? What you're trying to find out about the individual? Are you just looking to see if they have these types of social media things so you can then ask for subpoena of those companies to get the legal documents from them.

Or are you trying to be covert and try to just monitor what they're doing. So it kind of depends on what we started with. But if I was to take, for example, there's ways where you can kind of just kind of watch, if you will, and kind of monitor it.

I would have to do that manually, but I know there's a lot more products out there now that kind of automates that. And that's kind of the exciting part of OSINT now is there's a lot of artificial intelligence going into it. So the lone analyst that I would be bogged down trying to find all these different accounts where it can be automated now.

Tegus Client

Got it. And have you used any automation products?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

We've had Dataminr, which is a smaller company at the school district police department, but there was a billing issue. So I only got to use it for a couple of months. I think they just are getting it worked out. And basically, what that did was it kind of monitored like different hashtags and geolocations and things like that.

Tegus Client

But did you use any automation product at the police department?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

No, nothing automated anymore. Basically, it was just doing it kind of manually, looking here and looking there and then having to go back and monitor it.

Tegus Client

Got it. So you mentioned in the questionnaire, you mentioned that you're familiar with Babel Street, Cobwebs and Voyager.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Sure. Because I've been an analyst for a while, I have friends that have gone on to work at some of those companies. And then I've taken a webinar, if you will, of both Cobwebs and Skopenow. Both of those I've taken the webinars for just to kind of get familiar with it and hoping to bring it back to my agency.

Tegus Client

And I guess that did not happen, right?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes, some of them are more expensive than others, but I did actually just get back from a conference in Chicago, a crime analyst conference where there's two new vendors out there that I thought I would bring up in this conversation.

One is called Fivecast and the other one is called OSINT Combine. Now I know of OSINT Combine as a teaching resource that I've used before, but I didn't know that they actually had a product. And so they basically have a product now.

And this Fivecast, I think I talked to them a little bit and they seem to be on the more affordable side of things for a smaller agency. It kind of depends on what kind of agency size, like the Cobwebs is for your larger agencies. I know they use a lot with the federal government. They got a lot of military, things like that.

Tegus Client

Got it. So my question is like do these products, do they really help you solve the problem? I mean there are many type products out there that are in search of a problem or they say they can solve a problem, I'm curious on if these products really help you, crime analyst, do the job and be efficient?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think so in the sense that what I had to do manually and try to keep up with everything is very time consuming. And so what they've been able to do with their artificial intelligence is to be able to scrape the data for me and then basically put it in a digestible form that's easier for me to just go in and analyze.

And so I mean, of course, I wish my agency would buy it because it would save me a whole ton of time. And basically, the best way to do is they scrape all the open source stuff and they're able to find if there's connections and closeness between certain individuals, say me and you, in there and what's our social nexus to each other. And they're able to do that by scraping like 20 different open source platforms.

Tegus Client

Got it. So question there, what kinds of data sources would be helpful to you when you do this kind of investigation? I hear about the Open Web, but also social media and dark web as well, which of those sources are important for your investigation?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

For me, most of my business has been in just regular criminal enterprises. So I've learned a lot. I've taken classes about the dark web, but I've never had to use it in an investigation. Most of my crims are young and dumb, hopefully. But basically, it depends on what kind of crimes you're using. One of the things that some of those platforms do well is they do the dark web without you having to kind of touch it because obviously, when you start talking about the dark web and the deep web, you're talking about people who are smart enough to find out who's looking at them.

And so having that go between keep you from being exposed is very important. Otherwise, you're going to

have to use a VPN and bounce around and a lot of agencies just don't have that kind of bandwidth, if you will, space to be within that.

Tegus Client

All the data sources, but let's, ignore the dark web. In terms of the social media versus the open web, are there certain sources that were more important and more promising to you? Meaning like you have Facebook, Twitter, all different social media and then different web pages about some particular person, right? Were you finding the information you are looking for more often from one particular source? Like most often, it was the Facebook data that helped you or most often it is the Twitter data or most often it is some other website data. Are there particular sources?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Because my clientele is usually on the younger side, it was more Instagram and actually some Snapchat. All their parents are on the Facebook now. So usually, if you're looking at older kind of criminals, whether it's white collar or something else, they're still hanging out on Facebook.

But usually, for the younger ones are on some of these newer ones, TikTok, for example. Twitter, I found some people on Twitter, but none of my cases really needed me to delve into it deeply. It kind of depends on what kind of crimes you're trying to solve.

Tegus Client

Got it. Understood. So on getting this data from this social media website like Instagram and Snapchat, where the solutions have to scrape the data, how do you guys think about it from a legal perspective? Is scraping of the data from these websites permissible and kosher? How do you guys think about that part?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

There's actually been obviously some legal challenges to some of this already. But for the most part, what is put up on the Internet that is open, like, for example, if you have a Facebook page and you have it open where other people can see it, well, that's kind of like it's like having your trash outside, anyone could go through it.

There's permissions on all of these social media platforms. And so it's up to the individuals to kind of lock themselves down. And some of the social media sites kind of default to open and some of them kind of default to block.

And so it kind of is up to the individual user to keep their stuff secure. And it's also on the other side, it's bad for our kids who tend to have their stuff all open and hanging out because it lets predators come in to play. But as far as the legality, I know there's been some court stuff about it. And I think it's all been held up as far as long as it's open source, kind of scraping the stuff that's already been kind of you left your door open.

Tegus Client

And what about the terms of the service itself, I have come across certain stuff where Facebook or somebody said that you cannot scrap the content that is on Facebook, even if it is an open profile. Have you come across that?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes. I mean I do know if you have a fake profile account, it goes against their privacy settings. So I'm not sure how the big guys are handling that. But I can tell you, at the local level, most police agencies, I shouldn't say most, my police agencies were okay with me having a fake account in order to advance a case as long as I was a civilian and didn't engage with anybody.

But there are some detectives that would engage with them as if they were trying to sell a stolen product on like Facebook marketplace, there's sometimes people that would go in and just try to kind of make that meet up so they can get to arrest them with the stolen merchandise. So I know for a lot of agencies that they're still doing it because they just want to get the bad guys off the street.

Tegus Client

And creating these fake accounts, would you create those to search the Facebook or would you create the accounts to engage with the target?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Personally, I've always done just to search because like on Facebook, if you go search it for me tonight, and then you do it again tomorrow more than likely you're going to come up as a friend because of their algorithms. So you want to have a fake account. So my personal stuff doesn't come up to suggest me as a friend to you. But I do know some of my detectives in my narcotic side, some of those kind of cases, they do get infiltrate and try to kind of get in there and talk to them.

Tegus Client

Yes. Just on this point. I know you have not used any of these automation tools. But if you use any of these Fivecast, OSINT Combine, one of these tools, and you then go into the software and search for a specific person, would it only show what's available at the Facebook on a publicly available data?

Or would it also include data that might be in the individual, base profile that is now closed. And before you defend them with fake account, you would not be able to see what content that is on that person's news feed or something like that. So when you use these software, do you get all the data or just the data that is publicly available, wide open?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Well, if I was to become your friend, then I can get all the data. But if I'm just kind of looking at you and just kind of depends on what your settings are as far as I can see. Now from what I understand, there's a whole bunch of manual tricks where you can kind of say your closed account.

There's algorithms that can extract from like say your account is open and mine is closed, someone can exploit that through basically an algorithm or a Python script or something and be able to get in there. And that's how some of these companies get used, that would otherwise be closed.

Tegus Client

Okay. Do you know if those companies also help you create any kind of fake account to execute that, to search online without being seen as who you are or not?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Some of the companies, the way they're set up from what I understand, and I think it might be Cobwebs, I don't even think you need a fake account with how they're doing the stuff. But I do know like other ones like Dataminr and then there's ones where you can kind of hook up your account, do it, your fake account to it. I think Skopenow also will help you scrape through like your contacts.

Tegus Client

Got it. But you don't know exactly for example how Cobwebs, they do it without fake account. It's their algorithm, their secret sauce what they thought, you don't really know how that is actually being done on their side.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I do know that they can exploit friend relationships through Facebook. And I do know that some of those things are possible, but I don't exactly know how they're doing it.

Tegus Client

Got it. So how often does the police department decide to collect the data from some of these automated solutions versus using a warrant to get that data from these platforms?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

So basically, where we start is you have to go in and find out if they have an account. And so that's where you've got to go in and see if you can find in Instagram. And if you find an Instagram page, and then there's a way with some open source, with not platform open source, but just regular where you can find out what the Instagram ID is.

And with that, you can go and serve process, but some of it you need right away in order to build that probable cause. And so what happens is you are kind of doing the first part, let's see if a suspect has an Instagram account. And let's see what they're talking about on there. And then while we're there, the detective will usually ask for our preservation first, and then they'll get a warrant so they can get everything.

For example, in the homicide case that I kind of got deep into, we kind of knew who it was, but we didn't have enough really, so we're figuring out these guys were talking, they were actually talking on Instagram. And so there's a phone feature and there's a texting feature on Instagram. And so we got a legal process on that, and we were able to get a legal return. But in the meanwhile, we are still monitoring to see if the guy posted anything new, if that makes sense.

Tegus Client

Yes. Makes sense. But you were doing all this manually, right? And you're saying that if you have an automated solution, it would have been easier.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Oh, yes, for sure. Like I mean, that's a lot of sweat equity going in, especially if you've got a big case because like, for example, you can use things like TweetDeck to monitor some Twitter accounts. But on Instagram, you have to go into each of these accounts and kind of just see what you can and pretend you're a user, and they might not even friends with you so you kind of try to friend a friend and all those kind of things. Where if you had someone else kind of scraping it automatically, I'd wake up in the morning and have a nice pretty report.

Tegus Client

Understood. Could Dataminr do this for you? Or is that solving a different use case?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Dataminr was more about like looking for different hashtags. But one of the features I did like about it was it gave you the ability to put a geofence around, like, for example, our school district, we had a little geofence around all of our schools.

So if someone is saying something bad about maybe shooting or guns or something on an open forum, the intent was it would be able to notify me. I never got a chance to work on it that long, but that was how it was set up is you could put a geofence around a certain location and kind of keep it scanning for you in the background.

Tegus Client

Got it. How would you differentiate or compare Dataminr versus Cobwebs.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

We're talking like Rolls-Royce versus maybe a Ford Fiat, I don't know. Basically, Cobwebs from all intents and purposes that I can see is they're pretty much one of the top of the lines. I think they have pretty much everything, but it comes within everything kind of price. So I think you can parse that out a little bit. So it's a little bit cheaper unless you've got like a big agency. Dataminr is fairly inexpensive and does a fairly inexpensive job.

Tegus Client

Got it. And how did you hear about Cobwebs in the first place?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

A friend of mine went to work for them.

Tegus Client

Got it. So what would you say is the adoption of these kinds of automated products across the United States? Like do you think many people need it and of the people who need it, how many have it, like any sense of that option?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Well, I can tell you, after going to this conference this past year, I've gone to the same conference every year, obviously, minus the 2020, but this is the first time that we had like four different vendors that were in the space, which is a big increase from the one there was last year.

So I think other people are figuring out that this is what the people want because the social media is here to stay. And so it's about giving like, for example, in a case like mine, where you're the one analyst or maybe there's two, but you've got some homicides, you've got some robberies, you've got to be monitoring these things or you have crimes against children, they used it a lot.

And then every single kind of crime pretty much can benefit from this. Your fraud guys can benefit because there's ways to look at blockchain now. The ICAC people can look at for the sex crime into the deep web stuff. So I think it's just going to get bigger in my personal opinion.

Tegus Client

But what do you think is the opportunity? I mean who needs this? Does like a big city police department need it or a much smaller police department need it? Or does everybody need it? How should I understand the market opportunity?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think you heard of Uvalde, right, the massacre that happened there?

Tegus Client

Yes, in Texas, yes.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes. That little, tiny agency had a version of something. I think they had Skopenow. So from a little tiny town to the big, big cities, they're looking at it. That was in the after-action report was they had one of them. I think it was Skopenow was the one that they had. But you're going to have to have it.

So it's a matter of ponying up the money. For example, just in the last five, six years, cellular data became a big deal. And so I wanted to get your call detail record so I know who you called and from what hour.

Well, what's happened is these kids aren't talking on the phone anymore. The texting, they're chatting other ways. And so a lot of times, the only person there calling is their parents. And so what's happened now is if you go to get a CDR record, you're really just seeing some of the data packages that are being passed from a different tower. And so that became a big thing. And now that's kind of on the waning side, not that it's going to go away, but the other one is on a steeper incline is this other stuff is how do we harness this open source stuff?

Tegus Client

So you're saying even the small departments like Uvalde, they need it and maybe they had it. Two questions there. Well, I guess the first question is, if they had it and the shooting still happened, does that question the value of these products?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

No, that's a great question. I don't know if in that particular case, the guy posted to her friend and did not post like publicly. So I don't know if it could have been stalked. But I would like to think that if I had it, I would have all my little searches set up so if I can't catch something, I would. But I don't know if they just had the product and had started using it, I don't know where they were. But I do know in their after-action report, they did have something, they did have a tool like that.

Tegus Client

Got it. Understood. And then let's say, they were able to pony up the money and they buy the products. Is it easy to use these products, can every small police department afford to have somebody to learn and use these products?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think some of them are easier than others. And that's from what I understand, some of them are a little bit more labor intensive on the user and some of them are more labor intensive on the product itself. So for example, I do know from Cobwebs, for example, I know that they basically made it where you have a search bar, and if you put it out to search something, it's going to go and just basically try to find it anywhere. Anywhere it can crawl, it's going to send little crawler out there to see if they can find it. Some of the other ones, like I said, you have to have like the right hashtag or the right geolocation to try to find it.

Tegus Client

Got it. You mentioned about Geofeedia earlier that the company kind of went down. What does that mean to companies like this Cobwebs and others, aren't they all doing similar things?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes. That's the interesting thing. I mean, you bring up a really good point. I think what happened was with Geofeedia, I think they were able to get into some things that were not open source and just let it go through anyway.

So I think they got their hands in the cookie jar and found with the Twitter Firehose at the time, I think it was called the API or whatever at the time, I think they were able to get some stuff that they probably shouldn't have done. But I do think it's interesting that the space is growing, but we do have that whole sense of privacy thing out there, too.

Tegus Client

What is the law enforcement departments' view on this privacy concern of this data? Like does it matter how the data is obtained? Or is stopping the crime or catching the crook a higher priority than how the data is obtained?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Well, I think the line is as far as on the legal side, most agencies aren't worried about the privacy part as far as catching crooks. They're not going to go and cheat to get it. So the whole Geofeedia, if they were cheating to get it, law enforcement is not going to be doing that.

And I know my guys, because what's going to happen is the same thing with like wiretapping and things like that. When you write your stuff, you try to write your warrants and everything because everything that you get produced, you don't want to give all your trade secrets away. So you'll say from Internet sources and trying not to name the products that you're using. And just because as soon as the bad guys find out, then they'll try to exploit that.

Tegus Client

If tomorrow or sometime in future, these products like Cobwebs lose the ability to source data from Facebook or Twitter or Instagram or all of those things, would those products have any value?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Some of them. For example, like Cobwebs, I do know some of them have like other features involved like association charts. So you can actually manually add things to it, some of the bigger ones. Some of the smaller ones know they would go away if they couldn't. But you think about it, some of these companies have been around for a while, and they're still here. And I think there's a new one every day.

Tegus Client

Got it. So but why do you say Cobwebs would still have value? Can you talk about that?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Because one of the features I do know that it has is it has a feature where you can put in, let's say, all of us on this call, and I can put in your information manually, and it would still build an association chart. And so it might not be able to scrape new data, but it has other features as far as like there's another product called Analyst's Notebook that lets you do association charts and timelines and things like that, from what I have, already has that in it. I mean they would lose a lot of value. Don't get me wrong, but it would still have a place.

Tegus Client

Got it. Understood. Back to one of the earlier questions I was asking from talking to your peers and stuff, I don't know how many police departments are there in the U.S., but somewhere in the thousands, how many of them actually use a product like this today versus wanting to get one? I'm trying to understand, is there a lot of greenfield net new people who need this? Or do many people already have something like this?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

No. I think that's still green. I do think some of the larger places, for example, some of the like fusion centers and things like that, probably already have something but I think as the space gets kind of filled out, I'm sure the big companies have gone for like some of the feds and some of the bigger agencies, but there's plenty of Middle America that if it's at a good price point, we need all the tools in our toolbox to be able to work these crimes.

Tegus Client

And how would you define the good price point?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I guess it really kind of depends on the size of the agency. But for me I don't even know how to put a price. I do know like for my Sheriff's office at the time, talking about $25,000 a year is too much. But I don't want to steer you in the wrong direction on that.

Tegus Client

Got it. When you say $25,000 was too much, should I understand that as that number of times you use this is limited and we have a person who can do this so we don't want to spend $25,000?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

No. It's because they want to buy new uniforms or they want to buy new vehicles. Like my agency and one of the reasons why I left is because they didn't value the crime analysts as far as the functions and everything they can do. And some of the other agencies out there probably would have snapped it up for $25,000.

But I can only talk about my experiences. Like there's an agency that's north of Houston that's the similar size, and I always try to compare it to them because they've got 10 analysts in a real-time crime center, whereas the place I left only has one, is just the way of thinking is more progressive in certain places.

Tegus Client

And what are they using?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I don't know what they're using actually. I do know that they're using that Clearview AI, which is a facial recognition software. I'm not sure what they're using as far as open source thing.

Tegus Client

Got it. What about Houston PD?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think Houston PD just went with Cobwebs.

Tegus Client

Got it. Are there many products like this? There are a few names. You mentioned Skopenow. You mentioned Cobwebs, Fivecast, OSINT Combine. Babel Street?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I've heard of it. I hadn't seen much of it before, but I've heard of that and a part of Palantir, I think it's called, but I haven't seen it.

Tegus Client

How do you compare these different products? Like how do they differentiate?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think it depends. Like for me, when I was at the conference, I was asking specifically about the ability to put geofences up because for a school district, I want to know what's going around each of my schools. And so that was important to me. And I don't think Fivecast could do it, but they were at a price point where for a small, small agency that might be, okay. So it kind of depends on what your needs are. If you're doing dark web stuff, I think Cobwebs and Skopenow do some good stuff on the dark web, but it kind of depends on what you're going to be using it for.

Tegus Client

Understood. I love your young and dumb criminals comment. What type of data are you getting out from the open source web. Is it stuff that gives you a probable cause to take more specific actions? Is it giving you actual evidence of a crime? Is it giving you related contacts, like who is whose friends, so who else should I be looking at?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes, for sure. You want to look like, for example, if you're looking at someone who has a gun, I can't tell you, after that big homicide, I was telling you about how many times we look very closely at the pictures to see if it would be the same make as the gun we were interested in. Or if someone has five friends, who else are they hanging out with because that might be the guy they sold the drugs to or something like that. So all those things come into play.

Tegus Client

Yes. So what is the legal standard around this? Suppose you took this information to a judge and say, "Hey, they have these three friends and now we need some sort of a warrant to go after these, like we think this guy is the key thing. And because he's connected to them on social media, it gives us probable cause to get a warrant," do those type of things happen?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

You would need a lot more than just being associated. But what it would do is it would help you, then we work up from their friend and like there's been times when we've gone through and we've done surveillance on this other guy's house to get that new probable cause.

Like whenever I get a police report, you always want to look at who the associates are because it might be that next level friend that have more information. And maybe that next level friend has something to give up because they don't want to get in trouble. They might give you leverage.

Tegus Client

Right. So overall, you would say this information generally tends to prove quite helpful in your investigation, whether actual proof or giving you clues on where to look, it tends to be quite helpful?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes, I would say so. I think what it helps with is it kind of furnishes your investigation and it helps you tie the strings together, to kind of fit it all together, you can kind of see where those things can be connected.

And then after that, after you kind of look at it there, that's when you can go and get a legal process because what's going to happen is if they're on to you, they're going to try to shut things down and they can delete accounts and things like that. So knowing it in part, you can't just wait to get returns from legal process because they might post more things or they might try to be deleting things.

Tegus Client

And once you get that legal warrant, then would you put that into Cobwebs and let Cobwebs get the data? Or how does that part work?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

That's a good question. When we get the data back, for example, we've gotten stuff back from Instagram or Snapchat. There was a product that we use called GeoTime, the one I was talking to you about the CDR warrants and things like that, they had an extra feature in their program that would help kind of interpret what the legal process gave you.

And so I'm assuming I don't know for a fact, but I'm assuming Cobwebs would have something similar because I know they're a lot more robust than some of the others. But what happens is, for example, let's say, you get a return from Snapchat, well, the hard thing about Snapchat is it gives you two Excel files and you're trying to read conversations, and it's not like reading a text message from me and you. It's like just lines of data. So when you throw it into GeoTime, GeoTime was able to put it into that conversation mode. And so hopefully, and I don't know for a fact, but hopefully, some of those other ones are doing the same thing.

Tegus Client

Understood. I was trying to understand like for these legal processes, how does Cobwebs help? And in addition to the data that Cobwebs scraps from the website, would there be information that the PD would independently gather and upload into Cobwebs so that it can collect all this information together. Does that happen?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes. I think with some of the bigger ones, you can do that. With some of the smaller ones like Dataminr, you can't add anything to it. But I think some of the bigger ones, and I think with Skopenow, I think with Cobwebs, you can add things to it.

Tegus Client

And how often, like is that like limited information that you would add? Or is there a lot of information that you would upload into the tool to combine with the external information that Cobwebs get?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I mean I would add a lot. If I had it and could do it, because the hardest thing about being an analyst is you get 20 pounds of data in front of you and you're trying to analyze it all. So if I had a place where I can just centralize it, and I'm pretty sure that both Skopenow and Cobwebs can do that, but I'm not 100%.

Tegus Client

Got it. And what is the source of that data that when you said you got this 20 pounds of data, like what is the source of that data?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Well, for example, you get like those CDR warrants, like even though I know they're only talking to a mom or whatever, that's still data that you still collect because it still has value. You also get external reports from like from another agency where you can add more information. You also get like, for example, maybe school records or a criminal history that you would want to add. And then also, like you said, the Facebook and stuff, so you can build out the associates.

Tegus Client

Got it. When you were at the PD, were you concerned about kind of the ACLU kind of getting on any of your cases or any of your methodologies and causing trouble?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I read enough of the news to kind of have an understanding of that. But when you're in it, I mean I think we're not trying to do anything dirty, and most of the time, we're not going after someone that hasn't done anything. We're going after someone who we believe is a suspect in a crime. And so if they're leaving their trash out in the front yard, that's already been proven in court that you can go after it, so.

Tegus Client

Understood. What other software did you use as a crime analyst?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Like I said, that GeoTime was one of them, and that's the one that does the CDR records. There is a product called Esri for mapping. And then there's some other, we use like things like TLO or Accurint, ones for public data. They have public data that you can have a contract with them. And basically, if I put someone's name in there, it will show me what car they drive, what houses they own, things like that. So that's a big help.

Tegus Client

How much does that cost you on an annual basis, the TLO?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

It varies between companies. There's a couple of companies, but I think ours was about like $3,000 a year, maybe.

Tegus Client

Okay. It's very less expensive compared to this, $25,000.

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

Yes, yes.

Tegus Client

Okay. Anything else?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I'm trying to think. Well, LexisNexis has a whole suite, and I did use part of their suite. They have a public record's part and they also have a crime analysis part that we use.

Tegus Client

Got it. And how much did you guys pay LexisNexis on an annual basis?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

That was more expensive. I don't want to give you a wrong number. Then I was thinking about another one. There's a company called LeadsOnline. I know that one was about 10 to 15, I think. They do pawn shop data. So if I go and pawn something, by law, the pawn companies have to report it. And so there's good data in that. And so we had an enterprise license for that.

Tegus Client

Got it. That's very helpful. And if you have these LexisNexis and TransUnion all this stuff, would you still need a Cobwebs to surface the data? Or do the other things cover majority of the data you need?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

They don't cover the social media part of it. That's the whole point is of all the social media and the open source stuff, all the other stuff is basically just factual information. Does this person have a car? Does this person have a house? But it doesn't really tell you are they posting on Reddit or are they posting on Instagram?

Tegus Client

Got it. Understood. And once you start using a product, how easy would it be to shift to another product? Let's say, you're using Cobwebs. How easy would it be to shift to Skopenow?

Intelligence Operator at Fort Bend ISD

I think if you have a person, usually your crime analysts or whoever is kind of in that position to be looking, they're pretty adapt to computer programming. They might not know how to write computer programs, but they know how to manipulate them. And so I don't think it'll be a big issue as far as changing products. I know from time to time, my agency had a change. And especially if you're going to something nicer, you never mind it. If you are downgrading, then you're complained.

Tegus Client

Right. This is very helpful. Thank you very much for your time. Have a great rest of your day.