

UC Davis spent \$175K to hide pepper spray cop on Google, says report

Google now proven to sell media hit-jobs and the removal of media hit-jobs.

Google's "Protection Racket"!

Documents reportedly show that the California university hired teams to improve its Google results after a campus police officer pepper-sprayed students and became an Internet meme.

[Internet](#)



• by [Laura Hautala](#)
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Campus Police Lt. John Pike asks a pair of protestors to take down their tent on the UC Davis quad on November 18, 2011, the same day he pepper-sprayed students seated in the quad.

Randall Benton/ZUMA/Corbis

It was one of the [viral images](#) of 2011: a group of college students sitting passively on the ground while a UC Davis police officer slowly and deliberately hit them point-blank in the face with pepper spray.

The event drew widespread criticism of the school, dragging it into the Occupy Wall Street debate that was making waves around the country.

In the past five years, it appears the University of California, Davis, has used a different weapon to cover up that embarrassing incident from search results on Google.

University documents show that the school paid public relations firms at least \$175,000 to hide bad publicity on Google when people searched on the university name and the name of its chancellor, Linda Katehi, [according to](#) The Sacramento Bee, which obtained the papers.

In a statement, Dana Topousis, interim strategic communications lead at UC Davis, defended the university's use of communications funds.

"Increased investment in social media and communications strategy has heightened the profile of the university to good effect," Topousis said. She added that it's important that good news from the school "is not lost during a campus crisis, including the crisis that ensued following the extremely regrettable incident when police pepper-sprayed student protesters in 2011."

Such PR services, often called reputation management, generally work by flooding the Internet with positive or unrelated blog posts and other Web pages. As a result, the controversial or negative stories get pushed down to the second or third page of Google results. If a previously troubled company does good things, old, negative results will naturally fall to the bottom, said Brian Patterson, a partner at Go Fish Digital, a company that offers reputation management. Businesses like his "help guide a company through that process," he said. Go Fish Digital was not one of the firms hired by UC Davis.

But spending money on the service with two different companies led to a new headache for the school. UC Davis is a public university, and that means it's subject to California's Public Records Act transparency laws. The Sacramento Bee said it obtained the documents using this method.

"That picture is iconic," Patterson said. Appearing to try to bury it "looks terrible, and it's going to be hard for them to turn it around."

Another university in California's public education system, UC Berkeley, also saw controversy during the Occupy Wall Street protests that took place on its own campus. A row of police officers beat back a line of protestors with their batons, striking the protestors repeatedly in the torsos in unison. The video of that incident also went viral and caused a public outcry. So did it use reputation management in the aftermath?

"I've been here 12 years," said Dan Mogulof, executive director of communications and public affairs at UC Berkeley. "I'm not aware that we have ever used similar services."

Of the two firms that reportedly worked with UC Davis to improve its Google results, Nevins & Associates, declined to comment, and ID Media Partners did not respond to a request for comment.

Updated at 3:10 p.m. PT *to add comment from UC Davis and UC Berkeley.*

UC DAVIS demonstrates how Google offers mafia-like “protection racket” to clear your name

UC Davis sought to eliminate negative search results for school and chancellor

Strategic communications budget soared during Katehi’s tenure

Students occupying area outside Katehi’s office call for her resignation





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Following the 2011 pepper spraying of students, the campus hired consultants to improve the online reputations of UC Davis and Chancellor Linda Katehi. Sam Stanton The Sacramento Bee
By Sam Stanton and Diana Lambert

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UC Davis contracted with consultants for [at least \\$175,000](#) to scrub the Internet of negative online postings following the November 2011 pepper-spraying of students and to improve the reputations of both the university and Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi, newly released documents show.

The payments were made as the university was trying to [boost its image online](#) and were among several contracts issued following the pepper-spray incident.

Some payments were made in hopes of improving the results computer users obtained when searching for information about the university or Katehi, results that one consultant labeled “venomous rhetoric about UC Davis and the chancellor.”

Others sought to improve the school’s use of social media and to devise a new plan for the UC Davis strategic communications office, which has seen its budget rise substantially since Katehi took the chancellor’s post in 2009. Figures released by UC Davis show the strategic communications budget increased from \$2.93 million in 2009 to \$5.47 million in 2015.

“We have worked to ensure that the reputation of the university, which the chancellor leads, is fairly

portrayed,” said UC Davis spokeswoman Dana Topousis. “We wanted to promote and advance the important teaching, research and public service done by our students, faculty and staff, which is the core mission of our university.”

Money to pay the consultants came from the communications department budget, Topousis said.

It is one more example of how out of touch the leadership at UC Davis is when it comes to their public perspective. Doug Elmets, public affairs consultant

The documents outlining the expenditures were released to The Sacramento Bee this week in response to requests filed last month under the California Public Records Act.

The documents reflect an aggressive effort to counteract an avalanche of negative publicity that arose after the Nov. 18, 2011, pepper-spraying of student protesters by campus police. Fallout from that incident continued for more than a year, as investigations and lawsuits played out and spawned criticism of UC Davis and demands that Katehi resign.

In January 2013, UC Davis signed on with a Maryland company called Nevins & Associates for a six-month contract that paid \$15,000 a month.

“Nevins & Associates is prepared to create and execute an online branding campaign designed to clean up the negative attention the University of California, Davis, and Chancellor Katehi have received related to the events that transpired in November 2011,” a six-page proposal from Nevins promised.

“Online evidence and the venomous rhetoric about UC Davis and the Chancellor are being filtered through the 24-hour news cycle, but it is at a tepid pace,” the proposal said.

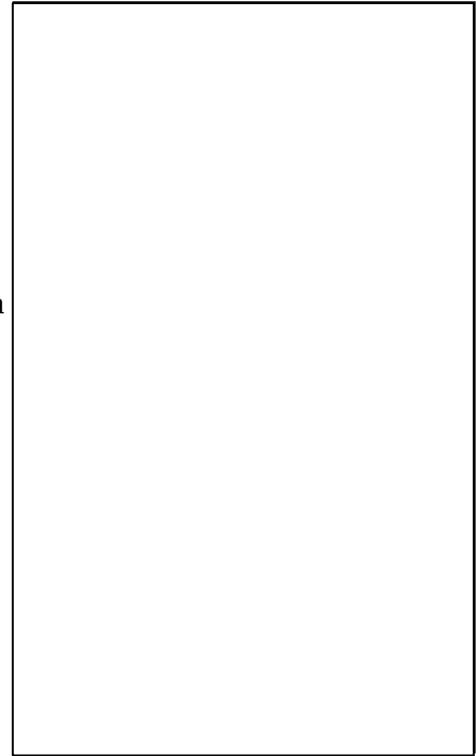
The objectives Nevins outlined for the contract included “eradication of references to the pepper spray incident in search results on Google for the university and the Chancellor.”

That objective was to be achieved by advising UC Davis officials on the use of Google platforms as part of “an aggressive and comprehensive online campaign to eliminate the negative search results for UC Davis and the Chancellor.”

Online reputation management is a growing field in which companies offer to improve Google and other search engine results by churning out positive news stories, press releases and announcements to minimize previous negative results. Some schools also use them to help students clean up their online presence before graduation.

“I would say that it is common for an individual who might be applying for a job or an individual who has been wrongly maligned to go to a company like Reputation.com, but for a public university that is funded through taxpayer funds, who has repeatedly stepped into a vast hole, it is surprising that they thought this could be done without the light of day shining on the act,” said Doug Elmets, a Sacramento public affairs consultant. “It is one more example of how out of touch the leadership at UC Davis is when it comes to their public perspective.”

Elmets said online reputation management is usually achieved with software that is used to scrub the more “outrageous accusations or allegations.” If a person puts UC Davis in a search engine, it would eliminate some things initially, but a person would only have to “dig a little deeper to find anything that needs to be told,” he said.



We have worked to ensure that the reputation of the university, which the chancellor leads, is fairly portrayed. UC Davis spokeswoman Dana Topousis

The release of the documents comes as Katehi is once again under fire, this time for her acceptance of seats on private corporate boards, including a [textbook publisher](#) and a [for-profit university](#) that was under scrutiny by the Federal Trade Commission. First revealed in The Bee, her outside board positions have sparked calls for her resignation as well as student protests.

[Students have occupied the reception office](#) outside Katehi's office since March 11 in a sit-in that they say will last until Katehi resigns.

The school's effort to manage its reputation continues. Topousis said the university has hired one outside consultant since March 1 to work on the school's image. On March 2, The Sacramento Bee published a story about Katehi taking a board seat on DeVry Education Group, which is under scrutiny from federal investigators.

Reaction to word of the online reputation expenditures sparked new criticism by a lawmaker who is one of four to [call on Katehi to step down](#).

"It is troubling that the administration chose to spend scarce public dollars and to nearly double its PR budget when tuition soared, course offerings were slashed and California resident students were being shut out," said Assemblyman Kevin McCarty, who chairs the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Education Finance. "These findings just raise more questions about university priorities."

The Nevins proposal for UC Davis stated that it would employ the expertise of founder David Nevins, a former chairman of the Maryland Board of Regents, and counter negative search keywords for UC Davis by using a "surge of content with positive sentiment and off-topic subject matter" about the university.

The proposal called for the university to adopt "a more involved relationship with Google platforms."

"Google has a propensity to rank Google-hosted content and advertising above others in search results," the proposal said, adding the suggestion that Katehi consider using Google to host an online "Hangout" to field questions from students and others, something the proposal notes President Barack Obama did in 2012.

The proposal also suggested using Google Hangouts to co-host programs with Aggie TV and KDVS, the university's student-run television and radio stations. "This would be similar to radio shows hosted by KDVS that were attended by former President and California Governor Ronald Reagan," the proposal said.

Nevins' office said Wednesday he would not comment on the contract.

Records show the university paid Nevins' firm \$92,970.73 through July 2013, including travel and lodging costs for Nevins associate Molly White.

White did not respond to messages left for her last month or Wednesday, but a résumé posted for her on LinkedIn cites her experience handling "a successful 6 month long strategic SEO (search engine

optimization) and online reputation management campaign for the University of California, Davis, and Chancellor Linda Katehi.”

UC Davis officials said they [still were working to respond](#) to requests for documents by The Bee, and did not provide any reports or memos explaining the results of the contracts. Currently, Google searches for “UC Davis pepper spray” produce nearly 100,000 results, while searches for “Katehi pepper spray” pull up roughly 10,800 results.

In the aftermath of the pepper-spray incident, which occurred as police were attempting to break up a protest and sit-in on the campus quad where tents had been set up, UC Davis officials [scrambled to contain the fallout](#) as videos of the incident were viewed millions of times on the Web.

Court filings showed that [campus police Lt. John Pike](#), who was seen calmly spraying seated students in various videos, was bombarded with more than 10,000 text messages and 17,000 emails that included threats and harassment. The university itself released nearly 10,000 documents 11 months after the incident that illustrated the worldwide negative reaction to the incident and officials’ attempts to contain the damage.

Three months after that release of documents, the university contracted with Nevins to find ways to remove the incident from Internet searches. The Nevins contract apparently ended after six months, in mid-July 2013, but UC Davis’ efforts to improve its online reputation did not.

In June 2014, the university hired Sacramento-based ID Media Partners in an \$82,500 contract to “design and execute a comprehensive search engine results management strategy.”

The firm, which does business under the name IDMLOCO, said in documents provided by the university that its “primary goal” was to “achieve a reasonable balance of positive natural search results on common terms concerning UC Davis and Chancellor Katehi.”

A second contract was awarded to IDMLOCO in February 2015 for a fee of \$8,000 a month – up to a limit of \$96,000 – to develop an “integrated social media program for executive communications.”

IDMLOCO was awarded a third contract in September 2015 for \$22,500 a month, or a maximum of \$67,500, to “provide an assessment of the University’s Strategic Communications redesign.”

“Given the recent changes in the Strategic Communications team, this is the right opportunity to fully understand and thoughtfully design an organization that maps to the Chancellor’s goals for the university,” IDMLOCO said in a proposal to Karl Engelbach, Katehi’s associate chancellor.

IDMLOCO has offices on L Street and was co-founded by Matt Eagan, a campaign aide to former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bryan Merica, a technology consultant who also is a co-founder of the Fox&Hounds blog that focuses on politics and business.

Merica and Eagan did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

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Read more here: <http://www.sacbee.com/news/local/article71659992.html#storylink=cpy>

Read UC Davis' contracts to repair online image

Two contracts total at least \$175,000

Web efforts to 'expedite the eradication of references to the pepper spray incident'

1 of 2

UC Davis Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi Renée C. Byer Sacramento Bee file
Bee staff

As part of an effort to counteract negative publicity after the November 2011 pepper spraying of student protestors, [UC Davis retained consultants for at least \\$175,000](#) to improve the school's online image. Documents related to the effort were released to The Sacramento Bee this week in response to requests filed last month under the California Public Records Act.

In January 2013, UC Davis signed on with a Maryland company called Nevins & Associates for a six-month contract that paid \$15,000 a month.

Engaging in a calculated system of sharing and promoting stories through UC Davis' owned communication vehicles like the UC Davis website, The California Aggie, Aggie TV, the student-run radio station KDVS and UC Davis' social media accounts.

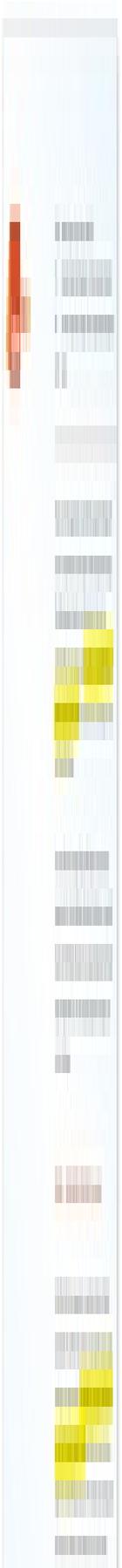
Plans for 'strategic content placement' proposed by Nevins and Associates

Read the whole agreement here:

[Nevins contract with UC Davis](#)

Second contract

IDMLOCO was awarded a contract in June 2014 for \$82,500 to “design and execute a comprehensive search engine results management strategy.”



Read the whole agreement here:

[ID Media contract with UC Davis](#)

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[UC Davis paid to repair its online image](#)

[UC Davis spent thousands to scrub pepper spray references from Internet](#)

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