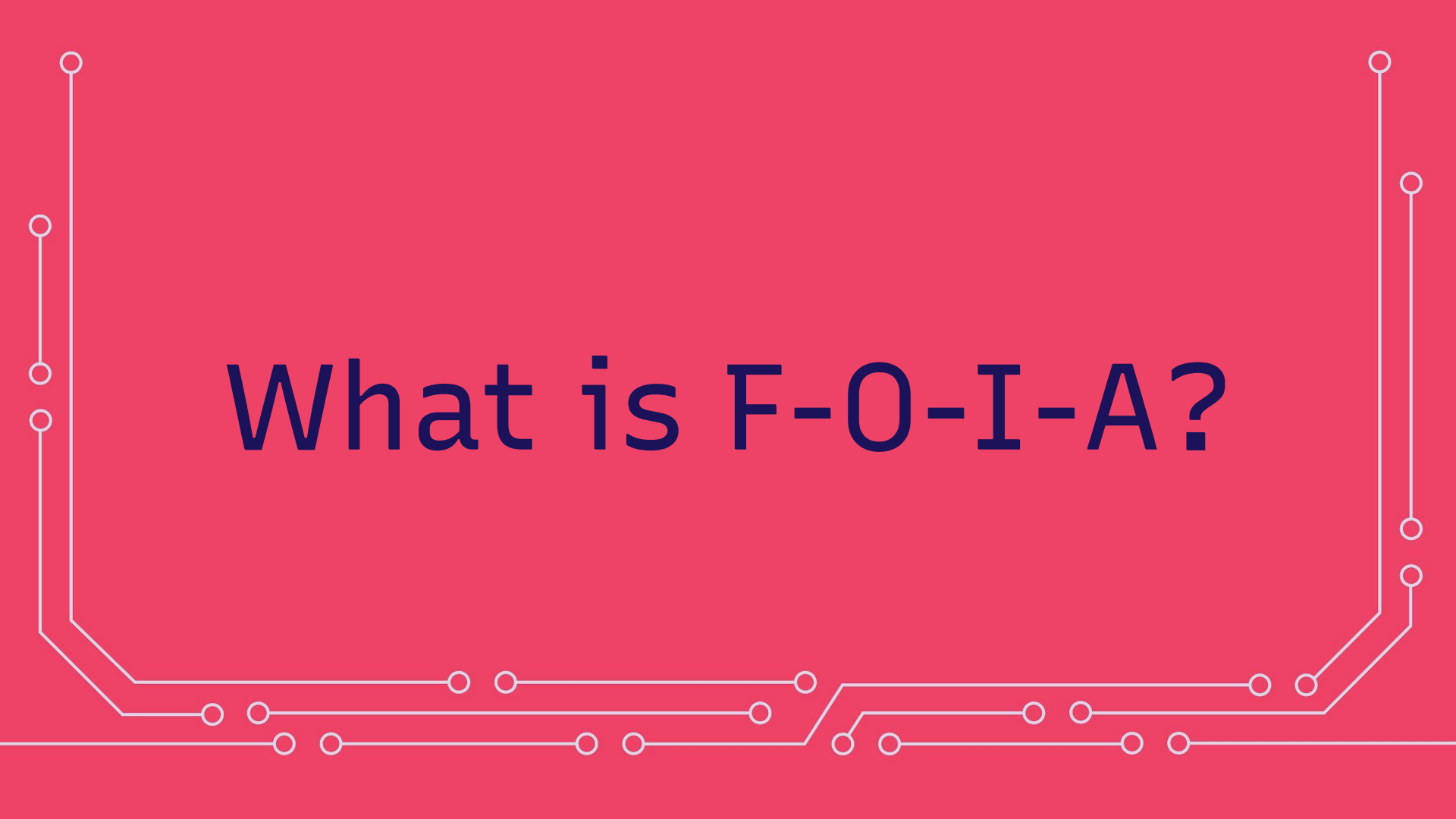


A decorative graphic consisting of white lines and small circles on a pink background, resembling a circuit board or a stylized frame. The lines are arranged in a U-shape, with horizontal segments at the bottom and vertical segments on the left and right sides. Small circles are placed at various points along these lines, including at the corners and at intervals along the horizontal segments.

What is F-O-I-A?

What we will cover in this lecture

- Overview of public records laws
- How to avoid FOIA
- If you go the FOIA route
 - What to ask for
 - Walkthrough: Social sentinel



GIMME



Public Records: a powerful
tool to get information



• But there are exemptions

Many countries have Freedom of Information Laws

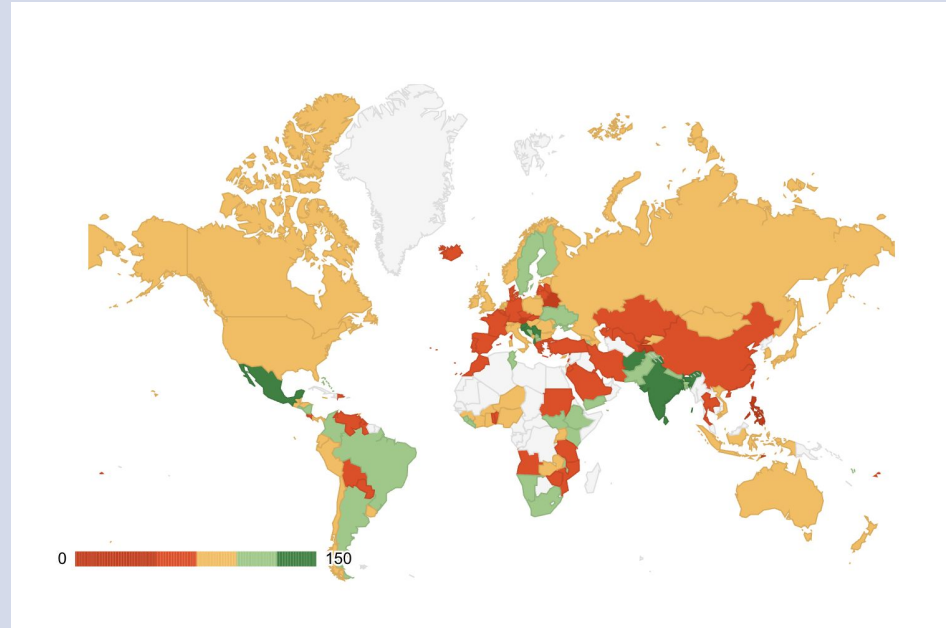
You can look yours up here:

<https://www.freedominfo.org/>

Global Right to Information
Rating is a score given to
countries on

*The RTI Rating assesses the
formal legal framework for the
right to information and does not
take into account
implementation.*

Source: [RTI Rating](#) | [Scoring
methodology](#)



U.S. FOIA

Since 1967, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) has provided the public the right to request access to records from any federal agency. It is often described as the law that keeps citizens in the know about their government. Federal agencies are required to disclose any information requested under the FOIA unless it falls under one of nine exemptions which protect interests such as personal privacy, national security, and law enforcement.

Source: <https://www.foia.gov/about.html>

The pros and cons of FOIA



Pros and cons of FOIA and public records requests

Pros

- Deep insights into government
- Information no one else has

Pros and cons of FOIA and public records requests

Cons

- Can take a lot of tedious maintenance
- Can take a long time
- Can be costly
- You may receive a lot of information that leads nowhere

FOUR YEARS AND COUNTING

Fiquem Sabendo's journey to get the federal government to publish public data on retirement payments and pensions for civil servants and the military



Fiquem Sabendo, a journalism agency specializing in the Freedom of Information Act in Brazil, had to wait five years for complete records.

Things you can try before filing public records requests

Alternatives to public records requests – government agency

- Talk to PR folks
 - Be consistent over time and kind
- Talk to FOI officer to get a better understanding of what the organization may have released before (on their website or elsewhere)

BuzzFeed News



War In Ukraine Queen Elizabeth Jean-Luc Brunel Tyler S

We Got Government Data On 20 Years Of Workplace Sexual Harassment Claims. These Charts Break It Down.

How prevalent is sexual harassment at your job? We crunched a ton of information — and it's still just the tip of the iceberg.

By Lam Thuy Vo

Posted on December 5, 2017, at 12:16 p.m. ET



BuzzFeed News received a trove of data on every sexual harassment claim filed between fiscal years 1995 and 2016 with the [US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#), a federal agency that enforces laws meant to protect workers from discrimination.

Data for this [story](#) was not received via FOIA! Just asked nicely (again and again)

Things you can try before filing public records requests

Alternatives to public records requests – other folks

- Search for records on muckrock.com, asktheeu.org or other sites where folks file requests
- Ask academics who study your subject (lots of the data may not have been published)
- Speak to advocacy groups (example: [Atlas of Surveillance from the EFF](https://atlas.eff.org))
- Look for projects from other orgs on Github



A database of surveillance technologies deployed by law enforcement in communities across the United States.

• But if you must go
the FOIA route...



What to ask for



Commonly requested documents

- Complaints, misconduct files, disciplinary records
- Agendas, calendars or other planning documents
- Internal investigations, inspection reports, misconduct files



AI-related requests

- Training manuals for data scientists
- Caseworker handbooks for people learning a new technology
- Training data documentation (like dictionaries)
- Contracts, sales pitch presentations, licenses from vendors/tech companies
- Communications like emails, text messages or DMs between government entities and company representatives

Data requests

- Databases and spreadsheets:
 - Based on applications and forms filled out by folks (e.g. asylum applications, etc.)
 - Used by departments for bureaucratic reasons (court cases, criminal databases, etc.)
 - Used by departments in secret (police gang databases, risk assessment, no-fly lists, etc.)
- Non-data things you can turn into data
 - Communications databases (outlook export files, Twitter DMs, etc.)

How to ask for documents

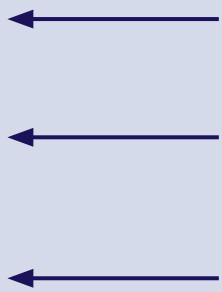


Key things to find out before you file

FOIA and other public records requests actually take a lot of upfront research if you want to be effective and cut out the time it takes folks to get back to you. It's worthwhile finding out the following:

- Who owns the data
 - Is the agency you're asking actually in charge of the data?
 - Are multiple agencies in charge of the same data? If so could you request it from all parties?
- What does the data look like?
 - What columns should it have?
- What does the data mean?
 - Ask for a data layout!
- Know the law!

Exercise: Asylum applications data

- Who owns the data
 - Is the agency you're asking actually in charge of the data?
 - What does the data look like?
 - What columns should it have?
 - Can we have it as a CSV?
 - What does the data mean?
 - Ask for a data layout!
 - Know the law!
- 
- USCIS
- Let's look at asylum application data
- Ask for a data layout!

Every year people come to the United States seeking protection because they have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution due to:

- *Race*
- *Religion*
- *Nationality*
- *Membership in a particular social group*
- *Political opinion*

If you are eligible for asylum you may be permitted to remain in the United States. To apply for asylum, file a Form I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal, within one year of your arrival to the United States. There is no fee to apply for asylum.

[...]

If you have an asylum application pending with us, you can check your case status online. All you need is the receipt number that we mailed you after you filed your application. Start here: uscis.gov/casestatus.

USCIS <https://www.uscis.gov/i-589>

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

Menu

Search our Site

Forms

I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal

ALERT: Expeditious Asylum Adjudication for Certain Afghans

[See more](#)

ALERT: USCIS Stops Applying Certain EAD Provisions for Asylum Applicants

[See more](#)

I-589, Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal

START HERE - Type or print in black ink. See the instructions for information about eligibility and how to complete and file this application. There is no filing fee for this application.

NOTE: ☐ Check this box if you also want to apply for withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture.

Part A.I. Information About You

1. Alien Registration Number(s) (A-Number) (if any)		2. U.S. Social Security Number (if any)		3. USCIS Online Account Number (if any)	
4. Complete Last Name		5. First Name		6. Middle Name	
7. What other names have you used (include maiden name and aliases)?					
8. Residence in the U.S. (where you physically reside)					
Street Number and Name				Apt. Number	
City	State	Zip Code	Telephone Number ()		
9. Mailing Address in the U.S. (if different than the address in Item Number 8)					
In Care Of (if applicable):				Telephone Number ()	
Street Number and Name				Apt. Number	
City	State	Zip Code			
10. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female		11. Marital Status: ☐ Single ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed			
12. Date of Birth (mm/dd/yyyy)		13. City and Country of Birth			

An asylum applications form. The fields in this form can help you write up a FOIA request

The records sought are:

1. A copy of the database created from completed USCIS Forms I-589 applications (https://www.uscis.gov/system/files_force/files/form/i-589.pdf) received by USCIS between January 1, 2008 through the date of search, which, at minimum, should include the following columns:
 - a. City for the U.S. residence of the applicant
 - b. State for the U.S. residence of the applicant
 - c. Zip code for the U.S. residence of the applicant
 - d. Gender of the applicant
 - e. Marital status of the applicant

[... This list went on for dozens of more columns]

2. Please also include a record layout for the data and a data dictionary for any codes used in the database

This is important because there may be acronyms and shorthands that make sense to bureaucrats but not to you

Full FOIA request:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EGUTegmI2CmFdx4HBbR3CRiqXkg2TmAUM2Z_CUMVKWE/edit

Key things to do after you filed

Getting your public records:

- Keep track of your request
 - You can use a tracker spreadsheet
- Nudge people
 - Do it again and again!
- Get to know your FOI officer! Be kind and be ready to explain what you need from folks
- Sue! (If you absolutely have to!)

Example: BuzzFeed News story

Your Dumb Tweets Are Getting Flagged To People Trying To Stop School Shootings

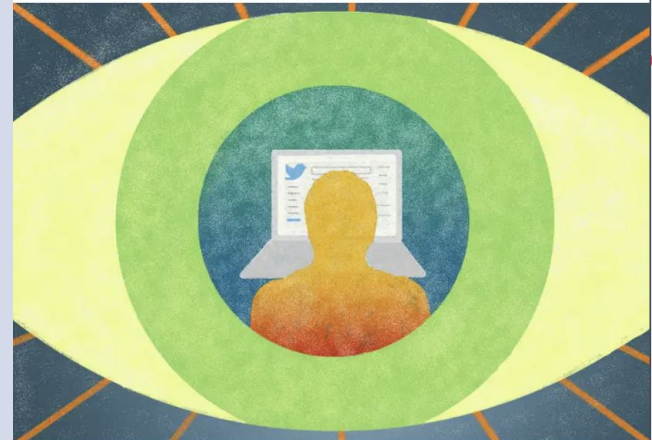
For an article titled Your Dumb Tweets Are Getting Flagged To People Trying To Stop School Shootings my colleague Peter Aldhous and Lam Thuy Vo investigated a company that schools are using to scan social media for threats. We filed more than 40 public records requests with schools that used the software to better understand what kind of information it was flagging and what wording it may be using.

Your Dumb Tweets Are Getting Flagged To People Trying To Stop School Shootings

Schools are using a dragnet to scan social media for threats. They're finding a lot of jokes on Twitter.

By Lam Thuy Vo and Peter Aldhous

Posted on October 31, 2019, at 4:21 p.m. ET

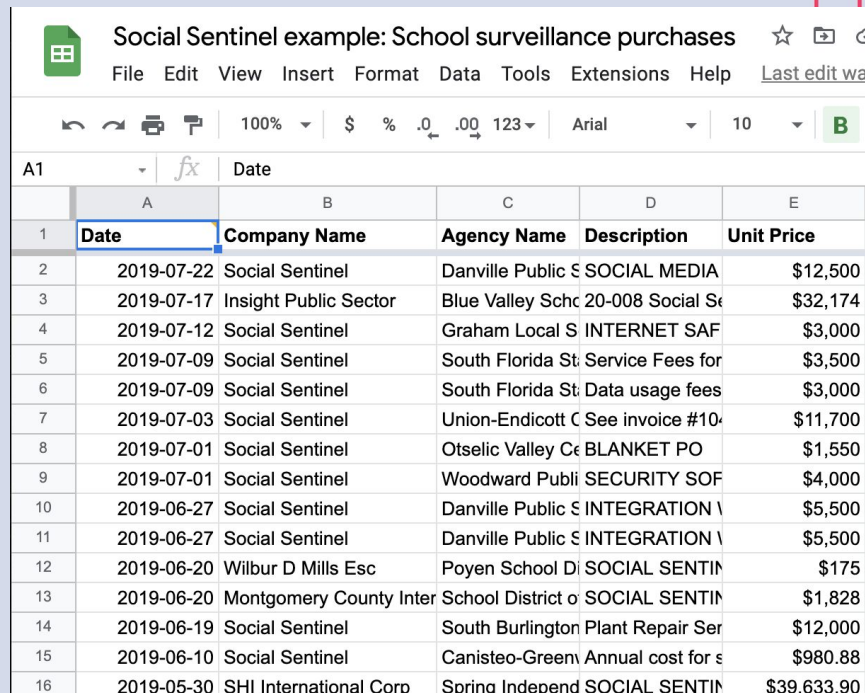


Example: BuzzFeed News story

Public Records Requests filed with 40 different school districts.

Here's how the reporters determined them:

- Find public data on who purchased the software
- Went through the website of each school/school district
- Filed FOI requests and followed up with each one on a weekly basis



Social Sentinel example: School surveillance purchases

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Date	Company Name	Agency Name	Description	Unit Price
2	2019-07-22	Social Sentinel	Danville Public S	SOCIAL MEDIA	\$12,500
3	2019-07-17	Insight Public Sector	Blue Valley Schc	20-008 Social Se	\$32,174
4	2019-07-12	Social Sentinel	Graham Local S	INTERNET SAF	\$3,000
5	2019-07-09	Social Sentinel	South Florida St	Service Fees for	\$3,500
6	2019-07-09	Social Sentinel	South Florida St	Data usage fees	\$3,000
7	2019-07-03	Social Sentinel	Union-Endicott C	See invoice #10	\$11,700
8	2019-07-01	Social Sentinel	Otselic Valley Ce	BLANKET PO	\$1,550
9	2019-07-01	Social Sentinel	Woodward Public	SECURITY SOF	\$4,000
10	2019-06-27	Social Sentinel	Danville Public S	INTEGRATION V	\$5,500
11	2019-06-27	Social Sentinel	Danville Public S	INTEGRATION V	\$5,500
12	2019-06-20	Wilbur D Mills Esc	Poyen School Di	SOCIAL SENTIN	\$175
13	2019-06-20	Montgomery County Inter	School District o	SOCIAL SENTIN	\$1,828
14	2019-06-19	Social Sentinel	South Burlington Plant Repair Ser		\$12,000
15	2019-06-10	Social Sentinel	Canisteo-Greenv	Annual cost for s	\$980.88
16	2019-05-30	SHI International Corp	Spring Independ	SOCIAL SENTIN	\$39,633.90

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XkXvkOqGVKjureT1eFwjigb-YCCIJ3kWOTxkdq-dbgw/edit?usp=sharing>

Example: BuzzFeed News story

Things the reporters asked for:

- All alerts sent by Social Sentinel to school safety officials as **.msg** or **.eml** files exported from the school's email client.
 - The reporters also attached examples obtained through a public records request from another Social Sentinel client.
 - They asked officers to provide the information for download or on CD-ROM or other digital storage medium.
- The reporters also asked for contracts and/or memorandums of agreement/understanding (MOA/MOUs) entered into between the school district and Social Sentinel.

Sept 25, 2019

Lam Thuy Vo,
BuzzFeed News
347 977 3784
lam.vo@buzzfeed.com

Arlington Public Schools
869 Massachusetts Avenue
Arlington, MA 02476

Attention: Kathleen Bodie

Under the Massachusetts Public Records Act § 66-10 et seq., on behalf of BuzzFeed, I request copies of the following records relating to the purchase and use of [Social Sentinel](#) software by the Arlington Public Schools:

- All alerts sent by Social Sentinel to school safety officials. Please provide these as **.msg** or **.eml** files exported from your email client, like the attached examples obtained through a public records request from another Social Sentinel client. Please provide for download or on CD-ROM or other digital storage medium.
- Contracts and/or memorandums of agreement/understanding (MOA/MOUs) entered into between the | Arlington Public Schools and Social Sentinel.

If there are any fees for searching or copying these records, please inform me before fulfilling my request. However, I would also like to request a waiver of all fees in that the disclosure of the requested information is in the public interest and will contribute significantly to the public's understanding of the operations or activities of the school district in ensuring a safe school environment for students. I am a reporter with BuzzFeed News. This information is not being sought for commercial purposes.

The Massachusetts Public Records Act requires a response to this request within 10 days. If access to the records I am requesting will take longer than this amount of time, please contact me with information about when I might expect copies or the ability to inspect the requested records.

If you deny any or all of this request, please cite each specific exemption you feel justifies the refusal to release the information and notify me of the appeal procedures available to me under the law.

Sincerely, Lam Thuy Vo

Example: BuzzFeed News story

EML
format:

```
1  MIME-Version: 1.0
2  Date: Mon, 01 Jan 2018 11:05:49 +0000
3  Message-ID: <f96ee9df7123d6c8139e6a4ead5866ed@swift.generated>
4  Content-Type: multipart/alternative;
5    boundary="-----030204070304050707060802"
6  X-Priority: Normal
7  Delivered-To: kbodie@arlington.k12.ma.us
8  Received: by 10.103.42.2 with SMTP id q2csp12782304vsq;
9    Mon, 1 Jan 2018 03:06:20 -0800 (PST)
10 Received: from mail180-15.suw31.mandrillapp.com (mail180-
11   * 15.suw31.mandrillapp.com. [198.2.180.15])
12   * by mx.google.com with ESMTPS id
13   * p17si3309553qkh.257.2018.01.01.03.06.20
14   * for
15   * <kbodie@arlington.k12.ma.us>
16   * (version=TLS1_2 cipher=ECDHE-RSA-AES128-GCM-
17   * SHA256 bits=128/128);
18   * Mon, 01 Jan 2018 03:06:20 -0800 (PST)
19 Received: from pmta03.mandrill.prod.suw01.rsglab.com (127.0.0.1) by mail180-
20   * 15.suw31.mandrillapp.com id h98b2o22sc0h for <kbodie@arlington.k12.ma.us>;
21   * Mon, 1 Jan 2018 11:06:20 +0000 (envelope-from <bounce-md_10656299.5a4a160d.v1-
22   * a127c86b6c4f42ec961bb06c03b2790f@mandrillapp.com>)
23 Received: from [34.206.142.103] by mandrillapp.com id
24   * a127c86b6c4f42ec961bb06c03b2790f;
25   * Mon, 01 Jan 2018 11:05:49 +0000
26 X-Google-Smtp-Source: ACJfBous0E0aI/K7wRmmwyMQhOKzuUWkEqv1Zh9r+/wrtgtLLEwV6vD9YZ/
27   * 8AHjaIY9ZPr19xXzo8
28 X-Received: by 10.55.192.154 with SMTP id v26mr42190508qkv.252.1514804780771;
29   * Mon, 01 Jan 2018 03:06:20 -0800 (PST)
30 ARC-Seal: i=1; a="rsa-sha256"; t=1514804780; cv=none;
```



Alert Notification PDF

Please click the button below to view this PDF.

[View PDF](#)

Example: BuzzFeed News story

Extracted
data:

date	tweet_text
Thu Aug 1st @ 7:31am	@CedReec_DE @Tamara.Mariaa @DaChosenl_Dylan roof also complied with police when they found him (Even though personally I thought they should've put a toilet in roof)
Thu Aug 1st @ 4:28am	Hope I didn't just kill him..." it's never just been about one race ❤️
Thu Aug 1st @ 2:10am	nobody: when a minor inconvenience hits and causes me to spiral into a mental breakdown that I later on realize was dramatic: https://7A.co/Ps3sHOJJZV
Wed Jul 31st @ 6:09am	@WWE @VAVERomanRegns Attempted murder
Tue Jul 30th @ 8:13pm	FUU WHO IS ABOUT TO BE RAPED (NOT LITERALLY) BY THE AKATSUKI CALLED KAKUZU HER FUCKING SENPAI BITCH WTF HE TRYNA TAKE YOUR TAH&D BEAST ANO KILL YOU! FUCKING DUMBASS BITCH!
Tue Jul 30th @ 4:04pm	@challengegabe01 @melleah06 I know! He is coming to Fezco and he's gonna have to kill him! Ay! I hope Rue doesn't go back to drugs.
Tue Jul 30th @ 11:42am	I'm tired of school, shoot me pls
Tue Jul 30th @ 9:19am	\$_SJPeace_ People need to just start shooting these criminal ass police. Enough is enough
Mon Jul 29th @ 8:20pm	@LenaScringer it's not about guns, its' about people. Could have been a car/truck mowing folks down... Could have been a machete
Mon Jul 29th @ 6:31pm	nick if you dont fall in love with jess again im gonna kill you
Mon Jul 29th @ 5:34pm	I've kept quiet about everything regarding Adam. I left his band to focus on myself more. At one point, I didn't hit him up for 2 weeks That was my fault. At the same time, 2 of my friends were threatening to kill themselves

Example: BuzzFeed News story

Extracted
data:

handle	count	link	open_dms?	contacted?	interviewed?
@		5 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	yes
@		2 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		2 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		2 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	yes
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	yes: https://docs.g
@		1 https://twitter.com/	no		
@		1 https://twitter.com/	yes	yes	

Example: BuzzFeed News story

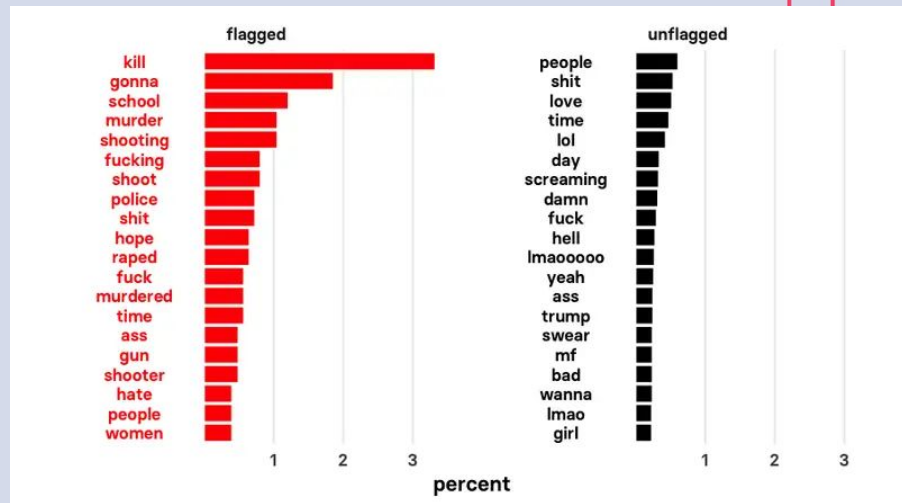
Final story: On July 29, a 13-year-old who used to tweet as @valkyries_queen was watching *New Girl* on Netflix when the plot really got to her.

“nick if you dont fall in love with jess again im gonna kill you,” she posted from her pseudonymous account, named after the character Valkyrie, portrayed by her crush, Tessa Thompson, in the Marvel movies.

@valkyries_queen had about 220 followers. Her tweet, sent from where she lives in Washington state, didn’t get any replies, any retweets, any attention, really – except from a school district more than 2,000 miles away, in Texas.

The tweet triggered the algorithms powering an automated monitoring system called Social Sentinel, which scans social media for language or images suggesting a potential threat to school safety. The system determines which schools the users may be associated with and notes locations they list in their profiles.

Social Sentinel sent @valkyries_queen’s tweet to at least five officials in the Katy Independent School District, just outside the Houston metropolitan area. @valkyries_queen had moved away from Katy, Texas, where she used to go to school, some three months previously but still followed her school’s Twitter account.



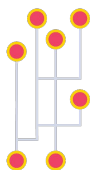
BuzzFeed News found that posts that were flagged by Social Sentinel were much more likely to contain words including “kill,” “school,” “murder,” and “shooting” than posts from the same users that didn’t trigger an alert.

Resources

- <https://www.freedominfo.org/resources/>



AI Spotlight Series



**The AI
Accountability
Network**



Pulitzer Center