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Glendale district says social media monitoring is for student safety

Glendale Unified is using the firm Geo Listening in a bid against cyberbullying, suicides, drugs and other ills. Critics say it infringes on privacy and steps beyond schools' jurisdiction.

September 14, 2013 | By Stephen Ceasar

Hoover High School junior Christopher Chung learned while scrolling through Facebook that his school was monitoring students' online activities.

Christopher saw an article posted by a friend about the Glendale Unified School District hiring a company to screen students' social media posts. The school district had been doing so for about a year.

"I heard rumors that GUSD was doing a little bit of monitoring — but nothing as official as this," he said. "The only way students were finding out about it was through social media. Our principal hasn't said anything about it."

The district last year hired Hermosa Beach-based Geo Listening to piece together the cyber tidbits of its 14,000 or so middle and high school students. The effort, for which the district is paying \$40,500, is aimed at unearthing the earliest signs of bullying and self-harm.

The company's computers scour an untold number of public posts by students on blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, for example. Analysts are alerted to terms that suggest suicidal thoughts, bullying, vandalism and even the use of obscenities, among other things. When they find posts they think should spur an intervention or anything that violates schools' student codes of conduct, the company alerts the campus.

While acknowledging some of the benefits, critics of the program contend that the monitoring could also have a chilling effect on students' free speech. And, they contend, it opens the possibility that students could be disciplined for comments made outside of school.

Students say the policing of their posts has stirred debate on campuses. Some are angry about what they see as an intrusion.

"They have a good purpose for what they're trying to do — stopping cyberbullying," Christopher said. "Nobody really understands what it is about or what the main objectives are of the program."

Glendale schools Supt. Dick Sheehan said the district was reeling from the recent suicides of students in the area and was searching for ways to reach out to those who need help. Two students committed suicide last school year, one at Crescenta Valley High School, which is in the district, and another at nearby La Cañada High School, which is part of the La Cañada Unified School District.

Authorities are investigating the role of cyberbullying in the suicide last week of Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a 12-year-old Florida girl who jumped to her death

from a platform at an abandoned cement plant near her home. Friends and family said she suffered constant online harassment from friends who had turned against her in a dispute over a boy. Rebecca was "absolutely terrorized on social media," Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd told reporters.

The Glendale district began a pilot program to monitor students online last year at its three high schools, Glendale, Hoover and Crescenta Valley.

"We think it's been working very well," Sheehan said. "It's designed around student safety and making sure kids are protected."

The district does not provide a list of students to the company. Instead, it uses "deductive reasoning" to link public accounts to students, said Chris Frydrych, founder and chief executive of Geo Listening. He declined to be more specific.

Frydrych would not comment on how many school districts he has contracts with but said he expects the company to be monitoring about 3,000 schools worldwide by the end of the year.

He stressed that the company monitors only publicly available posts and isn't peeking into private correspondence or hacking into accounts. The company gathers what students are putting out there for the world to see, Frydrych said.

Such programs must balance safe and supportive schools with student privacy and free speech, said Brendan Hamme, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

"But this program is sweeping and far afield of what is necessary to ensure student safety and intrudes deeply into students' privacy and conduct outside of school," he said.

The list of issues the company looks for is extensive. It includes controlled substances, self-harm, disruption of class or school activities, hazing, sexual harassment of peers or teachers, threats or acts of physical violence, use of fake identification, hate speech, racism, weapons and suicide or despair.

"No matter where they are, if they are advertising it in the public domain, it's no different than if they're standing in front of a teacher," Frydrych said.

Daily reports to school administrators include a screen capture of the flagged posts, along with details of whether they were made on or off campus, the time and date, the user's name, if available, and a description of why the post caught the attention of analysts, Frydrych said.

It's up to administrators to decide whether the posts warrant action, Sheehan said.

"To my knowledge, no student has been disciplined following a social media post found by Geo Listening," he said. "That's not to say we wouldn't."

The gathering of public information found online doesn't violate free-speech protections, said Peter Scheer, executive director of the First Amendment Coalition, a nonprofit based in San Rafael. The use of that information to alert parents to behavior or to counsel a student, for instance, would be appropriate, he said.

But disciplining students for posts made outside of school could infringe on the students' free-speech rights, Scheer said.

However, in situations where students write about hurting themselves, threaten to harm others or use hate speech toward a particular person, intervention for student safety can be reasonable, Scheer said.

Young Cho, 16, a junior at Hoover High, said that although she supports the effort to help keep students safe, monitoring them for less severe violations of school rules goes too far.

"We all know social media is not a private place, not really a safe place," she said. "But it's not the same as being in school. It's students' expression of their own thoughts and feelings to their friends. For the school to intrude in that area — I understand they can do it, but I don't think it's right."

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