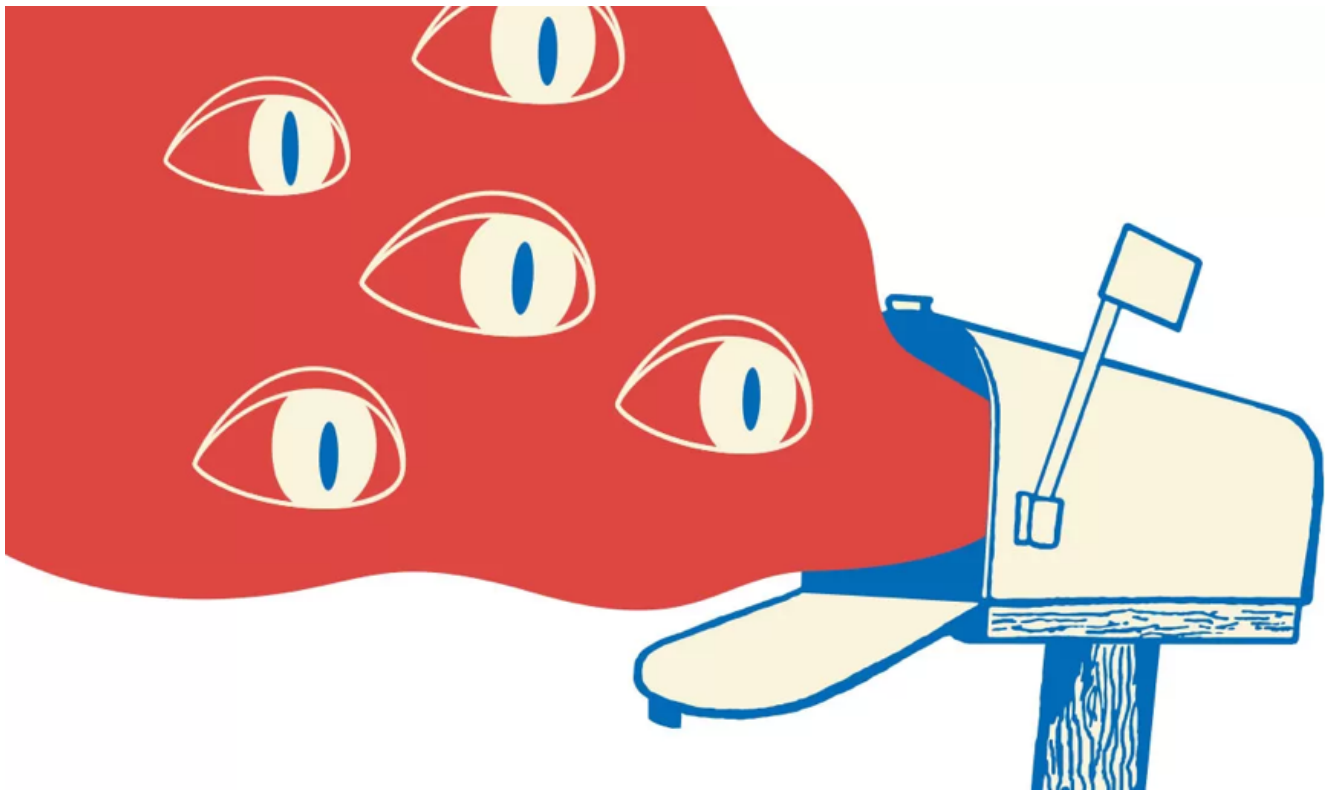


The USPS' Semi-Secret Internet Surveillance Apparatus

The agency best known for delivering mail has a side hustle in online snooping.

[Elizabeth Nolan Brown](#) From the [August/September-2021 issue](#)



(Illustration: Joanna Andreasson, Source images: CSA-Archive; Ponomariova_Maria/iStock)

Pop quiz: Which federal agency runs a social media surveillance unit known as the Internet Covert Operations Program (iCOP)?

If you guessed the FBI, the CIA, or the Department of Homeland Security—sorry. This one belongs to the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). And through it,

postal inspectors have been monitoring social media platforms about U.S. protests, using tools that include a facial recognition database.

That the agency best known for delivering mail has a side hustle in online snooping took a lot of people by surprise when it was reported in April by *Yahoo! News*, which obtained a March 16 "Situational Awareness Bulletin" about iCOP operations. The bulletin mentioned that U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPIS) agents monitoring Facebook, Parler, Twitter, and Telegram had noticed "significant activity regarding planned protests occurring internationally and domestically" as part of a rally for freedom and democracy.

"The iCOP program protects the Postal Service and the public by facilitating the identification, disruption, and dismantling of individuals and organizations that use the mail or USPS online tools to facilitate black market Internet trade or other illegal activities," the USPIS 2019 annual report explains. "Analysts in iCOP utilize USPS systems and tools to provide open source intelligence and cryptocurrency blockchain analysis in support of all Inspection Service investigations." Cases cover "narcotics, mail theft, revenue fraud, homicide, dangerous mail, and more."

As part of iCOP, USPIS agents "assume fake identities online, use sophisticated intelligence tools and employ facial recognition software," *Yahoo!*'s Jana Winter reported this year. These tools include Clearview AI's facial recognition database, which contains more than 3 billion images scraped from social media and other public websites, and Zignal Labs' real-time keyword search software.

Information from iCOP analysts was distributed through Homeland Security fusion centers to a wide array of law enforcement units and government authorities, as well as stored for future access. "The retention and

dissemination of these reports could allow federal agencies to receive information they are not allowed by statute to collect themselves," Winter suggested.

Although the USPS has disclosed the program's existence in its annual reporting, this spring's revelations caused an uproar from some congressional Republicans, who expressed concern about iCOP's professed monitoring of "right-wing leaning Parler and Telegram accounts." The program "raises serious questions about the federal government's ongoing surveillance of, and encroachment upon, Americans' private lives and discourse," wrote 30 GOP members of Congress in an April 22 letter to Postmaster General Louis DeJoy.

"The type of amorphous, broad mandate under which iCOP is allegedly operating is particularly troubling because it is unclear why the USPS, of all government agencies and the only one devoted to the delivery of Americans' mail, is taking on the role of intelligence collection," the letter continued. "The United States is not lacking in its availability of intelligence agencies, and it should be left to those professionals to engage in this sort of behavior, if it is even necessary at all."

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) has introduced a bill—co-sponsored by nine Republicans—to prohibit USPS funds from being used for the iCOP program.

On April 28, Chief Postal Inspector Gary R. Barksdale testified about the program before members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. He said it launched in 2017 to help detect mailed opioids and firearms but had morphed in May or June 2020 to monitoring the internet for information about potential threats to USPS leaders, staff, or facilities. "No audits of iCOP have occurred to date, but USPS is looking at governance issues," said

a committee press release about the briefing.

Not everyone was satisfied by the answers Barksdale offered. He "was unprepared to answer our questions to the point of incompetence," Rep. Nancy Mace (R–S.C.) wrote in the *Washington Examiner* after the briefing. "Barksdale couldn't tell us...how much taxpayers were paying to run it, or even what legal authority the post office had to spy on the public's social media activities."