

Amoral Compass: “Create and Govern Artificial Intelligence”. Palantir and Its Quest to Remake the World

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Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Finance analysts free of moral scruple can point to Palantir with relish and note that 2023 was a fairly rewarding year for it. The company, [which bills itself](#) as a “category-leading software” builder “that empowers organizations to create and govern artificial intelligence”, launched its initial public offering in 2020. But the milky confidence curdled, as with much else with tech assets, leading to the company stock falling by as much as 87% of value. But this is the sort of language that delights the economy boffins no end, a bloodless exercise that ignores what Palantir really does.

The surveillance company initially cut its teeth on agendas related to national security and law enforcement through Gotham. A rather dry summation of its services is [offered](#) by Adrew Iliadis and Amelia Acker:

“The company supplies information technology solutions for data integration and tracking to police and government agencies, humanitarian organizations, and corporations.”

Founded in 2003 and unimaginatively named after the magical stones in *The Lord of the Rings* known as “Seeing Stones” or *palantíri*, its ambition was to remake the national security scape, a true fetishist project envisaging technology as deliverer and saviour. While most of its work remains painfully clandestine, it does let the occasional salivating observer, such as Portugal’s former Secretary of State or European Affairs **Bruno Mações**, into its

citadel to receive the appropriate indoctrination.

It's impossible to take any commentary arising from these proselytised sorts seriously, but what follows can be intriguing. "The target coordination cycle: find, track, target, and prosecute," Mações [writes](#) for *Time*, reflecting on the technology on show at the company's London headquarters. "As we enter the algorithmic age, time is compressed. From the moment the algorithms set to work detecting their targets until these targets are prosecuted – a term of art in the field – no more than two or three minutes elapse." Such commentary takes the edge of the cruelty, the lethality, the sheer destruction of life that such prosecution entails.

While its stable of government clients remain important, the company also sought to further expand its base with Foundry, the commercial version of the software. "Foundry helps businesses make better decisions and solve problems, and Forrester estimated Foundry delivers a 315% return on investment (ROI) for its users," [writes](#) Will Healy, whose commentary is, given his association with Palantir, bound to be cherubically crawling while oddly flat.

This tech beast is also claiming to march to a more moral tune, with Palantir Technologies UK Ltd [announcing](#) in April that it had formed a partnership with the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine (OPG) to "enable investigators on the ground and across Europe to share, integrate, and process all key data relating to more than 78,000 registered war crimes."

The company's co-founder and chief executive officer, Alexander C. Karp, [nails his colours to the mast](#) with a schoolboy's binary simplicity. "The invasion of Ukraine represents one of the most significant challenges to the global balance of power. To that end, the crimes that are being committed in Ukraine must be prosecuted."

Having picked the Ukrainian cause as a beneficial one, Palantir revealed that it was "already helping Ukraine militarily, and supporting the resettlement of refugees in the UK, Poland and in Lithuania." For Karp, "Software is a product of the legal and moral order in which it is created, and plays a role in defending it."

Such gnostic statements are best kept in the spittoon of history, mere meaningless splutter, but if they are taken seriously, Karp is in trouble. He is one who has [admitted](#) with sissy's glee that the "core mission of our company always was to make the West, especially America, the strongest in the world, the strongest it's ever been, for the sake of global peace and prosperity". Typically, such money-minded megalomaniacs tend to confuse personal wealth and a robber baron's acquisitiveness with the more collective goals of peace and security. Murdering thieves can be most moral, even as they carry out their sordid tasks with silver tongues.

When Google dropped Project Maven, the US Department of Defense program that riled employees within the company, Palantir [was happy to offer its services](#). It did not matter one jot that the project, known in Palantir circles as "Tron", was designed to train AI to analyse aerial drone footage to enable the identification of objects and human beings (again bloodless, chilling, instrumental). "It's commonly known that our software is used in an operational context at war," Karp is [reported](#) as saying. "Do you really think a war fighter is going to trust a software company that pulls the plug because something becomes controversial with their life? Currently, when you're a war fighter your life depends on your

software.”

War is merely one context where Palantir dirties the terrain of policy. In 2020, Amnesty International published a report outlining the various human rights risks arising from Palantir’s contracts with the US Department of Homeland Security. Of particular concern were associated products and services stemming from its Homeland Security Investigations (HIS) division of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Human rights groups such as Mijente, along with a number of investors, [have also noted](#) that such contracts enable ICE to prosecute such activities as surveillance, detentions, raids, de facto family separations and deportations.

In 2023, protests by hundreds of UK health workers managed to shut down the central London headquarters of the tech behemoth. The workers in question were protesting the award of a £330 million contract to Palantir by the National Health Service (NHS) England. Many felt particularly riled at the company, [given its role](#) in furnishing the Israeli government with such military and surveillance technology, including predictive policing services. The latter are used to analyse social media posts by Palestinians that might reveal threats to public order or praise for “hostile” entities.

As Gaza is being flattened and gradually exterminated by Israeli arms, Palantir remains loyal, even stubbornly so. “We are one of the few companies in the world to stand and announce our support for Israel, which remains steadfast,” the company [stated](#) in a letter to shareholders. With a record now well washed in blood, the company deserves a global protest movement that blocks its appeal and encourages a shareholder exodus.

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