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Palantir listing may shine light on secretive Big Data firm

September 21, 2020

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WASHINGTON: Perhaps the most secretive firm to emerge from Silicon Valley, Palantir Technologies is set for a stock market debut this month that may shed light on the Big Data firm specializing in law enforcement and national security.

Palantir platform has been used in the controversial practice of "predictive policing" to help law enforcement, detect medical insurance fraud and fight the coronavirus pandemic.

While Palantir's data practices and algorithms are secret, the company claims it follows a road map which is, if anything, more ethical than its tech sector rivals.

It moved its headquarters to Denver this year, partly in an effort to set itself apart from its Silicon Valley rivals.

"Our company was founded in Silicon Valley. But we seem to share fewer and fewer of the technology sector's values and commitments," Palantir says in its prospectus. "From the start, we have repeatedly turned down opportunities to sell, collect or mine data."

Palantir is opting for a direct listing, expected on Sept. 29. This will not raise capital but will allow shares to be traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

Palantir's filing suggests a valuation of some \$10 billion, down from a private value as high as \$25 billion, according to Renaissance Capital.

The company posted a loss of \$580 million last year on revenue of \$743 million. But it sees prospects improving as it offers solutions to what it calls "fractured health care systems, erosions of data privacy, strained criminal justice systems and outmoded ways of fighting wars," its regulatory filing says.

Palantir's biggest shareholder is Peter Thiel, an early Facebook investor and one of the rare tech executives who backed Donald Trump's campaign in 2016.

"We are in a deadly race between politics and technology," Thiel wrote in a 2009 essay for the libertarian Cato Institute.

Activists argue that Palantir's technology — which scoops up financial records, social media posts, call records and internet records — enables unprecedented opportunities for mass surveillance with little oversight on privacy and fundamental rights.

Human rights activists have staged protests against Palantir after US agencies used its technology to hunt down illegal immigrants in the United States.

The immigration rights activist group Mijente claims Palantir technology is used in operations to track and arrest thousands of people “just for being undocumented.”

Palantir is a major player in “predictive policing,” a technology which critics say can amplify bias in law enforcement.

A 2017 research paper by University of Texas sociologist Sarah Brayne found the Palantir platform can connect seemingly unrelated bits of data for investigators, but can also lead to “a proliferation of data from police” collected without a warrant.

Palantir does not apologize for its work in national security and law enforcement.

Palantir points out that it created a privacy and civil liberties board in 2012, ahead of most tech rivals. It also rejects working with China as “inconsistent with our culture and mission.”