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World news

The leading light in Kyiv's fight against war crimes

AI is the new arms race, says head of data group building a digital map of Putin's 'illegal activity'

By **Ben Wright**

Alex Karp doesn't think the so-called "pause" in the development of artificial intelligence that is being called for by Elon Musk and others is a good idea. That's not because he isn't worried about the risks posed by the nascent technology – he is. However, the chief executive of Palantir, the US data group, believes holding back could be even more dangerous.

"Were we living in a world where the West had no adversaries, where all parties were going to be friendly and play nice, I'd be the first person arguing for a pause and maybe trying to make sure people didn't build this technology," he says. "But we're not living in that world."

Karp agrees with the 1,800 signatories of a letter released in March that AI systems with "human-competitive intelligence" might pose profound risks to humanity. But he also thinks they give Western countries an advantage over their adversaries that would be negated or surrendered if developers down tools even temporarily.

"Generative artificial intelligence and large language models (LLM) are much harder to build and to wield in authoritarian contexts," says Karp.

"The West has a structural advantage, and we need to triple down on it. We cannot afford to disarm."

Framing the debate in terms of a global arms race is no idle hyperbole as far as Karp is concerned. The Ukrainian military has for months been using Palantir's software in order to target Russian tanks and artillery. Defence experts have said the technology has been instrumental in helping hold off vastly larger forces.

"I've been derided for years for saying the ability or inability to wage algorithmic warfare will in time be viewed in the same way as the difference between having or not having nuclear capacities," says Karp. "But we see that had Russia invested more in algorithmic technology, this war would be very different."

Palantir has just announced it will be providing Ukraine with technology developed in its UK office to help investigators process the vast reams of data relating to more than 78,000 registered war crimes allegedly perpetrated by Russian forces.

The software will be used by the Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine to collate evidence related to cases of wilful killing, torture, rape, and deportation, as well as the destruction of civil infrastructure and residential property.

These will form the basis of two "anchor" cases – one centered on the crime of aggression and another on the crime of genocide. "The issue is not with finding evidence of war crimes – there's tons of evidence," says one Palantir employee. "The issue is with making sense of it all."

Investigators will, for example, be able to use open-source intelligence and satellite imagery to construct a virtual map of war crimes evidence. This could include evidence confirming the presence of Russian equipment near a crime scene, witness statements and videos uploaded to social media by Ukrainian citizens.

"Our goal is to build a web of full and comprehensive accountability for international crimes," says Andriy Kostin, the prosecutor-general of Ukraine. "To prove these crimes, we have to analyse a vast amount of evidence … [which] would be virtually impossible without modern IT solutions."

Karp was one of the first heads of a global business to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky following Russia's invasion in February last year, and the company has since opened an office in Kyiv. Palantir has also been helping Ukraine in the resettlement of refugees in the UK and in Lithuania. Sitting in front of a huge bunch of purple tulips in Palantir's London office, Karp says that grappling with the implications of new technology data, algorithms and AI will be easier for some countries than others and this "augurs to the future out-performance of the UK and the US".

"These large language models have certain principles that are revolutionary – they can provide reasoning at scale across the largest data sets in the world. However, the ability to interrogate the results is still pretty bad," says Karp.

He argues that improving this will be key to unlocking the potential of AI and much easier in the UK and US, which have the constitutional frameworks – with rigorous ethical frameworks and a strong rule of law – to provide sufficient data protection without getting bogged down in too much regulation.

By contrast, the EU's proposed regulation of AI could make it harder for networks to be "federated" and send messages to each other. Karp believes it will therefore be more difficult to weigh, qualify and replicate the analysis produced by algorithms.

"It is currently not possible to interrogate how an LLM got the result it did," he says. "But you can take the result and assess whether it is legitimate and valuable to your enterprise. That's where the value lies for business and the military that's where all the money is going to be. You can already do this in the US and UK and why I think those two countries are about to experience an enormous bonanza revolution.

It will be much slower on the Continent."

He also believes that knowledge and constitutional structures are more important than money: "This is definitely not an arms race where, de facto, the party who spends the most wins. It's the party that knows how to spend who wins. That's another reason why the UK could have an advantage."

Palantir was co-founded and is still chaired by Peter Thiel, the first outside investor in Facebook, who co-founded PayPal in 1998 and served as the company's chief executive until it was sold to eBay in 2002.

Sometime after the 9/11 terror attacks in the US, Thiel started to wonder whether PayPal's anti-fraud algorithms could be used to identify terrorists. He set up Palantir with a handful of software engineers and started holding talks with US intelligence agencies.

The company received funding from In-Q-Tel, the Central Intelligence Agency's not-for-profit venture capital arm. Its software is rumoured to have been used to help track down Osama bin Laden, something that Palantir refuses to confirm or deny. That early history, along with Thiel's full-throated support of Donald Trump, has meant that Palantir has often attracted controversy.

Thiel named the company after the seeing stones in JRR Tolkein's Lord of the Rings, which allowed the user to uncover hidden truths and track events around the world. The visitor pass I am handed at reception in Palantir's London office is emblazoned with a cartoon of a wide-eyed wizard-esque character and the words: "Save the Shire."

Some critics, including privacy advocates and left-wing politicians in the US, accuse the company of essentially being a kind of all-seeing, data-led panopticon. Sceptics in the corporate world suggest that it has cultivated a slightly sinister mystique, a culture of intellectual elitism and a very slick interface to sell services and underlying software that aren't particularly special.

A chief executive who employed Palantir on a specific project said:

"I paid them an awful lot of money to comprehensively prove that the sun would definitely rise the next day."

Others, however, swear by the insights Palantir can provide. Tom Enders, the former boss of Airbus, is on record as saying that employing the company was one of the best decisions of his career.

As with the debate about the usefulness of AI, the quality of the answers Palantir's software provides will largely depend on the questions it is asked. It has been used by JP Morgan to spot rogue traders, by Credit Suisse to counter money laundering, by Merck to develop drugs and by Airbus to solve manufacturing snafus.

In a nutshell, the company sends in small teams of engineers and then deploys its platforms to pool a wide variety of data sources, integrate, sift and cross-reference the information and spit out insights in easy to understand formats.

EDDIE MULHOLLAND FOR THE TELEGRAPH; EPA-EFE/

Alex Karp, the chief executive of Palantir, has been using digital technology to create a virtual map of Vladimir Putin's activity in Ukraine. Below, a mass grave in Izyum, Kharkiv

The company is probably best known in the UK for its work with the NHS. The Government awarded Palantir a contract during the pandemic to track vaccines and personal protective equipment. More recently it has done work to reduce waiting lists and merge a variety of different systems to increase the use of operating theatres. Results from a three-month pilot programme run by the Chelsea and Westminster Trust showed theatre utilisation improved from 73 per cent to 86 per cent.

Palantir is currently bidding for a £480 million contract to build the health service's new operating system. However, in an address to the Oxford Union earlier this year, Thiel said the UK's affection for the NHS was akin to "Stockholm syndrome" and that the "NHS makes people sick".

Karp met Thiel at Stanford University where they bonded over a shared disdain for the law school and a love of arguing about politics. Karp says they've been arguing ever since and he disagrees with his co-founder about the NHS.

"I am an economic progressive, and the idea that someone in need can go to the hospital and be treated independent of their economic background is something I firmly believe in," he says.

"My father was a paediatrician. He served deprived communities. I wish we had a health care system in the US that served the poor and underserved as well as I perceive the British system does. I'm proud we can support it."

In some ways Palantir feels like any other tech company. Its office is all glass and exposed steel girders. There's a well-stocked cafeteria serving three free meals a day and signs indicating where the "legal ninjas" work.

But Palantir actually moved its global headquarters from Paolo Alto in California to Denver in Colorado two years ago to escape what Karp calls the "Silicon Valley monoculture".

Karp is a fittingly paradoxical tech entrepreneur. A skinny, 55-year-old fitness fanatic with rimless glasses and a great mound of frizzy, gravity-defying greying hair, he is a regular at Davos, does tai chi every day, enjoys cross-country skiing and holds self-described progressive political views. He has a PhD in German philosophy rather than an engineering background and is unapologetic about the work Palantir does for military and securities services.

Thiel asked Karp to run Palantir because he thought he would be a good frontman to explain what the company did in layman's terms. Karp isn't so sure. He has described himself as a "fluorescent praying mantis" who can put off potential clients. However he believes his unusual personality means he's also well suited to supporting and managing Palantir's eclectic staff.

In the past Karp has said Palantir was built to support the West. The company doesn't do business with countries that it considers to be adversarial to the US, such as Russia and China – an approach that definitely sets it apart from other US tech companies. Indeed, Karp criticised Google for pulling out of Project Maven, the Pentagon's AI program, which has been likened to a modern-day Manhattan Project.

In a regulatory filing before its stock market float in 2020, Palantir said it wanted to become the "default operating system across the US government". And it is some of the company's government contracts that attracted the most controversy, especially helping US Immigration and Customs to identify illegal immigrants for deportation. Its work with US law enforcement departments has also raised concerns about racial profiling and predictive policing.

Privacy campaigners have claimed Palantir's work gives it too much access to the personal data of individuals. The company counters that it doesn't police how its products are used, only hosts data on behalf of clients – much like other software providers – and builds audit trails and privacy controls to ensure unauthorised personnel can't access information.

"There are some companies who say that their tech cannot be abused. That's not true," says Karp. "But it's crazy hard to abuse our products. That's why the intelligence services buy them. You can see how the data has been moved, who touched it and under what conditions."

A former Cambridge Analytica employee, turned whistleblower, claimed that Palantir helped his firm to harvest data from Facebook that was then used in Donald Trump's election campaign. Palantir has previously said this was done by a single employee who was subsequently fired and the company has a policy of not working on elections.

Karp says he understands why Palantir evokes a strong emotional response in its critics. "We work with the intelligence community, we were founded by a Trump supporter, we don't look likeable to some people. I get that," he says.

He points out that, in the early days, the company found it very hard to win over the intelligence communities. "They ended up buying our products because they worked," he says.

Why were the spooks so reticent? "Well, I come from a family whose sole occupation seemed to be protesting against the defence and intelligence communities, I have a PhD in German philosophy, I am clearly left of centre, and I don't have a standard social life. I don't look like a normal corporate executive.

"I was talking about things that no one believed were important like data protection and personal privacy. We are highly technical people that largely have an inability to tell a general or a chief executive what they want to hear. That's all very unlikable."

I ask whether the war in Ukraine as well as China's more increasingly aggressive "wolf-warrior" diplomacy has loosened some of the moral certainties of Palantir's critics and made it easier for him to get his point of view across.

"This company was built around the idea that the West has certain unique and important virtues. Those virtues should not just be defended, they should be supported with products that are so revolutionary, some might say 'dangerous', that our adversaries don't dare to call them into question."

"The broader point we have long been making is that the world is becoming more disjointed. It will be impossible for China, Russia and America to coordinate effectively simply because we don't share the same economic or political interests."

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