

**Tracked: How Colleges Used AI to Monitor Student Protests [Revised Questions]**

The pitch was attractive and simple.

For a few thousand dollars a year, Social Sentinel offered schools across the country sophisticated technology to scan social media posts from students at risk of harming themselves or others. Used correctly, the tool could help save lives, the company said.

For some colleges that bought the service, it also served a different purpose — allowing campus police to surveil student protests.

During demonstrations over a Confederate statue at UNC-Chapel Hill, a Social Sentinel employee entered keywords into the company's monitoring tool to find posts related to the protests. At Kennesaw State University in Georgia five years ago, authorities used the service to track protesters at a town hall with a U.S. senator, records show. And at North Carolina A&T, a campus official told a Social Sentinel employee to enter keywords to find posts related to a cheerleader's allegation that the school mishandled her rape complaint.

An investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism reveals for the first time that as more students have embraced social media as a digital town square to express opinions and organize demonstrations, many college police departments have been using taxpayer dollars to pay for Social Sentinel's services to monitor what they say. At least 37 colleges, including four in North Texas, collectively educating hundreds of thousands of students, have used Social Sentinel since 2015.

1. What is the main purpose of Social Sentinel as described in the text?

- scan social media posts for risks of harm  
↓  
student

2. Provide examples from the text of how colleges have used Social Sentinel for purposes other than monitoring students at risk.

- surveilling protest posts, monitoring posts about complaints, tracking protestors

3. How have college police departments been utilizing Social Sentinel, according to the investigation mentioned in the text?

- Using taxpayer dollars to pay for social sentinel to monitor student speech.

The true number of colleges that used the tool could be far higher. In an email to a UT Dallas police lieutenant, the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, said it was used by "hundreds of colleges and universities in 36 states." Margolis declined to comment on this story.

The News examined thousands of pages of emails, contracts and marketing material from colleges around the country, and spoke to school officials, campus police, activists and experts. The investigation shows that, despite publicly saying its service was not a surveillance tool, Social Sentinel representatives promoted the tool to universities for "mitigating" and "forestalling" protests. The documents also show the company has been moving in a new and potentially more invasive direction — allowing schools to monitor student emails on university accounts.

For colleges struggling to respond to high-profile school shootings and a worsening campus mental health crisis, Social Sentinel's low-cost tool can seem like a good deal. In addition to the dozens of colleges that use the service, a News investigation last year revealed that at least 52 school districts in Texas have adopted Social Sentinel as an additional security measure since 2015, including Uvalde CISD where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers in May. The company's current CEO J.P. Guilbault also said their services are used by one in four K-12 schools in the country.

Some experts said AI tools like Social Sentinel are untested, and even if they are adopted for a worthwhile purpose, they have the potential to be abused.

For public colleges, the use of the service sets up an additional conflict between protecting students' Constitutional rights of free speech and privacy and schools' duty to keep them safe on campus, said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University's Washington College of Law.

"What the technology allows you to do is identify individuals who are associated together or are associated with a place or location," said Ferguson. "That is obviously somewhat chilling for First Amendment freedoms of people who believe in a right to protest and dissent."

Navigate360, the private Ohio-based company that acquired Social Sentinel in 2020, called The News' investigation "inaccurate, speculative or by opinion in many instances and significantly outdated." The company also changed the name of the service from Social Sentinel to Navigate360 Detect earlier this year.

4. What information did the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, share regarding the number of colleges and universities using the tool? ✓

- 36 states were using the tool in college and university

5. According to the text, what contradictory behavior was observed in how Social Sentinel was marketed versus its public stance?

- marketed as "mitigating" tool, but claims it isn't for surveillance.

6. How does law professor Andrew Guthrie Ferguson highlight the potential conflict posed by using AI tools like Social Sentinel in public colleges?

Ferguson highlights the conflict between protecting student free speech & privacy against the duty to protect students.

In an interview in February, Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests.

But documents from Kennesaw State show campus police tracked demonstrators' online activity for days with Social Sentinel before a contentious 2017 town hall.

Brandy White, a criminal intelligence analyst in KSU's police department, was in charge of the monitoring. On instruction from her supervisors, White entered information about demonstrators and protest groups into Social Sentinel's monitoring tool and set up searches to find posts about the event, emails show.

White also received a KSU police intelligence briefing from a colleague about the event. The document, obtained by The News in response to a public records request, singled out one progressive activist group, the liberal grassroots network Indivisible, and cited conservative conspiracy theories that George Soros funded the protesters.

The report also identified a young progressive activist named Marisa Pyle.

At the time, Pyle was a 19-year-old student at a nearby college. She told The News that she had no idea about KSU's monitoring.

"There's no version of that where I needed any kind of special attention or surveillance by Kennesaw State."

7. According to the report obtained by The News, what progressive activist group was singled out for monitoring by KSU police intelligence?

-The liberal grassroots network Indivisible was singled out for monitoring by KSU.

The idea for Social Sentinel came out of a police briefing in the mid-2000s.

A sergeant named Jimmy had more to say than usual.

He told Margolis, then the police chief at the University of Vermont in Burlington, about a series of petty thefts, a sexual assault and a protest planned at the executive offices of the university.

“Jimmy, where did we get this information?” he asked.

The sergeant sent Margolis to see an overnight dispatcher, who showed him the source — new online sites, including a website called The Facebook.

It was in that moment, Margolis later said, the seed for Social Sentinel was formed.

“It became clear that we needed a digital beat cop — ‘someone’ with an ear to the social landscape,” he wrote in a 2015 blog post on the Social Sentinel website.

In 2008, in his final year as police chief, Margolis merged his consulting service with another started by Steven Healy, a former military police officer who previously held top safety roles at Princeton and Wellesley. Four years later, the two announced Campus Sentinel, an app that aggregated crime stats on college campuses.

It would take another two years before Margolis could realize his vision for an app that kept tabs on online activity. In 2014, with support from a Boston-based private equity firm and a New York-based venture capital company, the duo rebranded the service as Social Sentinel, a social media threat alert service.

The University of North Texas was an early adopter.

The school’s police chief, Ed Reynolds, told The News last year that the university scheduled a presentation with the company after hearing success stories from other chiefs at a conference.

The presenters billed Social Sentinel as an AI tool that could detect threatening tweets about the UNT campus, and showed Reynolds how it could be used to find posts.

After considering other competing services, the UNT police chief signed a \$15,000-a-year contract in December 2015.

In November of that year, a Social Sentinel employee sent Reynolds suggestions for how to use the service, emails obtained by The News show. In one section, the company proposed the school adopt a rule preventing them from monitoring protests, except when they threatened public safety.

It’s unclear whether UNT adopted the suggested policy — no signed copy exists in the records provided to The News. Aside from the proposed procedures sent to the North Texas school, Social Sentinel seems to have offered colleges few guardrails for how to use its service. The News reached out to every university known to use the service — none of the colleges that responded said they had rules specifically governing Social Sentinel.

Reynolds said UNT stopped using the service in 2018, after determining they could handle the monitoring in house. That same year, Collin College signed a contract with Social Sentinel and UT Dallas renewed its contract for another three years.

At least one college in North Texas still uses the monitoring tool. Nicole Shaw, the police chief at North Central Texas College, said the school's latest contract for the service cost \$12,750 a year.

Shaw said she knew of only one instance where the service alerted to a potentially troubling situation. In that case, the department was already aware of the student who wrote the post and the student was not an imminent threat to himself.

Potentially suicidal students aren't the only thing the college is monitoring for.

"Protests, that's one of the buzzwords," she said.

"We don't take sides, we just want to make sure everyone has a safe experience."

8. What event sparked the idea for Social Sentinel according to the text?

- A police briefing spark the idea of social Sentinel in mid-2000.

Social Sentinel has long said its service can't be used for monitoring protests.

But emails in 2017 between campus police officials at Kennesaw State show the school used the service at least three times for that purpose.

In addition to the town hall meeting, the school monitored protests against President Trump's 2017 ban on travelers from several Muslim-majority countries and demonstrations against the university's former chancellor, Sam Olens.

Several spokespeople from Kennesaw State declined repeated requests for interviews for this story.

Documents show the service was a key tool for the school's police department in 2017. Members of the staff reported how many tweets were flagged in their monthly meetings that year. The service showed up in a 2017 job description outlining the daily duties of a criminal intelligence analyst, saying the role included monitoring Social Sentinel for "crime, civil unrest, protests" and more.

Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests, but declined to comment on any activities before their acquisition of the company in 2020.

"The word protest is not even in our engines," he said, referring to the technology the company says it uses to analyze social media posts.

Documents The News obtained from schools around the country show company representatives repeatedly promoted Social Sentinel's ability to monitor protests.

In 2017, a marketer working with the company, David Smitherman, reached out to a UNC-Charlotte administrator, Christine Davis, to tout the service.

Smitherman had contacted Davis at least two other times saying the service could be used for forestalling potentially volatile protests, emails show. In a November 2016 message to another administrator, he wrote that it could be used for mitigating the impacts of “disruptive demonstrations & protests.” Around the same time, representatives used the same language of “mitigating” and “forestalling” protests in messages to Stephen F. Austin State University and UNC-Asheville.

This time he added something different — a whitepaper from the company titled “Demonstrations and Protests: Using Social Media to Gather Intelligence and Respond to Campus Crowds.”

The document outlines how the service can be used to monitor before and during demonstrations, and also mentions that Michigan State University used the service to monitor protests. Emails from 2015 and 2016 obtained by The News also show the whitepaper was sent to at least three other colleges — UT Dallas, Appalachian State and UNC-Asheville — considering the service.

“During an event, threat alerts can provide important insight about the leaders or agitators who may want a confrontation with law enforcement, the general climate of the crowd and the potential for crowd growth,” the document says.

Davis told The News that she did not follow up with Smitherman and the university did not seek a service to monitor protests. Smitherman declined to comment for this story.

9. How did the emails between campus police officials reveal the use of the Social Sentinel service at Kennesaw State in 2017?

emails revealed social sentinel monitored engagement w/protest

From the beginning, Social Sentinel’s co-founder, Margolis, said publicly that the service could not be used to surveil individual people.

In emails to clients, the company had a different message.

“I hear that you are interested in uploading usernames, user accounts, etc to follow known threats,” one employee wrote to former North Carolina State University Police Chief Jack Moorman in August 2015. “We recently released that feature, and you can now upload a list of Twitter authors.”

“I appreciate the information on the feature of uploading the accounts of individuals that we want to follow,” Moorman wrote back. “This should be a great benefit to ongoing threat assessment cases.”

NC State declined to comment on Moorman’s activities, but said Social Sentinel was not used to target individuals or groups. Moorman did not respond to requests for comment.

Documents show schools may have used another feature of the service called the Local+ List to target protesters and individual students. Of the 37 colleges identified by The News as using the

service, only two, Oregon State and the University of Connecticut, provided their Local+ List in response to public records requests.

At least one North Texas college — UT Dallas — could have used the feature to monitor individuals. Vanessa Balderrama, a project coordinator for the university, said the school could not release its Local+ List because it contained students' names.

North Carolina A&T, a historically Black college in Greensboro, may have used the list feature in a way that would reveal posts critical of the university's leadership after a cheerleader said her coaches mishandled her rape complaint. Emails from the school in February 2019 show a Social Sentinel employee suggesting a long list of keywords and phrases related to the protests to the school's social media manager.

"Yes, please add these in," the manager wrote in response.

North Carolina A&T Associate Vice Chancellor Todd Simmons denied using the service to monitor the demonstrations, saying the email was "an effort to upsell us to the Local Plus product." In its investigation, The News found no evidence that the Local+ List cost schools more money.

The Local+ List resembles another tool popular with law enforcement around the same time — the CIA-funded service Geofeedia.

The North Carolina colleges were familiar with the competing tool — at least two of the schools' police departments were part of a law enforcement group run by North Carolina's State Bureau of Investigation, which had a contract with Geofeedia.

Documents obtained by The News show UNC-Chapel Hill's police department asked the state bureau to surveil pro and anti-abortion protesters in October 2015. The investigative agency quickly obliged. Emails between the agencies show SBI tracked keywords and hashtags including "Feminist Students United," "Students for Reproductive Justice," "#feminist," "#studentsforlife" and even "#unc."

In 2016, the ACLU of Northern California disclosed that law enforcement agencies had used Geofeedia to monitor Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Ferguson. Soon after, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram announced they would suspend or limit Geofeedia's access to their service. A month later, Geofeedia laid off more than half of its staff.

The ACLU revelations raised alarms at Social Sentinel. One former employee told The News that executives decided to stop selling the service to local police departments after they realized their service was also used to monitor Black Lives Matter protesters.

In a 2017 webinar, Margolis referenced the problems with Geofeedia and said the company shared the ACLU's fears.

"Our team at Social Sentinel had exactly those same concerns back in 2015, and we put a stake in the ground and created the threat alert approach for exactly the reasons the ACLU cited," Margolis told the webinar's attendees. "Targeting and surveilling individuals or groups is not OK."

"Monitoring is icky," Margolis added.

After the disclosures about Geofeedia, UNC-Chapel Hill sought another social media monitoring service, and eventually signed a \$24,500 yearly contract with Social Sentinel in November 2016.

Less than a year later, the university surveilled student protesters again.

NBC News reported that the college collaborated with an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force to surveil the social media posts of people protesting a Confederate statue on campus in 2017. It is unclear which monitoring service the school used in that case.

During another protest of the Confederate monument a year later, campus police again monitored posts, this time using Social Sentinel's list feature, emails show.

The News received no documentation from the college showing UNC used the service for anything but monitoring protests. The former campus police chief, David Perry, and Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said in 2020 that they were not aware of any instances when the service had helped to prevent violence on the campus.

10. What did Social Sentinel's co-founder, Margolis, publicly state about the service's use regarding surveilling individual people?

- Margolis claimed the service could not surveil individual people.

Some university officials said they were not bothered by the potential privacy implications of Social Sentinel because they said they only used the tool to monitor public social media posts.

"I don't think it was ever a concern of mine," Reynolds, the UNT Chief, told The News last year. "The information that we were looking at was public information."

"My understanding of the product is they can only draw those comments from public posts on social media," said David Thomasee, executive director of operations at Gulf Coast State College. "I'm not sure that the expectation of privacy is there if anyone in the world can see it."

But even collecting publicly posted information may harm students' privacy and speech rights, experts say. Jake Wiener, a lawyer at the Electronic Privacy Information Center also said social media monitoring services may extend the reach of law enforcement agencies beyond what they were previously able to track.

"Something like a social media surveillance program is going to sweep in so much data," Wiener said. "An officer is going to be far more likely to investigate, and possibly arrest, people who are not actually the types of targets they're looking for."

Ferguson, the law professor at American who also authored *The Rise of Big Data Policing*, said the use of social media monitoring tools could be challenged under an interpretation of a 2017 Supreme Court Case, *Carpenter v. U.S.* In that case, the court ruled that the government could not seize a suspected robber's cell phone records, including location data from cell towers, without a warrant.

The court's decision may reflect a shift in the interpretation of privacy law to a new focus on how much information was collected rather than just what information was collected.

"You're looking for a needle in the haystack but you've got to collect the whole haystack to find the needle," Ferguson said.

Universities may also have more incentives to adopt surveillance technology than local police.

"We definitely hear administrators talking a lot like 'the school is like a family and we're here to protect you from anything bad that might happen on campus,'" said Alex Morey, a lawyer at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

"That kind of mentality would lead to a heightened willingness to see these surveillance systems as a good thing."

11. What concerns do experts like Jake Wiener and Ferguson raise regarding the potential consequences of using social media surveillance programs at universities?

\*  
Concerns were raised about student privacy and free speech violations

Four months after a gunman killed two people and injured four others at UNC-Charlotte in 2019, Judy Stanwyck noticed something strange.

Stanwyck, a senior buyer for the university, was handling UNC-Charlotte's purchase of Social Sentinel. She wasn't familiar with the technology so she looked up the company's website and started reading.

One feature jumped out — the company was advertising the ability to monitor students' university email accounts.

"I found this," Stanwyck wrote in an email to her colleague, including the link to the website. "I would just confirm exactly what they are purchasing."

Stanwyck did not respond to requests for comment.

In the company's proposed contract with UNC-Charlotte, it said the email monitoring service was only available for K-12 schools. But in an email to the university's associate vice chancellor for safety and security, an employee said they could add that service if they wanted to.

The company initially said it only monitored public information on social media. But since at least 2019, records show it has offered colleges the ability to monitor private student emails.

It's unclear whether a college has taken the company up on its offer — The News was unable to find a university that had used the email monitoring service, though the practice is common in K-12 schools.

Privacy experts said they were appalled by the service's ability to monitor private student messages.

"The idea of adding surveillance software to the campus infrastructure where students are

supposed to learn is just shocking," Dave Maass, the director of investigations at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said. "It's just an abomination to the idea of scholastic freedom."

UNC-Charlotte ultimately did not sign the contract, citing budget limitations. At the same time, the company was promoting the email monitoring service to another North Carolina college — UNC-Asheville.

In 2019 emails to the university, the co-founder Margolis promoted Social Sentinel's ability to work with the Google suite of services and promised they would work with Microsoft Outlook in the near future.

Another company employee advertised the new Gmail integration in the signature of every email she sent to the school that year.

The Navigate360 CEO Guilbault said some colleges use the service to monitor emails. But they may not be stopping there.

In emails to Gulf Coast and Palm Beach state colleges in 2019, the company touted its ability to monitor Google Docs, Google Hangouts chats and even Facebook Messages.

12. Describe the discrepancy between what the company's proposed contract stated and what they communicated to the university regarding email monitoring services.

The contract states email monitoring is for K-12 schools, but they offered to add the service to universities.

### Tracked: How Colleges Used AI to Monitor Student Protests [Revised Questions]

The pitch was attractive and simple.

For a few thousand dollars a year, Social Sentinel offered schools across the country sophisticated technology to scan social media posts from students at risk of harming themselves or others. Used correctly, the tool could help save lives, the company said.

For some colleges that bought the service, it also served a different purpose — allowing campus police to surveil student protests.

During demonstrations over a Confederate statue at UNC-Chapel Hill, a Social Sentinel employee entered keywords into the company's monitoring tool to find posts related to the protests. At Kennesaw State University in Georgia five years ago, authorities used the service to track protesters at a town hall with a U.S. senator, records show. And at North Carolina A&T, a campus official told a Social Sentinel employee to enter keywords to find posts related to a cheerleader's allegation that the school mishandled her rape complaint.

An investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism reveals for the first time that as more students have embraced social media as a digital town square to express opinions and organize demonstrations, many college police departments have been using taxpayer dollars to pay for Social Sentinel's services to monitor what they say. At least 37 colleges, including four in North Texas, collectively educating hundreds of thousands of students, have used Social Sentinel since 2015.

1. What is the main purpose of Social Sentinel as described in the text?

scan student social media posts for risks of harm

2. Provide examples from the text of how colleges have used Social Sentinel for purposes other than monitoring students at risk.

surveilling protest posts, monitoring post complaints, tracking

3. How have college police departments been utilizing Social Sentinel, according to the investigation mentioned in the text?

using taxpayer dollars to pay for social sentinel to monitor student speech.

The true number of colleges that used the tool could be far higher. In an email to a UT Dallas police lieutenant, the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, said it was used by "hundreds of colleges and universities in 36 states." Margolis declined to comment on this story.

The News examined thousands of pages of emails, contracts and marketing material from colleges around the country, and spoke to school officials, campus police, activists and experts. The investigation shows that, despite publicly saying its service was not a surveillance tool, Social Sentinel representatives promoted the tool to universities for "mitigating" and "forestalling" protests. The documents also show the company has been moving in a new and potentially more invasive direction — allowing schools to monitor student emails on university accounts.

For colleges struggling to respond to high-profile school shootings and a worsening campus mental health crisis, Social Sentinel's low-cost tool can seem like a good deal. In addition to the dozens of colleges that use the service, a News investigation last year revealed that at least 52 school districts in Texas have adopted Social Sentinel as an additional security measure since 2015, including Uvalde CISD where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers in May. The company's current CEO J.P. Guilbault also said their services are used by one in four K-12 schools in the country.

Some experts said AI tools like Social Sentinel are untested, and even if they are adopted for a worthwhile purpose, they have the potential to be abused.

For public colleges, the use of the service sets up an additional conflict between protecting students' Constitutional rights of free speech and privacy and schools' duty to keep them safe on campus, said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University's Washington College of Law.

"What the technology allows you to do is identify individuals who are associated together or are associated with a place or location," said Ferguson. "That is obviously somewhat chilling for First Amendment freedoms of people who believe in a right to protest and dissent."

Navigate360, the private Ohio-based company that acquired Social Sentinel in 2020, called The News' investigation "inaccurate, speculative or by opinion in many instances and significantly outdated." The company also changed the name of the service from Social Sentinel to Navigate360 Detect earlier this year.

4. What information did the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, share regarding the number of colleges and universities using the tool?  
*hundreds of colleges and universities used the tool*

5. According to the text, what contradictory behavior was observed in how Social Sentinel was marketed versus its public stance?  
*but claims it isn't for surveillance*

6. How does law professor Andrew Guthrie Ferguson highlight the potential conflict posed by using AI tools like Social Sentinel in public colleges?  
*Ferguson highlights the conflict between protecting student free speech and privacy against the duty to protect students.*

In an interview in February, Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests.

But documents from Kennesaw State show campus police tracked demonstrators' online activity for days with Social Sentinel before a contentious 2017 town hall.

Brandy White, a criminal intelligence analyst in KSU's police department, was in charge of the monitoring. On instruction from her supervisors, White entered information about demonstrators and protest groups into Social Sentinel's monitoring tool and set up searches to find posts about the event, emails show.

White also received a KSU police intelligence briefing from a colleague about the event. The document, obtained by The News in response to a public records request, singled out one progressive activist group, the liberal grassroots network Indivisible, and cited conservative conspiracy theories that George Soros funded the protesters.

The report also identified a young progressive activist named Marisa Pyle.

At the time, Pyle was a 19-year-old student at a nearby college. She told The News that she had no idea about KSU's monitoring.

"There's no version of that where I needed any kind of special attention or surveillance by Kennesaw State."

7. According to the report obtained by The News, what progressive activist group was singled out for monitoring by KSU police intelligence?

Grassroots network The progressive group singled out for monitoring was the Indivisible.

The idea for Social Sentinel came out of a police briefing in the mid-2000s.

A sergeant named Jimmy had more to say than usual.

He told Margolis, then the police chief at the University of Vermont in Burlington, about a series of petty thefts, a sexual assault and a protest planned at the executive offices of the university.

“Jimmy, where did we get this information?” he asked.

The sergeant sent Margolis to see an overnight dispatcher, who showed him the source — new online sites, including a website called The Facebook.

It was in that moment, Margolis later said, the seed for Social Sentinel was formed.

“It became clear that we needed a digital beat cop — ‘someone’ with an ear to the social landscape,” he wrote in a 2015 blog post on the Social Sentinel website.

In 2008, in his final year as police chief, Margolis merged his consulting service with another started by Steven Healy, a former military police officer who previously held top safety roles at Princeton and Wellesley. Four years later, the two announced Campus Sentinel, an app that aggregated crime stats on college campuses.

It would take another two years before Margolis could realize his vision for an app that kept tabs on online activity. In 2014, with support from a Boston-based private equity firm and a New York-based venture capital company, the duo rebranded the service as Social Sentinel, a social media threat alert service.

The University of North Texas was an early adopter.

The school’s police chief, Ed Reynolds, told The News last year that the university scheduled a presentation with the company after hearing success stories from other chiefs at a conference.

The presenters billed Social Sentinel as an AI tool that could detect threatening tweets about the UNT campus, and showed Reynolds how it could be used to find posts.

After considering other competing services, the UNT police chief signed a \$15,000-a-year contract in December 2015.

In November of that year, a Social Sentinel employee sent Reynolds suggestions for how to use the service, emails obtained by The News show. In one section, the company proposed the school adopt a rule preventing them from monitoring protests, except when they threatened public safety.

It’s unclear whether UNT adopted the suggested policy — no signed copy exists in the records provided to The News. Aside from the proposed procedures sent to the North Texas school, Social Sentinel seems to have offered colleges few guardrails for how to use its service. The News reached out to every university known to use the service — none of the colleges that responded said they had rules specifically governing Social Sentinel.

Reynolds said UNT stopped using the service in 2018, after determining they could handle the monitoring in house. That same year, Collin College signed a contract with Social Sentinel and UT Dallas renewed its contract for another three years.

At least one college in North Texas still uses the monitoring tool. Nicole Shaw, the police chief at North Central Texas College, said the school's latest contract for the service cost \$12,750 a year.

Shaw said she knew of only one instance where the service alerted to a potentially troubling situation. In that case, the department was already aware of the student who wrote the post and the student was not an imminent threat to himself.

Potentially suicidal students aren't the only thing the college is monitoring for.

"Protests, that's one of the buzzwords," she said.

"We don't take sides, we just want to make sure everyone has a safe experience."

8. What event sparked the idea for Social Sentinel according to the text?

The event that sparked Social Sentinel was a police briefing in the mid-2000s

Social Sentinel has long said its service can't be used for monitoring protests.

But emails in 2017 between campus police officials at Kennesaw State show the school used the service at least three times for that purpose.

In addition to the town hall meeting, the school monitored protests against President Trump's 2017 ban on travelers from several Muslim-majority countries and demonstrations against the university's former chancellor, Sam Olens.

Several spokespeople from Kennesaw State declined repeated requests for interviews for this story.

Documents show the service was a key tool for the school's police department in 2017. Members of the staff reported how many tweets were flagged in their monthly meetings that year. The service showed up in a 2017 job description outlining the daily duties of a criminal intelligence analyst, saying the role included monitoring Social Sentinel for "crime, civil unrest, protests" and more.

Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests, but declined to comment on any activities before their acquisition of the company in 2020.

"The word protest is not even in our engines," he said, referring to the technology the company says it uses to analyze social media posts.

Documents The News obtained from schools around the country show company representatives repeatedly promoted Social Sentinel's ability to monitor protests.

In 2017, a marketer working with the company, David Smitherman, reached out to a UNC-Charlotte administrator, Christine Davis, to tout the service.

Smitherman had contacted Davis at least two other times saying the service could be used for forestalling potentially volatile protests, emails show. In a November 2016 message to another administrator, he wrote that it could be used for mitigating the impacts of “disruptive demonstrations & protests.” Around the same time, representatives used the same language of “mitigating” and “forestalling” protests in messages to Stephen F. Austin State University and UNC-Asheville.

This time he added something different — a whitepaper from the company titled “Demonstrations and Protests: Using Social Media to Gather Intelligence and Respond to Campus Crowds.”

The document outlines how the service can be used to monitor before and during demonstrations, and also mentions that Michigan State University used the service to monitor protests. Emails from 2015 and 2016 obtained by The News also show the whitepaper was sent to at least three other colleges — UT Dallas, Appalachian State and UNC-Asheville — considering the service.

“During an event, threat alerts can provide important insight about the leaders or agitators who may want a confrontation with law enforcement, the general climate of the crowd and the potential for crowd growth,” the document says.

Davis told The News that she did not follow up with Smitherman and the university did not seek a service to monitor protests. Smitherman declined to comment for this story.

9. How did the emails between campus police officials reveal the use of the Social Sentinel service at Kennesaw State in 2017?

The messages were shown of them describing what the service could be used for and protest engagement

From the beginning, Social Sentinel’s co-founder, Margolis, said publicly that the service could not be used to surveil individual people.

In emails to clients, the company had a different message.

“I hear that you are interested in uploading usernames, user accounts, etc to follow known threats,” one employee wrote to former North Carolina State University Police Chief Jack Moorman in August 2015. “We recently released that feature, and you can now upload a list of Twitter authors.”

“I appreciate the information on the feature of uploading the accounts of individuals that we want to follow,” Moorman wrote back. “This should be a great benefit to ongoing threat assessment cases.”

NC State declined to comment on Moorman’s activities, but said Social Sentinel was not used to target individuals or groups. Moorman did not respond to requests for comment.

Documents show schools may have used another feature of the service called the Local+ List to target protesters and individual students. Of the 37 colleges identified by The News as using the

service, only two, Oregon State and the University of Connecticut, provided their Local+ List in response to public records requests.

At least one North Texas college — UT Dallas — could have used the feature to monitor individuals. Vanessa Balderrama, a project coordinator for the university, said the school could not release its Local+ List because it contained students' names.

North Carolina A&T, a historically Black college in Greensboro, may have used the list feature in a way that would reveal posts critical of the university's leadership after a cheerleader said her coaches mishandled her rape complaint. Emails from the school in February 2019 show a Social Sentinel employee suggesting a long list of keywords and phrases related to the protests to the school's social media manager.

"Yes, please add these in," the manager wrote in response.

North Carolina A&T Associate Vice Chancellor Todd Simmons denied using the service to monitor the demonstrations, saying the email was "an effort to upsell us to the Local Plus product." In its investigation, The News found no evidence that the Local+ List cost schools more money.

The Local+ List resembles another tool popular with law enforcement around the same time — the CIA-funded service Geofeedia.

The North Carolina colleges were familiar with the competing tool — at least two of the schools' police departments were part of a law enforcement group run by North Carolina's State Bureau of Investigation, which had a contract with Geofeedia.

Documents obtained by The News show UNC-Chapel Hill's police department asked the state bureau to surveil pro and anti-abortion protesters in October 2015. The investigative agency quickly obliged. Emails between the agencies show SBI tracked keywords and hashtags including "Feminist Students United," "Students for Reproductive Justice," "#feminist," "#studentsforlife" and even "#unc."

In 2016, the ACLU of Northern California disclosed that law enforcement agencies had used Geofeedia to monitor Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Ferguson. Soon after, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram announced they would suspend or limit Geofeedia's access to their service. A month later, Geofeedia laid off more than half of its staff.

The ACLU revelations raised alarms at Social Sentinel. One former employee told The News that executives decided to stop selling the service to local police departments after they realized their service was also used to monitor Black Lives Matter protesters.

In a 2017 webinar, Margolis referenced the problems with Geofeedia and said the company shared the ACLU's fears.

"Our team at Social Sentinel had exactly those same concerns back in 2015, and we put a stake in the ground and created the threat alert approach for exactly the reasons the ACLU cited," Margolis told the webinar's attendees. "Targeting and surveilling individuals or groups is not OK."

"Monitoring is icky," Margolis added.

After the disclosures about Geofeedia, UNC-Chapel Hill sought another social media monitoring service, and eventually signed a \$24,500 yearly contract with Social Sentinel in November 2016.

Less than a year later, the university surveilled student protesters again.

NBC News reported that the college collaborated with an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force to surveil the social media posts of people protesting a Confederate statue on campus in 2017. It is unclear which monitoring service the school used in that case.

During another protest of the Confederate monument a year later, campus police again monitored posts, this time using Social Sentinel's list feature, emails show.

The News received no documentation from the college showing UNC used the service for anything but monitoring protests. The former campus police chief, David Perry, and Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said in 2020 that they were not aware of any instances when the service had helped to prevent violence on the campus.

10. What did Social Sentinel's co-founder, Margolis, publicly state about the service's use regarding surveilling individual people?

Margolis stated that there was problems with Geofence and was ACLU night mares

Some university officials said they were not bothered by the potential privacy implications of Social Sentinel because they said they only used the tool to monitor public social media posts.

"I don't think it was ever a concern of mine," Reynolds, the UNT Chief, told The News last year. "The information that we were looking at was public information."

"My understanding of the product is they can only draw those comments from public posts on social media," said David Thomasee, executive director of operations at Gulf Coast State College. "I'm not sure that the expectation of privacy is there if anyone in the world can see it."

But even collecting publicly posted information may harm students' privacy and speech rights, experts say. Jake Wiener, a lawyer at the Electronic Privacy Information Center also said social media monitoring services may extend the reach of law enforcement agencies beyond what they were previously able to track.

"Something like a social media surveillance program is going to sweep in so much data," Wiener said. "An officer is going to be far more likely to investigate, and possibly arrest, people who are not actually the types of targets they're looking for."

Ferguson, the law professor at American who also authored The Rise of Big Data Policing, said the use of social media monitoring tools could be challenged under an interpretation of a 2017 Supreme Court Case, Carpenter v. U.S. In that case, the court ruled that the government could not seize a suspected robber's cell phone records, including location data from cell towers, without a warrant.

The court's decision may reflect a shift in the interpretation of privacy law to a new focus on how much information was collected rather than just what information was collected.

"You're looking for a needle in the haystack but you've got to collect the whole haystack to find the needle," Ferguson said.

Universities may also have more incentives to adopt surveillance technology than local police.

"We definitely hear administrators talking a lot like 'the school is like a family and we're here to protect you from anything bad that might happen on campus,'" said Alex Morey, a lawyer at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

"That kind of mentality would lead to a heightened willingness to see these surveillance systems as a good thing."

11. What concerns do experts like Jake Wiener and Ferguson raise regarding the potential consequences of using social media surveillance programs at universities?

THINK IT WILL HARM STUDENTS' PRIVATE AND FREE SPEECH.

Four months after a gunman killed two people and injured four others at UNC-Charlotte in 2019, Judy Stanwyck noticed something strange.

Stanwyck, a senior buyer for the university, was handling UNC-Charlotte's purchase of Social Sentinel. She wasn't familiar with the technology so she looked up the company's website and started reading.

One feature jumped out — the company was advertising the ability to monitor students' university email accounts.

"I found this," Stanwyck wrote in an email to her colleague, including the link to the website. "I would just confirm exactly what they are purchasing."

Stanwyck did not respond to requests for comment.

In the company's proposed contract with UNC-Charlotte, it said the email monitoring service was only available for K-12 schools. But in an email to the university's associate vice chancellor for safety and security, an employee said they could add that service if they wanted to.

The company initially said it only monitored public information on social media. But since at least 2019, records show it has offered colleges the ability to monitor private student emails.

It's unclear whether a college has taken the company up on its offer — The News was unable to find a university that had used the email monitoring service, though the practice is common in K-12 schools.

Privacy experts said they were appalled by the service's ability to monitor private student messages.

"The idea of adding surveillance software to the campus infrastructure where students are

supposed to learn is just shocking," Dave Maass, the director of investigations at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said. "It's just an abomination to the idea of scholastic freedom."

UNC-Charlotte ultimately did not sign the contract, citing budget limitations. At the same time, the company was promoting the email monitoring service to another North Carolina college — UNC-Asheville.

In 2019 emails to the university, the co-founder Margolis promoted Social Sentinel's ability to work with the Google suite of services and promised they would work with Microsoft Outlook in the near future.

Another company employee advertised the new Gmail integration in the signature of every email she sent to the school that year.

The Navigate360 CEO Guilbault said some colleges use the service to monitor emails. But they may not be stopping there.

In emails to Gulf Coast and Palm Beach state colleges in 2019, the company touted its ability to monitor Google Docs, Google Hangouts chats and even Facebook Messages.

12. Describe the discrepancy between what the company's proposed contract stated and what they communicated to the university regarding email monitoring services.

The company said it was only for K-12 schools but then they said they can add a safe and security service.

**Tracked: How Colleges Used AI to Monitor Student Protests [Revised Questions]**

The pitch was attractive and simple.

For a few thousand dollars a year, Social Sentinel offered schools across the country sophisticated technology to scan social media posts from students at risk of harming themselves or others. Used correctly, the tool could help save lives, the company said.

For some colleges that bought the service, it also served a different purpose — allowing campus police to surveil student protests.

During demonstrations over a Confederate statue at UNC-Chapel Hill, a Social Sentinel employee entered keywords into the company's monitoring tool to find posts related to the protests. At Kennesaw State University in Georgia five years ago, authorities used the service to track protesters at a town hall with a U.S. senator, records show. And at North Carolina A&T, a campus official told a Social Sentinel employee to enter keywords to find posts related to a cheerleader's allegation that the school mishandled her rape complaint.

An investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism reveals for the first time that as more students have embraced social media as a digital town square to express opinions and organize demonstrations, many college police departments have been using taxpayer dollars to pay for Social Sentinel's services to monitor what they say. At least 37 colleges, including four in North Texas, collectively educating hundreds of thousands of students, have used Social Sentinel since 2015.

1. What is the main purpose of Social Sentinel as described in the text?

The main purpose is to surveil social media post.

2. Provide examples from the text of how colleges have used Social Sentinel for purposes other than monitoring students at risk.

- monitoring students protest post  
- entering keywords to find post related to protest.

3. How have college police departments been utilizing Social Sentinel, according to the investigation mentioned in the text?

- paying social sentinel to monitor what they say.

The true number of colleges that used the tool could be far higher. In an email to a UT Dallas police lieutenant, the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, said it was used by "hundreds of colleges and universities in 36 states." Margolis declined to comment on this story.

The News examined thousands of pages of emails, contracts and marketing material from colleges around the country, and spoke to school officials, campus police, activists and experts. The investigation shows that, despite publicly saying its service was not a surveillance tool, Social Sentinel representatives promoted the tool to universities for "mitigating" and "forestalling" protests. The documents also show the company has been moving in a new and potentially more invasive direction — allowing schools to monitor student emails on university accounts.

For colleges struggling to respond to high-profile school shootings and a worsening campus mental health crisis, Social Sentinel's low-cost tool can seem like a good deal. In addition to the dozens of colleges that use the service, a News investigation last year revealed that at least 52 school districts in Texas have adopted Social Sentinel as an additional security measure since 2015, including Uvalde CISD where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers in May. The company's current CEO J.P. Guilbault also said their services are used by one in four K-12 schools in the country.

Some experts said AI tools like Social Sentinel are untested, and even if they are adopted for a worthwhile purpose, they have the potential to be abused.

For public colleges, the use of the service sets up an additional conflict between protecting students' Constitutional rights of free speech and privacy and schools' duty to keep them safe on campus, said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University's Washington College of Law.

"What the technology allows you to do is identify individuals who are associated together or are associated with a place or location," said Ferguson. "That is obviously somewhat chilling for First Amendment freedoms of people who believe in a right to protest and dissent."

Navigate360, the private Ohio-based company that acquired Social Sentinel in 2020, called The News' investigation "inaccurate, speculative or by opinion in many instances and significantly outdated." The company also changed the name of the service from Social Sentinel to Navigate360 Detect earlier this year.

4. What information did the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, share regarding the number of colleges and universities using the tool? Gary margolis said hundred of colleges and universities use the tool in 36 states

5. According to the text, what contradictory behavior was observed in how Social Sentinel was marketed versus its public stance? They says their looking out for students at risk, but they actually monitor students post of protest.

6. How does law professor Andrew Guthrie Ferguson highlight the potential conflict posed by using AI tools like Social Sentinel in public colleges? The conflict is that they are taking your first Amendment rights

In an interview in February, Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests.

But documents from Kennesaw State show campus police tracked demonstrators' online activity for days with Social Sentinel before a contentious 2017 town hall.

Brandy White, a criminal intelligence analyst in KSU's police department, was in charge of the monitoring. On instruction from her supervisors, White entered information about demonstrators and protest groups into Social Sentinel's monitoring tool and set up searches to find posts about the event, emails show.

White also received a KSU police intelligence briefing from a colleague about the event. The document, obtained by The News in response to a public records request, singled out one progressive activist group, the liberal grassroots network Indivisible, and cited conservative conspiracy theories that George Soros funded the protesters.

The report also identified a young progressive activist named Marisa Pyle.

At the time, Pyle was a 19-year-old student at a nearby college. She told The News that she had no idea about KSU's monitoring.

"There's no version of that where I needed any kind of special attention or surveillance by Kennesaw State."

7. According to the report obtained by The News, what progressive activist group was singled out for monitoring by KSU police intelligence? *The liberal grassroots network Indivisible.*

The idea for Social Sentinel came out of a police briefing in the mid-2000s.

A sergeant named Jimmy had more to say than usual.

He told Margolis, then the police chief at the University of Vermont in Burlington, about a series of petty thefts, a sexual assault and a protest planned at the executive offices of the university.

“Jimmy, where did we get this information?” he asked.

The sergeant sent Margolis to see an overnight dispatcher, who showed him the source — new online sites, including a website called The Facebook.

It was in that moment, Margolis later said, the seed for Social Sentinel was formed.

“It became clear that we needed a digital beat cop — ‘someone’ with an ear to the social landscape,” he wrote in a 2015 blog post on the Social Sentinel website.

In 2008, in his final year as police chief, Margolis merged his consulting service with another started by Steven Healy, a former military police officer who previously held top safety roles at Princeton and Wellesley. Four years later, the two announced Campus Sentinel, an app that aggregated crime stats on college campuses.

It would take another two years before Margolis could realize his vision for an app that kept tabs on online activity. In 2014, with support from a Boston-based private equity firm and a New York-based venture capital company, the duo rebranded the service as Social Sentinel, a social media threat alert service.

The University of North Texas was an early adopter.

The school’s police chief, Ed Reynolds, told The News last year that the university scheduled a presentation with the company after hearing success stories from other chiefs at a conference.

The presenters billed Social Sentinel as an AI tool that could detect threatening tweets about the UNT campus, and showed Reynolds how it could be used to find posts.

After considering other competing services, the UNT police chief signed a \$15,000-a-year contract in December 2015.

In November of that year, a Social Sentinel employee sent Reynolds suggestions for how to use the service, emails obtained by The News show. In one section, the company proposed the school adopt a rule preventing them from monitoring protests, except when they threatened public safety.

It’s unclear whether UNT adopted the suggested policy — no signed copy exists in the records provided to The News. Aside from the proposed procedures sent to the North Texas school, Social Sentinel seems to have offered colleges few guardrails for how to use its service. The News reached out to every university known to use the service — none of the colleges that responded said they had rules specifically governing Social Sentinel.

Reynolds said UNT stopped using the service in 2018, after determining they could handle the monitoring in house. That same year, Collin College signed a contract with Social Sentinel and UT Dallas renewed its contract for another three years.

At least one college in North Texas still uses the monitoring tool. Nicole Shaw, the police chief at North Central Texas College, said the school's latest contract for the service cost \$12,750 a year.

Shaw said she knew of only one instance where the service alerted to a potentially troubling situation. In that case, the department was already aware of the student who wrote the post and the student was not an imminent threat to himself.

Potentially suicidal students aren't the only thing the college is monitoring for.

"Protests, that's one of the buzzwords," she said.

"We don't take sides, we just want to make sure everyone has a safe experience."

8. What event sparked the idea for Social Sentinel according to the text?

The event was a Police briefing in the 2000s

Social Sentinel has long said its service can't be used for monitoring protests.

But emails in 2017 between campus police officials at Kennesaw State show the school used the service at least three times for that purpose.

In addition to the town hall meeting, the school monitored protests against President Trump's 2017 ban on travelers from several Muslim-majority countries and demonstrations against the university's former chancellor, Sam Olens.

Several spokespeople from Kennesaw State declined repeated requests for interviews for this story.

Documents show the service was a key tool for the school's police department in 2017. Members of the staff reported how many tweets were flagged in their monthly meetings that year. The service showed up in a 2017 job description outlining the daily duties of a criminal intelligence analyst, saying the role included monitoring Social Sentinel for "crime, civil unrest, protests" and more.

Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests, but declined to comment on any activities before their acquisition of the company in 2020.

"The word protest is not even in our engines," he said, referring to the technology the company says it uses to analyze social media posts.

Documents The News obtained from schools around the country show company representatives repeatedly promoted Social Sentinel's ability to monitor protests.

In 2017, a marketer working with the company, David Smitherman, reached out to a UNC-Charlotte administrator, Christine Davis, to tout the service.

Smitherman had contacted Davis at least two other times saying the service could be used for forestalling potentially volatile protests, emails show. In a November 2016 message to another administrator, he wrote that it could be used for mitigating the impacts of “disruptive demonstrations & protests.” Around the same time, representatives used the same language of “mitigating” and “forestalling” protests in messages to Stephen F. Austin State University and UNC-Asheville.

This time he added something different — a whitepaper from the company titled “Demonstrations and Protests: Using Social Media to Gather Intelligence and Respond to Campus Crowds.”

The document outlines how the service can be used to monitor before and during demonstrations, and also mentions that Michigan State University used the service to monitor protests. Emails from 2015 and 2016 obtained by The News also show the whitepaper was sent to at least three other colleges — UT Dallas, Appalachian State and UNC-Asheville — considering the service.

“During an event, threat alerts can provide important insight about the leaders or agitators who may want a confrontation with law enforcement, the general climate of the crowd and the potential for crowd growth,” the document says.

Davis told The News that she did not follow up with Smitherman and the university did not seek a service to monitor protests. Smitherman declined to comment for this story.

9. How did the emails between campus police officials reveal the use of the Social Sentinel service at Kennesaw State in 2017?

They would use it to monitor protests & demonstration (civil rest)

From the beginning, Social Sentinel's co-founder, Margolis, said publicly that the service could not be used to surveil individual people.

In emails to clients, the company had a different message.

“I hear that you are interested in uploading usernames, user accounts, etc to follow known threats,” one employee wrote to former North Carolina State University Police Chief Jack Moorman in August 2015. “We recently released that feature, and you can now upload a list of Twitter authors.”

“I appreciate the information on the feature of uploading the accounts of individuals that we want to follow,” Moorman wrote back. “This should be a great benefit to ongoing threat assessment cases.”

NC State declined to comment on Moorman's activities, but said Social Sentinel was not used to target individuals or groups. Moorman did not respond to requests for comment.

Documents show schools may have used another feature of the service called the Local+ List to target protesters and individual students. Of the 37 colleges identified by The News as using the

service, only two, Oregon State and the University of Connecticut, provided their Local+ List in response to public records requests.

At least one North Texas college — UT Dallas — could have used the feature to monitor individuals. Vanessa Balderrama, a project coordinator for the university, said the school could not release its Local+ List because it contained students' names.

North Carolina A&T, a historically Black college in Greensboro, may have used the list feature in a way that would reveal posts critical of the university's leadership after a cheerleader said her coaches mishandled her rape complaint. Emails from the school in February 2019 show a Social Sentinel employee suggesting a long list of keywords and phrases related to the protests to the school's social media manager.

"Yes, please add these in," the manager wrote in response.

North Carolina A&T Associate Vice Chancellor Todd Simmons denied using the service to monitor the demonstrations, saying the email was "an effort to upsell us to the Local Plus product." In its investigation, The News found no evidence that the Local+ List cost schools more money.

The Local+ List resembles another tool popular with law enforcement around the same time — the CIA-funded service Geofeedia.

The North Carolina colleges were familiar with the competing tool — at least two of the schools' police departments were part of a law enforcement group run by North Carolina's State Bureau of Investigation, which had a contract with Geofeedia.

Documents obtained by The News show UNC-Chapel Hill's police department asked the state bureau to surveil pro and anti-abortion protesters in October 2015. The investigative agency quickly obliged. Emails between the agencies show SBI tracked keywords and hashtags including "Feminist Students United," "Students for Reproductive Justice," "#feminist," "#studentsforlife" and even "#unc."

In 2016, the ACLU of Northern California disclosed that law enforcement agencies had used Geofeedia to monitor Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Ferguson. Soon after, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram announced they would suspend or limit Geofeedia's access to their service. A month later, Geofeedia laid off more than half of its staff.

The ACLU revelations raised alarms at Social Sentinel. One former employee told The News that executives decided to stop selling the service to local police departments after they realized their service was also used to monitor Black Lives Matter protesters.

In a 2017 webinar, Margolis referenced the problems with Geofeedia and said the company shared the ACLU's fears.

"Our team at Social Sentinel had exactly those same concerns back in 2015, and we put a stake in the ground and created the threat alert approach for exactly the reasons the ACLU cited," Margolis told the webinar's attendees. "Targeting and surveilling individuals or groups is not OK."

"Monitoring is icky," Margolis added.

After the disclosures about Geofeedia, UNC-Chapel Hill sought another social media monitoring service, and eventually signed a \$24,500 yearly contract with Social Sentinel in November 2016.

Less than a year later, the university surveilled student protesters again.

NBC News reported that the college collaborated with an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force to surveil the social media posts of people protesting a Confederate statue on campus in 2017. It is unclear which monitoring service the school used in that case.

During another protest of the Confederate monument a year later, campus police again monitored posts, this time using Social Sentinel's list feature, emails show.

The News received no documentation from the college showing UNC used the service for anything but monitoring protests. The former campus police chief, David Perry, and Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said in 2020 that they were not aware of any instances when the service had helped to prevent violence on the campus.

10. What did Social Sentinel's co-founder, Margolis, publicly state about the service's use regarding surveilling individual people?

Margolis said that the service should not be used for surveilling.

Some university officials said they were not bothered by the potential privacy implications of Social Sentinel because they said they only used the tool to monitor public social media posts.

"I don't think it was ever a concern of mine," Reynolds, the UNT Chief, told The News last year. "The information that we were looking at was public information."

"My understanding of the product is they can only draw those comments from public posts on social media," said David Thomasee, executive director of operations at Gulf Coast State College. "I'm not sure that the expectation of privacy is there if anyone in the world can see it."

But even collecting publicly posted information may harm students' privacy and speech rights, experts say. Jake Wiener, a lawyer at the Electronic Privacy Information Center also said social media monitoring services may extend the reach of law enforcement agencies beyond what they were previously able to track.

"Something like a social media surveillance program is going to sweep in so much data," Wiener said. "An officer is going to be far more likely to investigate, and possibly arrest, people who are not actually the types of targets they're looking for."

Ferguson, the law professor at American who also authored The Rise of Big Data Policing, said the use of social media monitoring tools could be challenged under an interpretation of a 2017 Supreme Court Case, Carpenter v. U.S. In that case, the court ruled that the government could not seize a suspected robber's cell phone records, including location data from cell towers, without a warrant.

The court's decision may reflect a shift in the interpretation of privacy law to a new focus on how much information was collected rather than just what information was collected.

"You're looking for a needle in the haystack but you've got to collect the whole haystack to find the needle," Ferguson said.

Universities may also have more incentives to adopt surveillance technology than local police.

"We definitely hear administrators talking a lot like 'the school is like a family and we're here to protect you from anything bad that might happen on campus,'" said Alex Morey, a lawyer at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

"That kind of mentality would lead to a heightened willingness to see these surveillance systems as a good thing."

11. What concerns do experts like Jake Wiener and Ferguson raise regarding the potential consequences of using social media surveillance programs at universities?

The concerns they have is that they are going to sweep to much data and challenge interpretation in supreme courts.

Four months after a gunman killed two people and injured four others at UNC-Charlotte in 2019, Judy Stanwyck noticed something strange.

Stanwyck, a senior buyer for the university, was handling UNC-Charlotte's purchase of Social Sentinel. She wasn't familiar with the technology so she looked up the company's website and started reading.

One feature jumped out — the company was advertising the ability to monitor students' university email accounts.

"I found this," Stanwyck wrote in an email to her colleague, including the link to the website. "I would just confirm exactly what they are purchasing."

Stanwyck did not respond to requests for comment.

In the company's proposed contract with UNC-Charlotte, it said the email monitoring service was only available for K-12 schools. But in an email to the university's associate vice chancellor for safety and security, an employee said they could add that service if they wanted to.

The company initially said it only monitored public information on social media. But since at least 2019, records show it has offered colleges the ability to monitor private student emails.

It's unclear whether a college has taken the company up on its offer — The News was unable to find a university that had used the email monitoring service, though the practice is common in K-12 schools.

Privacy experts said they were appalled by the service's ability to monitor private student messages.

"The idea of adding surveillance software to the campus infrastructure where students are

supposed to learn is just shocking,” Dave Maass, the director of investigations at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said. “It’s just an abomination to the idea of scholastic freedom.”

UNC-Charlotte ultimately did not sign the contract, citing budget limitations. At the same time, the company was promoting the email monitoring service to another North Carolina college — UNC-Asheville.

In 2019 emails to the university, the co-founder Margolis promoted Social Sentinel’s ability to work with the Google suite of services and promised they would work with Microsoft Outlook in the near future.

Another company employee advertised the new Gmail integration in the signature of every email she sent to the school that year.

The Navigate360 CEO Guilbault said some colleges use the service to monitor emails. But they may not be stopping there.

In emails to Gulf Coast and Palm Beach state colleges in 2019, the company touted its ability to monitor Google Docs, Google Hangouts chats and even Facebook Messages.

12. Describe the discrepancy between what the company's proposed contract stated and what they communicated to the university regarding email monitoring services.

The company say the monitoring should be should be K-12 schools but email say they could add that service if they wanted to.

### Tracked: How Colleges Used AI to Monitor Student Protests [Revised Questions]

The pitch was attractive and simple.

For a few thousand dollars a year, Social Sentinel offered schools across the country sophisticated technology to scan social media posts from students at risk of harming themselves or others. Used correctly, the tool could help save lives, the company said.

For some colleges that bought the service, it also served a different purpose — allowing campus police to surveil student protests.

During demonstrations over a Confederate statue at UNC-Chapel Hill, a Social Sentinel employee entered keywords into the company's monitoring tool to find posts related to the protests. At Kennesaw State University in Georgia five years ago, authorities used the service to track protesters at a town hall with a U.S. senator, records show. And at North Carolina A&T, a campus official told a Social Sentinel employee to enter keywords to find posts related to a cheerleader's allegation that the school mishandled her rape complaint.

An investigation by *The Dallas Morning News* and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism reveals for the first time that as more students have embraced social media as a digital town square to express opinions and organize demonstrations, many college police departments have been using taxpayer dollars to pay for Social Sentinel's services to monitor what they say. At least 37 colleges, including four in North Texas, collectively educating hundreds of thousands of students, have used Social Sentinel since 2015.

1. What is the main purpose of Social Sentinel as described in the text?

The main purpose is to surveil social media post.

2. Provide examples from the text of how colleges have used Social Sentinel for purposes other than monitoring students at risk.

- Allowing campus police to surveil student protests.  
- Employees enter a keyword into company's monitoring tool to find related post about the protest.

3. How have college police departments been utilizing Social Sentinel, according to the investigation mentioned in the text?

- Services to monitor what they say

The true number of colleges that used the tool could be far higher. In an email to a UT Dallas police lieutenant, the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, said it was used by "hundreds of colleges and universities in 36 states." Margolis declined to comment on this story.

The News examined thousands of pages of emails, contracts and marketing material from colleges around the country, and spoke to school officials, campus police, activists and experts. The investigation shows that, despite publicly saying its service was not a surveillance tool, Social Sentinel representatives promoted the tool to universities for "mitigating" and "forestalling" protests. The documents also show the company has been moving in a new and potentially more invasive direction — allowing schools to monitor student emails on university accounts.

For colleges struggling to respond to high-profile school shootings and a worsening campus mental health crisis, Social Sentinel's low-cost tool can seem like a good deal. In addition to the dozens of colleges that use the service, a News investigation last year revealed that at least 52 school districts in Texas have adopted Social Sentinel as an additional security measure since 2015, including Uvalde CISD where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers in May. The company's current CEO J.P. Guilbault also said their services are used by one in four K-12 schools in the country.

Some experts said AI tools like Social Sentinel are untested, and even if they are adopted for a worthwhile purpose, they have the potential to be abused.

For public colleges, the use of the service sets up an additional conflict between protecting students' Constitutional rights of free speech and privacy and schools' duty to keep them safe on campus, said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University's Washington College of Law.

"What the technology allows you to do is identify individuals who are associated together or are associated with a place or location," said Ferguson. "That is obviously somewhat chilling for First Amendment freedoms of people who believe in a right to protest and dissent."

Navigate360, the private Ohio-based company that acquired Social Sentinel in 2020, called The News' investigation "inaccurate, speculative or by opinion in many instances and significantly outdated." The company also changed the name of the service from Social Sentinel to Navigate360 Detect earlier this year.

4. What information did the company's co-founder, Gary Margolis, share regarding the number of colleges and universities using the tool?

hundreds of colleges and universities in 36 states  
uses the tool.

5. According to the text, what contradictory behavior was observed in how Social Sentinel was marketed versus its public stance?

It says it a security measure  
but when it actually monitors student posts.

6. How does law professor Andrew Guthrie Ferguson highlight the potential conflict posed by using AI tools like Social Sentinel in public colleges?

The conflict is that  
the freedom of speech is out but you get a safe  
place

In an interview in February, Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests.

But documents from Kennesaw State show campus police tracked demonstrators' online activity for days with Social Sentinel before a contentious 2017 town hall.

Brandy White, a criminal intelligence analyst in KSU's police department, was in charge of the monitoring. On instruction from her supervisors, White entered information about demonstrators and protest groups into Social Sentinel's monitoring tool and set up searches to find posts about the event, emails show.

White also received a KSU police intelligence briefing from a colleague about the event. The document, obtained by The News in response to a public records request, singled out one progressive activist group, the liberal grassroots network Indivisible, and cited conservative conspiracy theories that George Soros funded the protesters.

The report also identified a young progressive activist named Marisa Pyle.

At the time, Pyle was a 19-year-old student at a nearby college. She told The News that she had no idea about KSU's monitoring.

"There's no version of that where I needed any kind of special attention or surveillance by Kennesaw State."

7. According to the report obtained by The News, what progressive activist group was singled out for monitoring by KSU police intelligence?

The liberal grassroots network Indivisible.

The idea for Social Sentinel came out of a police briefing in the mid-2000s.

A sergeant named Jimmy had more to say than usual.

He told Margolis, then the police chief at the University of Vermont in Burlington, about a series of petty thefts, a sexual assault and a protest planned at the executive offices of the university.

“Jimmy, where did we get this information?” he asked.

The sergeant sent Margolis to see an overnight dispatcher, who showed him the source — new online sites, including a website called The Facebook.

It was in that moment, Margolis later said, the seed for Social Sentinel was formed.

“It became clear that we needed a digital beat cop — ‘someone’ with an ear to the social landscape,” he wrote in a 2015 blog post on the Social Sentinel website.

In 2008, in his final year as police chief, Margolis merged his consulting service with another started by Steven Healy, a former military police officer who previously held top safety roles at Princeton and Wellesley. Four years later, the two announced Campus Sentinel, an app that aggregated crime stats on college campuses.

It would take another two years before Margolis could realize his vision for an app that kept tabs on online activity. In 2014, with support from a Boston-based private equity firm and a New York-based venture capital company, the duo rebranded the service as Social Sentinel, a social media threat alert service.

The University of North Texas was an early adopter.

The school’s police chief, Ed Reynolds, told The News last year that the university scheduled a presentation with the company after hearing success stories from other chiefs at a conference.

The presenters billed Social Sentinel as an AI tool that could detect threatening tweets about the UNT campus, and showed Reynolds how it could be used to find posts.

After considering other competing services, the UNT police chief signed a \$15,000-a-year contract in December 2015.

In November of that year, a Social Sentinel employee sent Reynolds suggestions for how to use the service, emails obtained by The News show. In one section, the company proposed the school adopt a rule preventing them from monitoring protests, except when they threatened public safety.

It’s unclear whether UNT adopted the suggested policy — no signed copy exists in the records provided to The News. Aside from the proposed procedures sent to the North Texas school, Social Sentinel seems to have offered colleges few guardrails for how to use its service. The News reached out to every university known to use the service — none of the colleges that responded said they had rules specifically governing Social Sentinel.

Reynolds said UNT stopped using the service in 2018, after determining they could handle the monitoring in house. That same year, Collin College signed a contract with Social Sentinel and UT Dallas renewed its contract for another three years.

At least one college in North Texas still uses the monitoring tool. Nicole Shaw, the police chief at North Central Texas College, said the school's latest contract for the service cost \$12,750 a year.

Shaw said she knew of only one instance where the service alerted to a potentially troubling situation. In that case, the department was already aware of the student who wrote the post and the student was not an imminent threat to himself.

Potentially suicidal students aren't the only thing the college is monitoring for.

"Protests, that's one of the buzzwords," she said.

"We don't take sides, we just want to make sure everyone has a safe experience."

8. What event sparked the idea for Social Sentinel according to the text?

The events that sparked the idea of the Social Sentinel was police briefing in the 2000's

Social Sentinel has long said its service can't be used for monitoring protests.

But emails in 2017 between campus police officials at Kennesaw State show the school used the service at least three times for that purpose.

In addition to the town hall meeting, the school monitored protests against President Trump's 2017 ban on travelers from several Muslim-majority countries and demonstrations against the university's former chancellor, Sam Olens.

Several spokespeople from Kennesaw State declined repeated requests for interviews for this story.

Documents show the service was a key tool for the school's police department in 2017. Members of the staff reported how many tweets were flagged in their monthly meetings that year. The service showed up in a 2017 job description outlining the daily duties of a criminal intelligence analyst, saying the role included monitoring Social Sentinel for "crime, civil unrest, protests" and more.

Guilbault said the service does not have the ability to monitor protests, but declined to comment on any activities before their acquisition of the company in 2020.

"The word protest is not even in our engines," he said, referring to the technology the company says it uses to analyze social media posts.

Documents The News obtained from schools around the country show company representatives repeatedly promoted Social Sentinel's ability to monitor protests.

In 2017, a marketer working with the company, David Smitherman, reached out to a UNC-Charlotte administrator, Christine Davis, to tout the service.

Smitherman had contacted Davis at least two other times saying the service could be used for forestalling potentially volatile protests, emails show. In a November 2016 message to another administrator, he wrote that it could be used for mitigating the impacts of “disruptive demonstrations & protests.” Around the same time, representatives used the same language of “mitigating” and “forestalling” protests in messages to Stephen F. Austin State University and UNC-Asheville.

This time he added something different — a whitepaper from the company titled “Demonstrations and Protests: Using Social Media to Gather Intelligence and Respond to Campus Crowds.”

The document outlines how the service can be used to monitor before and during demonstrations, and also mentions that Michigan State University used the service to monitor protests. Emails from 2015 and 2016 obtained by The News also show the whitepaper was sent to at least three other colleges — UT Dallas, Appalachian State and UNC-Asheville — considering the service.

“During an event, threat alerts can provide important insight about the leaders or agitators who may want a confrontation with law enforcement, the general climate of the crowd and the potential for crowd growth,” the document says.

Davis told The News that she did not follow up with Smitherman and the university did not seek a service to monitor protests. Smitherman declined to comment for this story.

9. How did the emails between campus police officials reveal the use of the Social Sentinel service at Kennesaw State in 2017? They used it by protesting against president. Kennesaw States used it to monitor campus protest & demonstration (civil unrest)

From the beginning, Social Sentinel’s co-founder, Margolis, said publicly that the service could not be used to surveil individual people.

In emails to clients, the company had a different message.

“I hear that you are interested in uploading usernames, user accounts, etc to follow known threats,” one employee wrote to former North Carolina State University Police Chief Jack Moorman in August 2015. “We recently released that feature, and you can now upload a list of Twitter authors.”

“I appreciate the information on the feature of uploading the accounts of individuals that we want to follow,” Moorman wrote back. “This should be a great benefit to ongoing threat assessment cases.”

NC State declined to comment on Moorman’s activities, but said Social Sentinel was not used to target individuals or groups. Moorman did not respond to requests for comment.

Documents show schools may have used another feature of the service called the Local+ List to target protesters and individual students. Of the 37 colleges identified by The News as using the

service, only two, Oregon State and the University of Connecticut, provided their Local+ List in response to public records requests.

At least one North Texas college — UT Dallas — could have used the feature to monitor individuals. Vanessa Balderrama, a project coordinator for the university, said the school could not release its Local+ List because it contained students' names.

North Carolina A&T, a historically Black college in Greensboro, may have used the list feature in a way that would reveal posts critical of the university's leadership after a cheerleader said her coaches mishandled her rape complaint. Emails from the school in February 2019 show a Social Sentinel employee suggesting a long list of keywords and phrases related to the protests to the school's social media manager.

"Yes, please add these in," the manager wrote in response.

North Carolina A&T Associate Vice Chancellor Todd Simmons denied using the service to monitor the demonstrations, saying the email was "an effort to upsell us to the Local Plus product." In its investigation, The News found no evidence that the Local+ List cost schools more money.

The Local+ List resembles another tool popular with law enforcement around the same time — the CIA-funded service Geofeedia.

The North Carolina colleges were familiar with the competing tool — at least two of the schools' police departments were part of a law enforcement group run by North Carolina's State Bureau of Investigation, which had a contract with Geofeedia.

Documents obtained by The News show UNC-Chapel Hill's police department asked the state bureau to surveil pro and anti-abortion protesters in October 2015. The investigative agency quickly obliged. Emails between the agencies show SBI tracked keywords and hashtags including "Feminist Students United," "Students for Reproductive Justice," "#feminist," "#studentsforlife" and even "#unc."

In 2016, the ACLU of Northern California disclosed that law enforcement agencies had used Geofeedia to monitor Black Lives Matter demonstrators in Ferguson. Soon after, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram announced they would suspend or limit Geofeedia's access to their service. A month later, Geofeedia laid off more than half of its staff.

The ACLU revelations raised alarms at Social Sentinel. One former employee told The News that executives decided to stop selling the service to local police departments after they realized their service was also used to monitor Black Lives Matter protesters.

In a 2017 webinar, Margolis referenced the problems with Geofeedia and said the company shared the ACLU's fears.

"Our team at Social Sentinel had exactly those same concerns back in 2015, and we put a stake in the ground and created the threat alert approach for exactly the reasons the ACLU cited," Margolis told the webinar's attendees. "Targeting and surveilling individuals or groups is not OK."

"Monitoring is icky," Margolis added.

After the disclosures about Geofeedia, UNC-Chapel Hill sought another social media monitoring service, and eventually signed a \$24,500 yearly contract with Social Sentinel in November 2016.

Less than a year later, the university surveilled student protesters again.

NBC News reported that the college collaborated with an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force to surveil the social media posts of people protesting a Confederate statue on campus in 2017. It is unclear which monitoring service the school used in that case.

During another protest of the Confederate monument a year later, campus police again monitored posts, this time using Social Sentinel's list feature, emails show.

The News received no documentation from the college showing UNC used the service for anything but monitoring protests. The former campus police chief, David Perry, and Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz said in 2020 that they were not aware of any instances when the service had helped to prevent violence on the campus.

10. What did Social Sentinel's co-founder, Margolis, publicly state about the service's use regarding surveilling individual people? *Margolis said that the service should not be used for surveilling.*

Some university officials said they were not bothered by the potential privacy implications of Social Sentinel because they said they only used the tool to monitor public social media posts.

"I don't think it was ever a concern of mine," Reynolds, the UNT Chief, told The News last year. "The information that we were looking at was public information."

"My understanding of the product is they can only draw those comments from public posts on social media," said David Thomasee, executive director of operations at Gulf Coast State College. "I'm not sure that the expectation of privacy is there if anyone in the world can see it."

But even collecting publicly posted information may harm students' privacy and speech rights, experts say. Jake Wiener, a lawyer at the Electronic Privacy Information Center also said social media monitoring services may extend the reach of law enforcement agencies beyond what they were previously able to track.

"Something like a social media surveillance program is going to sweep in so much data," Wiener said. "An officer is going to be far more likely to investigate, and possibly arrest, people who are not actually the types of targets they're looking for."

Ferguson, the law professor at American who also authored The Rise of Big Data Policing, said the use of social media monitoring tools could be challenged under an interpretation of a 2017 Supreme Court Case, Carpenter v. U.S. In that case, the court ruled that the government could not seize a suspected robber's cell phone records, including location data from cell towers, without a warrant.

The court's decision may reflect a shift in the interpretation of privacy law to a new focus on how much information was collected rather than just what information was collected.

"You're looking for a needle in the haystack but you've got to collect the whole haystack to find the needle," Ferguson said.

Universities may also have more incentives to adopt surveillance technology than local police.

"We definitely hear administrators talking a lot like 'the school is like a family and we're here to protect you from anything bad that might happen on campus,'" said Alex Morey, a lawyer at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

"That kind of mentality would lead to a heightened willingness to see these surveillance systems as a good thing."

11. What concerns do experts like Jake Wiener and Ferguson raise regarding the potential consequences of using social media surveillance programs at universities?

The concerns they have is that they are going to sweep to much data, and challenges interpretation in Supreme Court

Four months after a gunman killed two people and injured four others at UNC-Charlotte in 2019, Judy Stanwyck noticed something strange.

Stanwyck, a senior buyer for the university, was handling UNC-Charlotte's purchase of Social Sentinel. She wasn't familiar with the technology so she looked up the company's website and started reading.

One feature jumped out — the company was advertising the ability to monitor students' university email accounts.

"I found this," Stanwyck wrote in an email to her colleague, including the link to the website. "I would just confirm exactly what they are purchasing."

Stanwyck did not respond to requests for comment.

In the company's proposed contract with UNC-Charlotte, it said the email monitoring service was only available for K-12 schools. But in an email to the university's associate vice chancellor for safety and security, an employee said they could add that service if they wanted to.

The company initially said it only monitored public information on social media. But since at least 2019, records show it has offered colleges the ability to monitor private student emails.

It's unclear whether a college has taken the company up on its offer — The News was unable to find a university that had used the email monitoring service, though the practice is common in K-12 schools.

Privacy experts said they were appalled by the service's ability to monitor private student messages.

"The idea of adding surveillance software to the campus infrastructure where students are

supposed to learn is just shocking," Dave Maass, the director of investigations at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said. "It's just an abomination to the idea of scholastic freedom."

UNC-Charlotte ultimately did not sign the contract, citing budget limitations. At the same time, the company was promoting the email monitoring service to another North Carolina college — UNC-Asheville.

In 2019 emails to the university, the co-founder Margolis promoted Social Sentinel's ability to work with the Google suite of services and promised they would work with Microsoft Outlook in the near future.

Another company employee advertised the new Gmail integration in the signature of every email she sent to the school that year.

The Navigate360 CEO Guilbault said some colleges use the service to monitor emails. But they may not be stopping there.

In emails to Gulf Coast and Palm Beach state colleges in 2019, the company touted its ability to monitor Google Docs, Google Hangouts chats and even Facebook Messages.

12. Describe the discrepancy between what the company's proposed contract stated and what they communicated to the university regarding email monitoring services. *The difference is that they said they monitor emails which were only available for K-12 but when the acullay say they can add on services.*