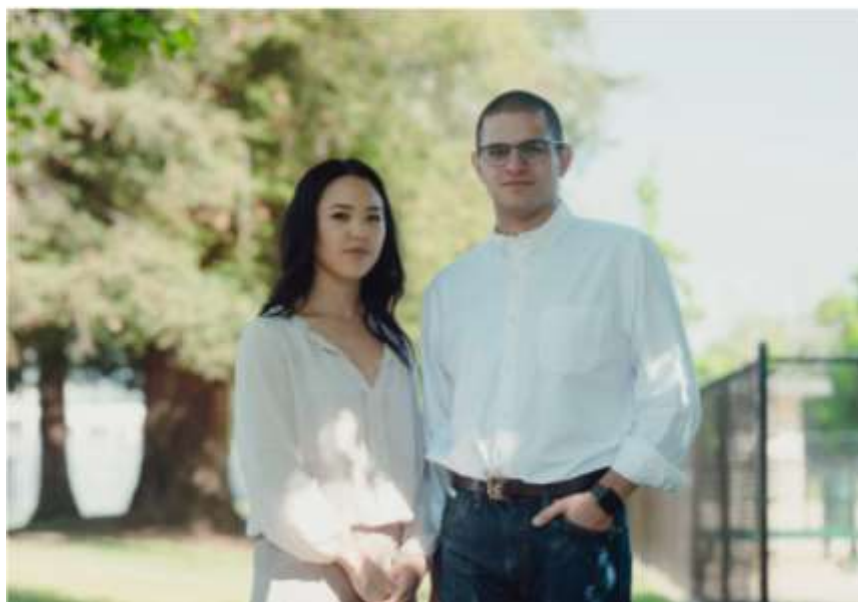


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## Keeping Online Testing Honest? Or an Orwellian Overreach?

The rise of proctoring software to deter cheating alarms privacy advocates. Some students and professors find it invasive, too.



Daniel Farzanekou, right, rebelled against an online proctoring system by grabbing a notepad from his girlfriend, Emily Louie, left, and holding a handwritten profanity up to the webcam. Credit...

Rozette Rago for The New York Times

**By Shawn Hubler**

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SACRAMENTO — As Daniel Farzanekou prepared to take an online exam late last month in his naval science elective at the University of California, Los Angeles, the software directed him to pick up his laptop and scan his room, his desk, his ID and his face.

“Ridiculous,” Mr. Farzanekou, a 20-year-old history major, fumed. He grabbed a notepad from his girlfriend, scribbled a two-word profanity in black ink and pointedly held it up to the webcam. Then he uninstalled the digital proctor software and fired off an email to his professor. The monitoring system was like something out of “communist Russia,” he wrote, demanding a less Orwellian test.

As a semester like no other winds down for college students, with bedrooms replacing classrooms as testing sites amid the coronavirus pandemic, professors accustomed to classrooms are no longer able to keep a close eye on test takers, looking for cheat sheets and wandering eyes.

Into the havoc have come digital proctoring services, which, after years in tech’s niches, are suddenly monitoring hundreds of thousands of students taking millions of at-home exams from far-flung homes in myriad time zones.

Privacy advocates are sounding alarms. Investors are taking note. And students are fueling demand with their own testing — of boundaries.

Boston University and Georgia Tech started investigations last month amid reports that students were uploading questions from their take-home tests to an online tutoring service based in Santa Clara, Calif., and then copying the answers. Shares in the tutoring company, Chegg, [spiked on Tuesday](#) after it reported a 35 percent year-over-year revenue increase.

In an [April survey](#) by Educause, a nonprofit organization focused on technology and education, 77 percent of 312 institutions polled said they were administering, or planning to

administer, take-home tests online with some sort of remote monitoring, ranging from human surveillance via webcams to software that lets a test temporarily take over a student's browser. It is not only students who are cringing at the online monitoring.

"There has to be a better way," said Sue Escobar, a professor of criminal justice at California State University, Sacramento. Ms. Escobar said she would not use the webcam option the university added last month to its online testing software, finding it "invasive."

"Sure, we want to minimize cheating, but how far do you go?"

**Academic integrity is not a new concern in remote learning.** In surveys, [about one in three students say they have cheated in online tests](#) — **about the same as the proportion who admit to cheating offline.**

For nearly two decades, Respondus, an educational technology firm in Redmond, Wash., has been marketing a customized browser that prevents test-takers from seeking answers in a new tab while their exam is in progress. As online instruction and web access have expanded, the online proctoring market has become more crowded.

Companies like ProctorU in Birmingham, Ala., and Examity in Newton, Mass., now offer remote oversight by live proctors who watch students take tests via Skype and webcams. Proctorio in Scottsdale, Ariz., uses artificial intelligence to monitor and flag body language and background noise that might point to cheating.

"When you're educating thousands of students in an online setting, it's a good tool in the tool kit," said Louis Soares, chief learning and innovation officer at the American Council on Education, though he added that the best defense is a culture of academic integrity.

Mr. Soares noted that universities "were already on a journey toward a blending of face-to-face and digital learning." The research firm Markets&Markets [estimated](#) in 2018 that the online education market would grow from about \$4 billion then to nearly \$21 billion by 2023. The pandemic has accelerated that trend to warp speed.

Proctorio's chief executive, Mike Olsen, said his steady business grew 900 percent after campuses began closing, as the 235,000 exams his company proctored last April grew this April to 2.5 million.

Scott McFarland, chief executive of ProctorU, said he has had to double his staff of about 500 live proctors. Respondus's founder, David Smetters, said the number of universities using its services went in the space of a few weeks from about 1,500 to about 2,500.

There will be no going back, university officials predict. "This is a learning curve we won't unlearn," Mr. Soares said. The College Board is considering digital, [at-home SAT testing](#) if schools do not reopen by fall.

With great growth have come great growing pains. ProctorU had a nasty — [and public](#) — [exchange](#) over [data mining fears](#) with a faculty group at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

In Florida, thousands of students have signed [Change.org petitions](#) against their schools' use of Honorlock, a proctoring service that they say needs a more stringent [privacy policy](#).

Social media has exploded with [complaints](#) and [workarounds for cheaters](#). The University of California, Berkeley [banned online exam proctoring](#), concerned that poor and rural students lacked sufficient access to high-speed connections and compatible laptops. Meggan Levitt, the assistant vice provost for technology at University of California, Davis, said the school was set to expand its live proctoring deal with Examity when the coronavirus shut down the company's India facilities.

Others simply report being annoyed and intimidated by the sense, even in the Zoom era, that they are being spied on. Thera Boonyamarn, a 20-year-old U.C.L.A. student who flew home to Thailand when her campus closed, said that every time she sneezed into a Kleenex because of allergies, the testing software would "flag" her for seeming to look away while holding what appeared to be paper.

"It's creepy," said Hailey Arzaga, a 22-year-old psychology and criminology major at Cal Poly Pomona who worried about what the webcam would reveal as she took a recent quiz on

qualitative research methods. “Like, we have you on video and audio and we’ll record you if you screw up.”

Mr. McFarland of ProctorU acknowledged that the live surveillance “is something to get used to.” But the proctoring services say they do not sell students’ data to third parties and that they purge it after it is sent to the school unless a cheating investigation requires that they preserve it.

ProctorU drafted and posted a [Student Bill of Rights](#) after the privacy concerns at the University of California, Santa Barbara. At the University of California’s campuses where proctors are being used, faculty generally have assured students that alternate arrangements can be made for those concerned about proctors.

Still, the criticism has been unsettling, said Mr. Smetters, the Respondus founder. “We don’t drop in, we don’t review the video after — people think we’re doing that and we’re not,” he said. “We’ve been doing this for 20 years, we love education and suddenly we’re the bad guys. But we’re the good guys! We provide tools to universities so they can ensure integrity.”

It was Respondus’s testing system that unsettled Mr. Farzanekou, despite entreaties from his girlfriend, Emily Louie, and her roommate, he said, “that this was not the hill to die on.” “I told him, ‘What’s the big deal?’” recalled Ms. Louie, a 22-year-old biology major. “People our age — you just can’t trust them. I know people who leave their phones open when they take online exams, and put Post-it notes on the computer screen so the camera can’t see.”

“I don’t cheat,” Mr. Farzanekou said, calling the software “dystopian” and “eerie.” Ms. Louie replied that she had taken a year of Italian, uneventfully, using the system. “I was super self-conscious in the beginning, but then I got used to it.” But Mr. Farzanekou was not willing to let it rest.

“Isn’t that the thing about authoritarian states — that they expect you to become used to it?” he retorted. His Iranian parents, her Chinese parents and her roommate, who is from Turkey, he pointed out, had come from “places where they don’t respect your privacy.”

In the end, his instructor relented. The dispensation was one time and came with a warning that, come finals week, the webcam might be back again.

**“Please note that this exam is NOT open note or book,” wrote the adjunct professor, Lt. Alexander Dellva, “and I am therefore relying on your integrity to take this exam using only the knowledge in your brain.”**

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