



The Far-Right Helped Create The World's Most Powerful Facial Recognition Technology

Luke O'Brien

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Advanced facial recognition technology poses a mortal threat to privacy. It could grant the government, corporations and even average citizens the ability to capture a photo of anybody and, with a few keystrokes, uncover all kinds of personal details. So when The New York Times published an exposé about a shadowy facial recognition firm called Clearview AI in January, it seemed like the worst nightmare of privacy advocates had arrived.

Clearview is the most powerful form of facial recognition technology ever created, according to the Times. With more than 3 billion photos scraped surreptitiously from social media profiles and websites, its image database is almost seven times the size of the FBI's. Its mobile app can match names to faces with a tap of a touchscreen. The technology is already being integrated into augmented reality glasses so people can identify almost anyone they look at.

Clearview has contracts with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, BuzzFeed reported earlier this year, and FBI agents, members of Customs and Border Protection, and hundreds of police officers at departments nationwide are among its users.

With the coronavirus pandemic increasingly throwing the country into chaos and President Donald Trump moving to expand domestic surveillance powers — in theory, to better map disease spread — Clearview has sought deeper inroads into government infrastructure and is now in discussions with state agencies to use its technology to track infected people, according to The Wall Street Journal.

Even if you've never heard of Clearview, you likely have an online presence — maybe a friend or a relative has posted a photo of you to Facebook — which means you're probably in its database. Clearview's CEO and co-founder, Cam-Hoan Ton-That, and his associates chose to mass-violate social media policies against scraping accounts to build an image warehouse of unprecedented size, as several outlets have noted recently.

What hasn't been reported, however, is even scarier: Exclusive documents obtained by HuffPost reveal that Ton-That, as well as several people who have done work for the company, have deep,

longstanding ties to far-right extremists. Some members of this alt-right cabal went on to work for Ton-That.

Clearview stated that it had immediately parted ways with some of these people when HuffPost reached out for comment for this story, but the pervasive links between the company and the alt-right can't be simply dismissed as a few bad apples.

Big Brother, it turned out, was wearing a MAGA cap.

A Mysterious Hacker

Little is known about Ton-That, a 31-year-old Australian hacker who moved to San Francisco in 2007. He made a name for himself two years later by unleashing a computer worm that phished the login credentials of Gmail users. Ton-That showed no remorse after journalists traced the worm to him— he simply set up another phishing site.

By 2015, he had joined forces with far-right subversives working to install Trump as president. They included Mike Cernovich, a Trump-affiliated propagandist who spearheaded the near-deadly Pizzagate disinformation campaign; Andrew “weev” Auernheimer, a neo-Nazi hacker and the webmaster for The Daily Stormer; and Pax Dickinson, the racist former chief technology officer of Business Insider who went on to march with neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In this far-right clique, two of Ton-That's associates loomed larger than most thanks to their close connection to billionaire Peter Thiel, a Facebook board member and Trump adviser: Jeff Giese, a Thiel protégé and secret funder of alt-right causes, and Charles “Chuck” Johnson, a former Breitbart writer and far-right extremist who reportedly coordinated lawfare against media organizations with Thiel. And according to new documents obtained by HuffPost, Johnson appears to have received funding from Thiel for a startup that the Southern Poverty Law Center would label a “white nationalist hate group.” (Johnson has filed suit against HuffPost in Texas over a January 2019 article about his visits to members of Congress to discuss “DNA sequencing.”)

People involved with Clearview appear to have gone to great lengths to conceal their links to the company and each other. Johnson, for instance, does not appear on any of the incorporation documents and has left little public trace of his association with Ton-That beyond a Facebook post. But multiple far-right sources who know Johnson told HuffPost that he and Ton-That were in close contact at least as early as 2016, and that Johnson told them he was working with Ton-That on facial recognition.

Johnson told one source late that year that he viewed the technology as a way to potentially “identify every illegal alien in the country.” In early 2017, Johnson introduced Ton-That to another source, saying he was a gifted coder he'd hired to build the facial recognition tool. Around the same time, Johnson stated on Facebook that he was “building algorithms to ID all the illegal immigrants for the deportation squads.”

Video and private messages obtained by HuffPost confirm that Johnson and Ton-That were collaborating on far-right schemes in 2016; by early 2017 at the latest, they were in contact about scraping social media platforms for the facial recognition business. At least two people who worked for Johnson took jobs with and worked for Clearview until late March, when the company claims to have severed ties with them after HuffPost reached out with questions.

Thiel himself has an obvious interest in mass surveillance: Palantir, his data-mining behemoth, aggregates enormous amounts of personal information about immigrants and undocumented workers, and it provides the analytical tools for ICE raids. In 2017, Thiel became one of Clearview's earliest investors. He did not respond to questions sent to him and his spokesperson.

Like other tech products scaled in dodgy ways, Clearview may have grown too big to rein in. Every time police use Clearview, they upload images of people they're trying to identify — even child sex abuse victims — to Ton-That's unregulated and ever-expanding database, where they are stored indefinitely.

No federal laws exist to govern the use of facial recognition. “The weaponization possibilities of this are endless,” Eric Goldman, co-director of the High Tech Law Institute at Santa Clara University, told the Times.

Clearview also appears to spy on law enforcement searches. After a Times reporter had police officers run her photo through the app, the officers received calls from Clearview representatives asking if they were speaking to a journalist. The potential for abuse is vast.

“The fear is that the kind of authoritarian control this [tool] will grant will wind up in the hands of the wrong people,” said Liz O’Sullivan, the technology director at the nonprofit Surveillance Technology Oversight Project.

Like, for instance, a Clearview contractor who is fond of disseminating Third Reich propaganda about Jews. The same extremist, with whom Ton-That now claims to have parted ways, was instrumental in helping sow disinformation from Kremlin operatives in 2016 to assist the Trump campaign. A Clearview “investigator” who appeared to work for the company until late March is part of a D.C.-based white nationalist crew that gathers in secret.

Yet another Clearview employee who left the company after an inquiry from HuffPost is a Croatian-born extremist who wrote in 2015 that he “wholeheartedly endorse[s] racism, racialism, ethnocentrism, Islamophobia, Eurocentrism and anti-Semitism.” Writing under a pseudonym on various blogs, he had embraced the possibility of balkanizing America, which could allow authoritarian states such as Russia or China to fill the power vacuum.

“For a stable and sustainable global order to exist,” he wrote, “the United States Government as we know it must be destroyed.”

A White National Convention

In July 2016, far-right extremists descended on Cleveland for the Republican National Convention. The alt-right's intellectual figurehead, Richard Spencer, was there, as was Cernovich. So was Johnson, who at the time was running GotNews, a site that employed white nationalists to crank out race-baiting content for Trump supporters. Peter Brimelow, the publisher of the white nationalist VDARE, showed up. British political saboteur Milo Yiannopolous attended a "twinks for Trump" party that featured anti-Muslim speakers such as Pamela Geller and Geert Wilders.

One night, Spencer attended a dinner with Johnson and other members of the far-right at an upscale Italian restaurant. He found himself sitting at a table with Ton-That, a striking figure with long black hair. The hacker arrived at the dinner with Johnson after they'd caused a minor fracas. They'd harassed Michelle Fields, a former Breitbart reporter who'd had her arm roughly grabbed at a Trump rally a few months earlier by the candidate's then-campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski. At the RNC, Johnson chased after Fields in the street until her fiancé shoved him away. The incident was captured in a video uploaded to Johnson's GotNews YouTube channel. In the background, you can see Ton-That with Johnson, laughing as Fields scrambles away. (Fields worked for HuffPost at the time.) Over dinner that night, the hacker was more subdued.

"He was smart," Spencer told HuffPost of Ton-That. "He was into this esoteric reactionary sphere stuff. I remember he was talking about celibacy and the priestly order being celibate and thinking for the group and not having mundane concerns. He was into quasi-Catholic neo-trad[itional] reactionary type stuff."

The neoreactionary movement, also known as "NRx" or "Dark Enlightenment," is a geeky subset of the racist, misogynistic far-right that has festered in Silicon Valley's libertarian circles for over a decade, especially within the cryptocurrency community. Its members revere Thiel, microdose LSD and gussy up totalitarian ideas with a pseudo-intellectualism that creates a moral pretext for them to undermine — "engineer," they might say — democracy. With tech skills and access to vast wealth, they have an influence that has eluded the bookish young men in Spencer's orbit. Ton-That had been affiliated with this neoreactionary confederacy since before the 2016 RNC.

The movement's high priest, Curtis Yarvin, is a programmer who goes by "Mencius Moldbug" and has a cryptocurrency startup funded by Thiel. Yarvin, who seemingly endorses slavery and has written approvingly of apartheid, has argued the U.S. would be better off if ruled by a CEO-king. To make this happen, he advocates for a soft coup. Among neoreactionaries, Trump is often referred to as the "God-Emperor" who will restore order to an immigrant-flooded nation under the thumb of a progressive media-academic complex — "global Jewry," in neo-Nazi-speak.

Giese, whose ties to Thiel go back decades, organized the dinner in Cleveland. As a student, he edited Thiel's libertarian newspaper, The Stanford Review. He later worked for Thiel's first hedge fund, and then for Koch Industries' public affairs office. Thiel put up seed money when Giese started his own company.

Ahead of the 2016 election, Gieseae worked closely with Cernovich to help organize a social media insurgency that could direct the far-right's energy toward a singular purpose: getting Trump elected. Their network amplified extremists, besmirched opponents and disseminated Kremlin-boosted disinformation.

In a "How to Fund the Alt-Right" guide posted online in 2016 under an alias Gieseae used, donors were encouraged to give money to white nationalist and neo-Nazi organizations. ("Not me at all," Gieseae said. "I don't know who did that.") The guide stressed the importance of anonymity and recommended donors use Bitcoin and PayPal, the online money transfer company founded by Thiel.

Spencer said Gieseae donated \$5,000 — the maximum amount that didn't require donor disclosure to the IRS — to his white nationalist organization, the National Policy Institute, in 2016. ("No comment," Gieseae said.) Spencer told HuffPost that he later came to feel as if Gieseae was trying to use the energy of the alt-right for political subversion and profit.

Auernheimer, the neo-Nazi hacker, described Gieseae in a private Discord chat as a "major investor providing help to racists ... a hugely connected dude ... with lots of business interests who was supporting [T]rump stuff." ("That's not true," Gieseae said.)

At Gieseae's dinner in Cleveland, conversation turned, inevitably, to building the ethnostate, according to Katie McHugh, a former Breitbart editor who attended the event and has since renounced far-right extremism. A group of Hispanic waiters in earshot looked on warily. Someone at the table apologized to them. The waiters laughed nervously. Then the extremists, Ton-That among them, set out into the night to put their plans into motion.

Chuck Johnson's Online Hatefest

If you were a hip far-right elitist in 2016, the online place to be was a Slack channel Johnson set up for WeSearchr, a now-shuttered crowdfunding platform he had launched. In private messages between Johnson and McHugh from 2015, Johnson described a meeting with Thiel that year to pitch his crowdfunding idea.

"Thiel gave me all the money I need," Johnson said. "[W]rote me a check on the spot."

Thiel declined to comment.

WeSearchr raised bounties for alt-right causes and would soon earn the designation of "white nationalist hate group" from the SPLC.

Johnson had a well-deserved reputation as a troll, but he was also a central node in a web of extremists. And he had many enemies — the social media companies that took away his platforms, the news outlets that exposed him, the liberal society that he was convinced had allowed minorities to get into Harvard at his expense.

“When I met Chuck, I wondered why we weren’t weaponizing people like him,” Giese told BuzzFeed.

Giese belonged to Johnson’s WeSearchr Slack. So did Cernovich. And so did Ton-That.

Altogether, there were about 400 people in the channel, according to McHugh, who was a member and provided HuffPost with several dozen messages from the channel. The group was a who’s who of racist political saboteurs and moneyed terraformers of society, with a sprinkling of alt-right celebrities like George Zimmerman, who joined the channel in June 2016 and was auctioning off the weapon he used to kill Trayvon Martin. Johnson, who had deemed Zimmerman a “great man,” published a GotNews post to drive up the price of “the mighty gun that slain the dindu.”

Ton-That shared his far-right views in the WeSearchr Slack, as well as online more broadly. He has since deleted his social media accounts, but archives of his Twitter exchanges from 2015 and 2016 show him spreading anti-liberal talking points and Islamophobia, as well as amplifying figures like Yiannopolous.

He was clearly reading/listening to pretty trashy conservative media, and/or pretty trashy conservative people. Ben Wheeler, a coder in New York, about Clearview co-founder Cam-Hoan Ton-That

Ben Wheeler, a coder in New York who met Ton-That in 2015 through programmer pals, called out the Australian for tweeting far-right conspiracies in the run-up to the 2016 election.

“He had some very inaccurate takes on [Hillary] Clinton, he was clearly reading and talking to people in the Breitbart vein,” Wheeler wrote in a message to HuffPost. “[A]s an example of her corruption, he pointed to the ways he said the Clintons used Chelsea Clinton’s wedding to embezzle money. I looked that up and it was one of those almost certainly false claims from one untrustworthy source. He was clearly reading/listening to pretty trashy conservative media, and/or pretty trashy conservative people.”

One of these people was likely Andrew Auernheimer, the webmaster for The Daily Stormer, the most popular neo-Nazi website. Another member of the WeSearchr Slack channel and a close collaborator with Johnson, Auernheimer devoted ample time to boosting both Johnson’s crowdfunding platform and his extremist friends.

Auernheimer told HuffPost that he had “never heard of” Ton-That. But in 2015, he appeared to interact publicly with him on Twitter to bemoan the number of liberals in academia, a conversation HuffPost was able to piece together by looking at replies to the two alt-right members that remain online.

Auernheimer spoke often of his desire to slaughter Jewish children, start a race war and destroy the United States. He landed in federal prison in 2013 on identity fraud and hacking charges. After his conviction was vacated on a jurisdictional technicality, he reentered society with a giant swastika on his chest. He declared himself a neo-Nazi on The Daily Stormer and called for government agents and their families to be assassinated. He left the country and vowed revenge

on America. “I plan on coming back with an army, be it human or automaton,” he wrote. He now claims to be based in Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldova aligned with Moscow and beyond the reach of U.S. extradition treaties.

Like Ton-That, Auernheimer also had an interest in biometrics. Around the time of the 2016 RNC, he told a friend that he was “working on facial recognition, specifically about black people.” When contacted by HuffPost, Auernheimer clarified that he’d been “building a racial, not facial, recognition project [that] took characteristics from the entire body, not just the face.” At the time, the system had been too costly to mount on drones, he said, but he planned to revisit the idea soon. Auernheimer could not provide any proof to support his statements. Ton-That told HuffPost that Clearview had nothing to do with the neo-Nazi.

“I never met him and he did no work for the company,” Ton-That said.

But Auernheimer *had* worked closely with Johnson for years, and he, too, claimed a connection to Thiel. A month after being released from prison in 2014, Auernheimer told a hacker friend in direct messages that he was “meeting with Peter Thiel’s right hand.” (Auernheimer denied making this claim, but HuffPost authenticated the messages with their recipient. Thiel didn’t respond to questions for this story.)

That same year, Auernheimer teamed up with Johnson to mine the leaked database of the Ashley Madison infidelity website for kompromat. They partnered again in 2015 to publish covertly recorded smear videos of Planned Parenthood officials. (Auernheimer told HuffPost he and Johnson “have nothing to do with each other” and are “radically opposed politically and socially.” HuffPost obtained numerous friendly emails they had exchanged.)

Johnson frequently collaborated with Giese as well. In one especially inglorious caper, they arranged for Bill Clinton’s sexual assault accusers and Barack Obama’s Trump-supporting half-brother Malik to appear at the 2016 general election debates. “Malik Obama, getting him to endorse Trump, they brought him to Giese’s apartment and just gave him cash,” Spencer said. “At least, that’s what Giese told me.” (“I don’t recall any of that,” Giese told HuffPost.)

When HuffPost reached Malik Obama in Kenya to ask if he’d taken money from Johnson and his associates to promote Trump, Obama responded by saying, “Donald Trump is the best president America ever had and Charles Johnson is my friend.”

But Johnson always had bigger plans than Malik Obama. He’d filled his black book with the names of far more important people whose coattails he could ride: Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas; xenophobic commentator Ann Coulter; Blackwater founder Erik Prince; high-profile attorney Alan Dershowitz — and Ton-That, whose technical ability offered Johnson a different pathway to power. They were the same age, with the same focus, fighting the same internet culture war.

In one WeSearchr Slack exchange, Johnson linked to an article about the aggressive stock trading habits of Rep. Judy Chu (D-Calif.), calling her “one of the best day traders ever.”

“Of course,” Ton-That replied, “it’s a chink.”

They also agreed on target selection. The WeSearchr Slack members reserved a good portion of their animus for Gawker, a publication that had aggressively covered Thiel and his business interests. Thiel had furtively bankrolled numerous lawsuits against the blog — the most notable being an invasion of privacy case filed by former professional wrestler Terry “Hulk Hogan” Bollea after Gawker published a portion of sex tape he was in.

The alt-right backed Thiel to the hilt. WeSearchr co-founder Pax Dickinson urged members of Johnson’s Slack channel to compile a list of Gawker employees and feed it to neo-Nazi trolls on far-right websites such as 4chan. “Let them do the contacting,” Dickinson wrote of the trolls, seemingly aware that his plan could lead to harassment.

Johnson had his own vendetta against Gawker, which had covered him critically and in one instance mocked him over a rumor that he defecated on a floor in college. Johnson had sued Gawker for defamation and later reached a confidential settlement with the blog. “In a just world, I’d have them killed,” Johnson said of Gawker and its CEO, Nick Denton. “But we are not there yet.”

Johnson, however, was in a position to crowdfund a WeSearchr bounty to sniff out plagiarism at Gawker, an ultimately fruitless quest. Ton-That, whom Gawker had also covered critically after his phishing scams seven years earlier, jumped at the chance.

“[W]ho else is working on gawker plagiarism & wants to collaborate?” he messaged the channel at the beginning of June 2016. “[I]’m scraping all their articles right now.”

On June 10, 2016, Gawker filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and put up its assets for sale. A few days later, Cernovich posted a photo of Ton-That and Johnson having a meal, both of them flashing the “OK” sign that has become a popular hand gesture for white nationalists in the Trump era.

When BuzzFeed confronted Ton-That about the photo, he claimed he was “only making the Okay sign in the photo as in ‘all okay.’” That August, Ton-That messaged the WeSearchr channel with an idea to crash a “funeral” party Gawker employees were throwing to mourn the demolition of their publication. “Wish I had a hulkomania shirt,” he wrote.

It was during this period of his life, ensconced among extremists online and off, that Ton-That began building the company that would become Clearview.

In 2016, the Australian hacker brought on two unnamed engineers to help him on the project, according to The New York Times. Ton-That refused to give HuffPost their names. One helped design a program to scrape images of faces from a range of sites and social media platforms, often in violation of their policies. The other created a facial recognition algorithm.

The Birth Of ‘Smartcheckr’

On election night, Ton-That partied with Johnson and Dickinson in New York amid a sea of red MAGA caps. Two days later, Johnson posted a news story from The Sun to his Facebook. It included a photo of Dickinson and Ton-That celebrating bawdily. “My business partners are in the Sun and I feel left out,” Johnson wrote.

Johnson was very likely referring to a business that was registered in New York a few months later and followed the same naming convention as WeSearchr: Smartcheckr. The company would eventually rebrand as Clearview, as Ton-That later told the Times.

In January 2017, Johnson indicated on Facebook that he was “building algorithms to ID all the illegal immigrants for the deportation squads.” Soon, he was boasting to friends and acquaintances that he was working on a powerful facial recognition tool.

A person who used to be close to Johnson and requested anonymity out of concern for their safety told HuffPost that they saw him “with a whole bunch of really important people” at Trump Hotel in spring 2017, “and he was going on and on about this facial recognition software he had hired people to build.” Johnson, they added, was with one of these hires — “some coding wizard” with long hair in a ponytail. “He kept introducing him as a prodigy who was building the software,” the source recalled. When HuffPost showed the source photos of Ton-That, they confirmed he was the man with Johnson. “If it’s not him, that’s his twin.”

Not long after the election, McHugh got a call from Johnson. “He told me they had a way to identify every illegal alien in the country,” she said. “He brought up facial recognition technology and demanded I call Stephen Miller because he knew Stephen Miller was a true believer.”

It’s unclear if Johnson ever spoke to Miller, the architect of Trump’s brutal immigration policy. But around the same time, Johnson was working behind the scenes with Giese and Thiel — a member of the transition executive committee — to recommend alt-right candidates for science and technology appointments with the incoming administration, according to Forbes. A person close to Trump’s transition confirmed to Politico that Johnson participated in transition-related meetings.

By this point, Johnson had a well-documented track record of bigotry and dirty tricks. In 2015, he’d been permanently — and noticeably — suspended from Twitter after requesting funds to “take out” a Black civil rights activist. In 2016, he’d gone on an alt-right podcast called “Fash the Nation” to talk at length about the evolutionary traits of “Jews” and “Blacks.” (“They’re dumber,” Johnson said of African Americans.)

In January 2017, Johnson hosted a Reddit “Ask Me Anything” session during which he was asked for his thoughts on “the Holocaust, WW2, and the JQ in general.” (The “JQ,” or “Jewish Question,” is a term anti-Semites, including Hitler, have used for over a century as shorthand for their conspiracy theory that Jews have too much control over society.) “I do not and never have believed the six million figure,” Johnson wrote. “I think the Red Cross numbers of 250,000 dead in the camps from typhus are more realistic but I confess to having complicated views on the subject. I think the Allied bombings of Germany were a war crime. I agree with [Holocaust

revisionist] David Cole about Auschwitz and the gas chambers not being real. Why were their [sic] swimming pools there if it was a death camp?”

Two weeks after Johnson’s Holocaust denial on Reddit, SMARTCHECKR, LLC was registered in New York. The address associated with it belonged to Richard Schwartz, who had been a top aide to Rudy Giuliani when he was mayor of New York City. Schwartz would later admit to being one of the founders of Smartcheckr.

Thiel was one of the company’s earliest investors. “In 2017, Peter gave a talented young founder \$200,000, which two years later converted to equity in Clearview AI,” Thiel’s spokesman, Jeremiah Hall, said in a statement. Hall didn’t specify which founder he meant and did not respond to questions for this story.

Emails and messages obtained by HuffPost show that Ton-That and Johnson were in touch about Smartcheckr in 2017. In one email thread, Johnson and his associates at GotNews discussed a dogwhistle post they were putting together about a racially motivated mass shooting in Fresno, California, that had been committed by a Black man who was Muslim. Tyler Bass, a GotNews writer, wondered if there was an easy way to scrape “an entire Facebook page quickly ... the next time another American goes apeshit and before Facebook pulls it down out of shame.” He added Ton-That to the conversation, who replied quickly. “I’m working on this for smartcheckr,” the hacker wrote. “Plan to make these tools available for our guys.”

A Series Of Troubling Hires

Bass was one of Ton-That’s guys. He had become interested in hacker culture as a young man, and he was arrested on a computer harassment charge in Virginia in 2013 that either the alleged victim or the prosecutor declined to pursue.

Bass later morphed into a committed racist. By 2017, he was asking around about a writing job with American Renaissance, a heavyweight white nationalist organization. He already belonged to a white nationalist crew called the “DC Helicopter Pilots,” according to McHugh, who dated him in 2017. The group was a Washington-area chapter of The Right Stuff, an influential pro-Trump organization that attracts neo-Nazis. Members of the DC Helicopter Pilots — likely a reference to Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet’s practice of executing dissidents by throwing them out of helicopters — met regularly, at least once to eat swastika-shaped cookies. One chapter leader was a State Department official assigned to the Bureau of Energy Resources who advocated for a nuclear-armed white ethnostate.

A few weeks after the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in August 2017 — which Bass told McHugh that he attended with his 8-year-old son — he found a job as an “investigator” doing “remote software testing” at Smartcheckr.

HuffPost obtained five of Bass’s résumés spanning from May 2017 to the present. He claimed to have assembled “devastating opposition dossiers on open-borders figures and activists” while working for Johnson and said he created “counternarratives for third-party reporters to mold

mass perception.” His résumés also say he helped Johnson vet candidates for the Trump administration transition team. The administration declined to comment.

Another early Smartcheckr hire was Douglass Mackey, an otherwise unremarkable Middlebury graduate who’d washed out of a job in finance and became an alt-right superstar in 2016 under the alias “Ricky Vaughn.” The advocate of “global white supremacy” was so effective at disseminating pro-Trump, anti-Semitic propaganda and Kremlin-originated disinformation that MIT Media Lab named his Twitter account on a list of top influencers on the election, ahead of NBC News and the Drudge Report.

In 2017, Mackey and an unidentified partner pitched Smartcheckr to the racist Republican candidate Paul Nehlen, who was vying for the Wisconsin seat of retiring House Speaker Paul Ryan. Nehlen, another member of Johnson’s WeSearchr Slack channel, was quickly radicalizing from outlandish bigotry to white nationalist extremism. He’d soon appear on David Duke’s radio show to talk about machine-gunning migrant children.

In a proposal Mackey sent Nehlen, Smartcheckr promised to micro-target potential voters and donors for \$2,500 per month. The company would do oppo research by tapping “unconventional databases.” Ton-That’s “proprietary search and facial recognition technology” would allow for analysis of voters’ social media and their views on various issues.

Nehlen said on a podcast that he gave Mackey access to his Facebook through Business Manager, a tool for managing pages and accounts, for three months. “He didn’t post anything,” he said. “He didn’t do anything. He was suggesting that he was going to be able to grow my audience or whatever. He did nothing.”

Ton-That told BuzzFeed that Mackey only worked “for 3 weeks as a consultant to Smartcheckr, which was the initial name of Clearview.” He denied any knowledge of Mackey’s Ricky Vaughn persona — even though Mackey was also a member of the WeSearchr Slack channel, where he used the handle “Richard Vaughn” and the same avatar that he did on Twitter. Ton-That claimed Mackey had been referred to him by a “liberal Democrat.” But Johnson posted a video in October 2016 in which he called Mackey a “friend of mine, a guy that I’ve talked to on the phone, a good guy.” Mackey did not respond to emails from HuffPost.

Ton-That also claimed Mackey sent an “unauthorized proposal” to Nehlen and that “the technology described in the proposal did not even exist.” And yet Johnson had been bragging about the technology for the better part of a year. Bass was already troubleshooting Smartcheckr’s “flagship product,” according to his résumé.

In early 2018, still angry about getting ripped off, Nehlen disclosed that Mackey was Ricky Vaughn — something that was previously known only to high-ranking members of the alt-right. One of them, Christopher Cantwell, posted the Smartcheckr proposal Mackey sent Nehlen on his website. Twitter and other platforms lit up with white nationalist chatter.

“[O]ne of my closest pals just got his life ruined,” Auernheimer said of Mackey in The Daily Stormer forum.

Smartcheckr employees and associates scrambled to hide their connections to the company and each other after the incident. Schwartz, the former Giuliani aide, sanitized his LinkedIn profile. Smartcheckr used a reputation management service to suppress information about itself and Schwartz by clouding Google search results with fake webpages, according to a source close to the company.

Schwartz did not respond to questions from HuffPost.

Eventually, the commotion subsided. Ton-That and Smartcheckr tightened up operational security. They'd incorporated Clearview AI in Delaware through a third-party registered agent the previous year and would shift to that name for the facial recognition business.

"Thank ... goodness the panicked speculation about Smartcheckr is dying down," Bass emailed McHugh. "Still, it's not going to be great. If you have any thoughts on how to tailor things going forward in light of Mackeygate, as you offered, please let me know."

Clearview Hits The Bigtime

In January 2018, Ton-That surfaced at the "Night for Freedom" party Cernovich organized in New York. Up on stage, Gavin McInnes, the Canadian founder of the neo-fascist Proud Boys gang, joked about "faggots" and the genitalia of transgender women. Pizzagate-peddler and neo-Nazi collaborator Jack Posobiec turned up. So did Canadian cult leader Stefan Molyneux and James O'Keefe, who in 2009 made a Thiel-financed video that mocked people of color.

McHugh was standing in a cluster of people when Ton-That materialized out of the crowd. It had been almost two years since she'd seen him at the far-right dinner in Cleveland. They chatted briefly. "Hoan told me things were going well for him," McHugh said. "Especially with his company."

The hacker melted back into the party. McHugh never saw him again.

Things certainly were going well. By the time of Cernovich's event, Clearview had found more investors, including Ton-That's former boss at AngelList, Naval Ravikant, and Kirenaga Partners, a small venture capital firm in New York. The firm's founder, David Scalzo, told the Times that "there's never going to be privacy" and shrugged about the possibility that technology "might lead to a dystopian future or something."

Another early investor was Hal Lambert, a Texas money manager and major GOP fundraiser who is close with Ted Cruz and claimed to be on Trump's inaugural committee. Lambert had also invested early in Anduril, a Thiel-backed defense contractor that is building autonomous surveillance systems to police the southern border. Lambert has railed against the political left and the news media, most recently appearing on Fox Business Network to downplay the danger of coronavirus and accuse journalists of stoking fear.

When reached by phone, Lambert expressed surprise to hear about anti-democratic extremists associated with Clearview. But he admitted to knowing Johnson. He also said he'd known Ton-

That prior to Clearview because the coder “worked on some data stuff” for the investor. Lambert declined to provide further details, citing “proprietary” work.

Throughout 2018 and into the following year, Ton-That worked with Schwartz to sign up law enforcement agencies for Clearview. The company claimed to have “mountains” of data in its “proprietary image database.” The Clearview team started aggregating every mugshot taken in the U.S. over the last 15 years, according to emails obtained by OneZero. Schwartz peddled the tech at law enforcement conferences. Ton-That set up bogus LinkedIn profiles to run ads that hyped the technology, according to BuzzFeed.

To help drum up more business, Clearview recruited Jessica Medeiros Garrison, a former executive director of the Republican Attorneys General Association and a Daily Caller contributor. The company also retained Paul Clement, the former U.S. solicitor general and perennial right-wing consideration for the Supreme Court, as its attorney.

Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies were signing up for Clearview: the Indiana State Police, the New York State Police, the Chicago Police Department, the Atlanta Police Department, police departments in New Jersey and Florida, and the Department of Homeland Security. So did the Intelligence and Counterterrorism Division of the Texas Department of Public Safety, a contract that has not been previously reported. Clement sent a letter to the Atlanta Police Department last summer stating that “over 200 law enforcement agencies around the nation” were using Clearview. That number would triple within months, according to The New York Times.

Clement provided a legal cover for police to sidestep civil rights concerns, writing that Clearview didn’t violate the Fourth Amendment because the mere act of posting anything to social media removed any expectation of privacy.

Clement also anticipated the argument that facial recognition has baked-in racial bias problems. A majority of algorithms tested in 2019 by the National Institute of Standards and Technology falsely identify female and darker-skinned faces at much higher rates than white male faces. Clearview was simply more accurate than existing technology, Clement wrote. (The company appears to have shunned an independent audit of its technology and did not participate in the NIST test.) Moreover, he added, Clearview used “non-race-based algorithms” to minimize bias. Clement offered no evidence in his letter to support either claim.

On his April 2018 résumé, Bass wrote that he was identifying “prostitution and gang connections of subjects on 24-hour deadlines.” Clearview promotional materials state the company “began solving crimes using newly developed facial-recognition technology” in 2018, meaning that Ton-That and his employees may have had the ability to snoop on police searches and criminal investigations and harvest images of suspects for their database for almost two years.

The company also found a big client in Rudin Management Company, a multibillion-dollar real estate firm for which Bass did “background screenings of tenants and hires.” He started hiding his employer on his résumé. He worked, he said, for “Confidential.”

On his current résumé, Bass highlights that he used his “familiarity with the Spanish language” at Rudin Management, an indication that Clearview and the real estate firm may have had a white nationalist vetting Spanish-speaking people for jobs and housing. Bass now claims to work directly for Rudin Management, which Rudin Management says is untrue.

“The individual in question was never employed by Rudin Management,” a spokesperson said. But Rudin did use Ton-That’s company to screen people, according to the spokesperson: “We utilized Smartcheckr’s services for a period of time to conduct routine background checks based on publicly available information.”

Rudin Management refused to provide further details, but the firm previously told BuzzFeed that it also used a surveillance camera system developed by Clearview that works with the facial recognition technology.

Bass declined to speak with HuffPost.

A Radical Liaison To Law Enforcement

As Clearview continued to sign up police departments, the far-right extremists at the company interacted more with law enforcement. In an email from December 2019 obtained by BuzzFeed, Clearview employee Marko Jukic pitched a free trial of the technology to a nationwide police listserv: “We invite you to test the limits for yourself.”

Jukic had for years used an alias derived from his surname to spread racism and anti-democratic ideas, praise Vladimir Putin and even write approvingly about a potential collapse of the United States government. Born in Croatia, Jukic identified as an extremist Catholic traditionalist and had spent most of his childhood bouncing around the world with his Croatian mother and American father, a political officer with the U.S. State Department.

He dropped out of Northwestern University in 2016. Soon enough, he went to work for Johnson and became an active member of the WeSearchr Slack channel. He coordinated with Ton-That on the Gawker-scraping project and tweeted about radical organizing with the former director of the Thiel-funded Machine Intelligence Research Institute.

In his early adulthood, Jukic, who just turned 24, published many thousands of extremist words on neoreactionary blogs. He declared that “diversity, equality, tolerance and the rest of the lot of contemporary progressive values are indisputably corrosive to civilization as they are today practiced.” He expressed homophobic, misogynistic and racist views. “[I]f you spend a few hours letting your disenchanting friends and family know that it’s OK to use the word ‘nigger’ [and] point out that democracy is a miserable failure,” he wrote, “you will have accomplished far more concrete good in the world than you would have by spending a few hours doing almost anything else.”

He was opposed to multiculturalism and wrote that Jews did not belong among people of European heritage. “The answer to the Jewish question,” he wrote, “is quite simple: segregation and separation. ... [U]nlike progressives, neoreactionaries do not believe one can abolish the laws

of nature and turn diversity into a strength, least of all using the State. Diversity engenders animosity and eventually violence, and is thus a weakness.” Genocide wasn’t a solution, Jukic wrote, “unless you have the biggest bully around on your side.” By that, he meant the power of the state.

“In context that is a quote urging far right extremists to avoid Jewish people and to disavow anti-Semitic violence,” Jukic said.

Jukic was prone to flights of wild-eyed neoreactionary fancy, imagining a future where a king ruled America and would tackle “welfare spending” by sending the military and heavily armed militias to “pacify” the “ghettos” with lethal force. Journalists who set foot in occupied zones would be assassinated. “[V]iolence most definitely is the answer,” he wrote. He supported the “generous use” of racial profiling to curb immigration, as well as a wall along the Mexico border equipped with high-tech cameras and drones.

In much of his writing, he looked to the ethnonationalism of Putin’s Russia for inspiration and speculated about a Russian empire that encompassed Hawaii and extended to San Francisco.

In his vision of a new geopolitical order, the first step, Jukic wrote, was to dismantle and balkanize what he described as the “uniquely evil” United States. To neoreactionaries, that meant replacing democracy with some form of authoritarianism. Two years later, however, he’d decided that balkanization or civil war in America was impossible because “America’s diversity problem is not regional, but national and ubiquitous.”

“This is not unwarranted pessimism but the sober reality that has to be accepted before any real goals can be achieved,” he wrote about a month later. “Just because the United States cannot Balkanize does not mean it cannot collapse into chaos, however.”

Jukic emailed HuffPost a statement in which he claimed his posts were “exercises in theatrical hyperbole and comedic satire.” He was, he said, a young man trying to shock his reader. His talk of balkanization was little more than an off-the-books 4chan-fueled college bull session. He said he no longer believed that “America’s severe societal problems” would lead to governmental collapse, although he still felt the political process remained “fundamentally broken.” And he’d “always disavowed” political violence, he said.

“I wrote a number of purposely inflammatory things as a teenager and young adult to test boundaries,” Jukic said in his statement. “I never meant any harm, but I admit my insouciance and prodigious imagination would not always give that impression. It’s something that I put firmly in the past many years ago already of my own accord, long before being contacted for this article, and I intend to keep it that way. Those quotes do not represent my thinking or views in the present day.”

But many of Jukic’s posts appeared not long before he started working at Clearview. Richard Spencer’s Radix Journal syndicated some of his writing. Other far-right extremists took Jukic seriously and engaged him in long conversations about radical politics.

As far-fetched as Jukic's vision seemed, he'd thought deeply about his tactics and eschewed the open activism the alt-right had embraced, most notably in Charlottesville. Instead, he endorsed the neoreactionary concept of "passivism": lie low, create hidden networks, quietly build the "machinery" to subvert the system. "Victory will not be won at the ballot box," Jukic wrote in 2016. "Donald Trump will need to build his own regime, his own state, and make it so good that the existing regime defects to it in fear and awe of his power. He'll need his own NYT, his own State Department, his own CIA, his own Harvard."

Three years later, Jukic was pitching Clearview to law enforcement.

Subverting Democracy

After the Times published its investigation into Clearview in January, New Jersey's attorney general ordered all police in the state to stop using its tool. Two Democratic senators introduced legislation to put a moratorium on facial recognition use by government officials and contractors until Congress could regulate the technology. Other lawmakers questioned Clearview about the company having licensed its technology to organizations in authoritarian countries such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore and United Arab Emirates.

Social media companies fired off cease-and-desist letters demanding that Clearview stop scraping photos and data. The company was hit with multiple lawsuits by people who alleged that Clearview illegally collected their biometric information, including a class-action suit in New York federal court. Another class-action in Virginia federal court alleged that Clearview had violated the Virginia Computer Crimes Act, the same law Bass was arrested for allegedly violating in 2013 and for which he was never prosecuted. Vermont's attorney general filed a lawsuit against Clearview last month, alleging that the company had broken state laws by collecting images of Vermonters, including children, without their consent.

Clearview raced to do damage control. A "user code of conduct" materialized on the firm's website, along with a promise that the technology would have no consumer applications and be available only to law enforcement and "select security professionals." But that wasn't true — Clearview was aggressively courting companies and private clients such as Macy's, Bank of America and Walmart, according to a list leaked to BuzzFeed.

Clearview also allowed investors and Trump-affiliated elites to play around with its app and unregulated database. The company set up an account for the company of former Trump campaign spokesman Jason Miller. His company has run almost 20 searches, according to BuzzFeed. John Catsimatidis, the billionaire Trump donor and owner of Gristedes Foods, the largest grocery store chain in Manhattan, tested the facial recognition technology at one of his supermarkets in an effort to catch shoplifters, according to The New York Times. But Catsimatidis, who is friends with Schwartz, also used the app to snoop on a man he spotted on a dinner date with his daughter.

And Johnson appears to still be involved with the company. On a flight to Boston in January, the far-right extremist befriended a passenger and showed off a facial recognition app that could only have been Clearview, according to BuzzFeed.

Ton-That bobbed and weaved through television interviews, letting more details slip while asserting a First Amendment right to access anything posted on social media. A number of banks were using Clearview, he told CNN, but he declined to name them. He admitted to meeting with legislators but didn't say what they'd discussed. He declined to name them, too. Most of all, he downplayed the dangers of his technology.

“This is not a 24/7 surveillance system,” he said.

Another Clearview attorney, Tor Ekeland, emerged to field media requests. Ekeland was also Auernheimer's lawyer and had made his name by getting the neo-Nazi out of federal prison. He did not respond to a request for comment.

Another round of damage control ensued after HuffPost reached out to Jukic with questions last week. Ton-That said through a spokesperson on March 27 that Clearview had severed ties with both Bass and Jukic.

“I was shocked by and completely unaware of Marko Jukic's online writings under a different name,” Ton-That said. “As soon as those writings were brought to my attention, we took steps to separate him from the company.”

But Ton-That almost certainly knew Jukic's neoreactionary pen name. In Slack channel messages and emails between the two that date back to 2016, Jukic used the same alias as he did on Social Matter, a prominent, now-defunct neoreactionary blog run by a former Daily Caller writer who later took a job at a Thiel-funded think tank.

In a statement to HuffPost, Ton-That professed his love for America — in large part, he said, because of his adopted country's diversity. He said he found white supremacist and anti-Semitic views “abhorrent.” He shared an insight into his background that could apply to many intelligent, wayward young men who stumble into hateful online echo chambers.

“I grew up in Australia, but truthfully, I grew up on the Internet,” Ton-That said. “I grew up without television or movies as cultural touchstones. I learned about the world, its inhabitants and ideas online. It's where I learned my craft to program and code, and how to navigate the vast variety of information, thoughts and views. It had not always been a straight path, and it had not always served me well. There was a period when I explored a range of ideas—not out of belief in any of them, but out of a desire to search for self and place in the world. I have finally found it, and the mission to help make America a safer place. To those who have read my words in the Huffington Post article, I deeply apologize for them.”

When HuffPost contacted Johnson in late March, he pretended to be an undercover U.S. intelligence operative who'd been recruited out of high school. “Would prefer being kept out of whatever you are doing,” he said. “Nearly got me killed by a foreign government last time.” Johnson said his government contract prohibited him from talking to the press. He then spoke at length with HuffPost, and said if this article ran, “you'll wind up hurting our country as China, Russia, Israel, and Britain all roll out facial recognition products which curtail our liberties.”

The next day, a man using the pseudonym “John Smith” called from a VoIP line with a West Palm Beach number after HuffPost insisted that Johnson have a credible person verify his claims. “Smith” refused to say where he worked but offered vague reassurances that the government had vetted “the DNA” of the Clearview team and found no “red flags.” That team, according to Smith, included Johnson, whom Smith described as “not a significant equity holder” in Clearview. When asked again if Johnson had a stake in Clearview, Smith said, “I believe so. I don’t know for sure.”

Johnson later texted HuffPost. “I’ve done my part,” he wrote. “Marko and Hoan do good work on behalf of our country.” Johnson refused to answer any questions about his involvement in the company or his relationship with Ton-That, who did the same when first contacted by HuffPost but eventually distanced himself from Johnson.

“Charles Johnson is not an executive, employee, consultant, and doesn’t have a board seat at Clearview Ai,” Ton-That told HuffPost a week after his first statement. He refused to disclose whether Johnson had an equity stake in the company.

But the money behind Clearview and the company’s opaque origins are bound to raise more eyebrows, especially during a health crisis in which a hard-right Trump administration could expand domestic surveillance in ways that would be hard to unwind. Clearview’s secretive founders have already shown a callous disregard for the privacy of American citizens. Even more concerning are their connections to a dark strain of political extremism now coursing through Silicon Valley and Washington.

In April 2016, Johnson announced himself as an extremist in a GotNews video. “What is the alt-right?” he said. “I guess I’m sort of on the ground floor here given that I’m friends with Curtis Yarvin aka Mencius Moldbug.”

To read Yarvin is, in the neoreactionary godfather’s own words, to find “instructions” for a quiet “fascist coup” in America, one that might take 25 years, maybe 50. What Yarvin calls a “reboot” of America would dissolve the government and “terminate democracy.” All in the name of a stable new world order.

If you squint, you can almost see it underway, as techno-authoritarians who openly deride modern America as an obsolete operating system build-out, through their own companies and the complicity of law enforcement, an all-seeing eye unbound by the statutes that constrain the government’s use of personal data. Does the Trump adviser behind many of these efforts — the German-born American billionaire with a third citizenship quietly purchased from New Zealand — really have the best interests of every American in mind?

More than a decade ago, Thiel committed a statement to print that should adjoin his every mention in the press.

“I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible,” the Clearview investor wrote in a 2009 essay for the Cato Institute.

He meant it.