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After googling the law enforcement software start-up company PredPol (short for “predictive policing”), something strange happened—PredPol advertisements kept reappearing in my Twitter feed. PredPol wasn’t on my radar at this point—I had come across the company while doing pre- liminary research on the use of predictive analytics in current law enforcement practices. But PredPol forced its way into my consciousness with its inces- sant stream of advertisements touting that the company was helping “build safer communities.” The first advertisement I encountered in my feed read: “More Than a HotSpot Tool, we use no personal data to help Law Enforcement agencies to build safer communities.”

The advertisement tried to reassure me that the company was not monitoring my behavior, which was somewhat unsettling given that the ad likely only appeared in my feed because of my Google searches. A few days passed without me thinking much about PredPol or its creepy ads in my Twitter feed. In the meantime, I tweeted at some of my friends who are interested in policing and technology about an essay I was developing on predictive policing. In response to a tweet I posted on data and policing, @newyorkyearzero noted that the unique thing about the statistical analysis police program CompStat was not its methodological innovations, but how it repre- sented police “science” to the public. I replied that the use of crime statistics to legitimize the police and prisons was nothing new; since the late nineteenth century, a data-driven approach to understanding crime has been used to perpetuate institutionalized antiblack violence and legitimize policing. Other activist intellectuals began to chime in on the conversation and share links to articles, and advertisements for PredPol began to pop up in their feeds as well as in the feeds of bystanders who follow me on Twitter but did not participate in the exchange.

PredPol’s data-driven approach to policing, as well as the aggressive marketing tactics deployed by the company to legitimize its methods, makes it an ideal case to examine when trying to understand the algorithmic turn in policing. PredPol draws on many of the tenets of the “police science” paradigm to solve two contemporary crises: the crisis of legitimacy suffered by the police and a broader epistemological crisis that could be called the crisis of uncertainty. In this essay I will critique the widespread use and assessment of PredPol in the ways that it: 1) con- cedes to the inevitability of crime and creates zones of paranoia, 2) generates false positives that can be used to promote the product, and 3) depoliticizes policing and the construction of crime.

PredPol and Algorithmic Policing

The use of predictive analytics is standard in the commercial sector. The purchases we make at the grocery store are used to determine which coupons will be printed out with our receipt, while our past purchases on Amazon are used to generate a bottomless feed of product recommendations. However, the adaptation of predictive analytics in the realm of law enforcement has been more gradual, though in recent years there has been a substantial push by the tech industry to develop predictive policing technology. IBM has spent more than $14 billion on developing predictive analytics software for both commerce and law enforcement sectors. By late 2013, PredPol alone received $1.3 million in seed funding by Silicon Valley investors.²

The ideological foundation for PredPol and other predictive policing technologies can be traced to George Kelling, a criminologist who is affiliated with the conservative Manhattan Institute. Beginning in the 1980s, he advocated the use of statistical analysis to more effectively distribute law enforcement resources. In the mid-1990s, CompStat was introduced into the New York Police Department (NYPD), which encouraged officers to make decisions about which areas to police based on statistical analysis rather than intuition. Since the 1990s, more than 150 police departments nation- wide have adopted policing software and equipment that allows for statistical analysis. According to SF Weekly, “Interest in predictive policing spiked nationally in 2009 as the National Institute of Justice, the research and policy branch of the Department of Justice, published a series of white papers and doled out millions in grant money to seven police departments to undertake the task.”³

The Los Angeles Police Department received one of these grants to undertake predictive policing research. At the same time, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) was conducting research funded by the army, navy, and air force that used algorithms—based on earthquake pre- dictions—to track insurgents and predict casualties in war zones overseas. This software, which was first used in Iraq and later evolved into PredPol, was the brainchild of an anthropology professor, Jeffrey Brantingham; a math professor, Andrea Bertozzi; and a mathematics postdoctoral researcher, George Mohler.

Sean Malinowski, who oversaw the LAPD pre- dictive policing grant, linked the efforts of the LAPD with the predictive policing methods that were being developed at UCLA. Malinowski attended the Egyptian National Police Academy in Cairo, where he studied counterterrorism. Later, the federal-funded research project was turned into a Silicon Valley start-up when Mohler, who became a professor at Santa Clara University, made connections with Ryan Coonerty, Caleb Baskin, and Zach Friend. Mohler noted that “Zach was a media mastermind—he’d worked in the press office of the 2008 Obama campaign. Once PopSci and The New York Times picked up the story, it was off to the races.”⁴ Thus, the developers of PredPol were concerned with not only creating a tool that would make law enforcement more effi- cient, but also constructing a brand that would pique the interest of the media.