

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #029

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

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[00:00:04] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] Today, we are going to talk about a company that you probably have never heard of, but that you may be, through your taxes at least, quite a large customer of.

[00:00:26] That company is called Palantir, and there are people who say it is the scariest company in the world.

[00:00:33] Before we get right into the podcast though, let me just take 30 seconds to remind those of you listening to this podcast on Apple podcasts, Spotify, iVoox, or wherever you're listening to it on that you can access the transcript and key vocabulary for the podcast over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:00:55] In case you hadn't seen this yet, we now have a super cool feature where the transcript animates across the screen as you're listening to the podcast, a little bit like subtitles.

[00:01:07] So now it's super easy to follow every single word and not miss one thing.

[00:01:13] So check that out, that's over at leonardoenglish.com

[00:01:19] Right, Palantir the most important company you've never heard of.

[00:01:25] In case you hadn't realised by now, this isn't a business podcast, and we don't just talk about companies because they've done something interesting in the news, or we want to hear the story about how they got started.

[00:01:40] This podcast tries to tell stories about the way the world works and Palantir well, it certainly has a pretty big global impact.

[00:01:50] There are some big fans of the company saying that it protects us and makes our lives safer, that it stops terrorists, violent criminals, and makes the world a better place.

[00:02:05] But there are also those that say that the company [poses](#)¹ a dangerous risk to our safety and personal freedoms, and it needs to be stopped before it's too late.

[00:02:16] Today we are going to talk about what it is exactly that Palantir does and then you can decide whether you think this is a good thing for the world.

¹ to cause something, especially a problem or difficulty

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:02:30] So my first question would be, have you ever heard of Palantir?

[00:02:36] I imagine that for most of you, the answer would be no.

[00:02:42] It's a very secretive company, it's not like they have a shop, an app or anything like that.

[00:02:49] But it is worth over \$20 billion and it counts many of the world's governments as its clients.

[00:03:00] It was founded by the secretive [libertarian](#)² billionaire Peter Thiel, who was one of the early founders of PayPal.

[00:03:09] He was also an early investor in Facebook and is now a big Donald Trump supporter.

[00:03:16] He founded the company in 2004 shortly after the September the 11th terrorist attacks, with a view to creating a company that would stop these kinds of things happening in the future.

[00:03:30] So what does it actually do?

[00:03:35] If you look at Palantir's website under what do we do, it says "*we make products for human driven analysis of real world data*".

² a person who believes that people should be free to think and behave as they want and should not have limits put on them by governments

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:03:47] This is obviously a kind of corporate [doublespeak](#)³.

[00:03:51] It doesn't really mean anything, so let's try to translate this into plain English.

[00:03:57] In short, Palantir is a software company that finds connections between data.

[00:04:05] While this might sound simple, the levels at which Palantir operates are [anything but](#)⁴.

[00:04:15] What Palantir does is [connect the dots](#)⁵ between huge sets of data, billions of different data points, and provides information that can be useful to solving a problem.

[00:04:30] This might be connecting purchases of bus tickets with things that are bought in a shop and CCTV footage to stop a terrorist attack or to find patterns in millions of different internal emails to discover [insider trading](#)⁶ at a large company.

[00:04:52] I'm sure you've heard of the phrase big data.

³ language that has no real meaning or has more than one meaning and is intended to hide the truth

⁴ used to mean the opposite of the stated quality

⁵ bringing together information from different places, find a pattern

⁶ the illegal buying and selling of company shares by people who have special information because they are involved with the company

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:04:56] Big data is obviously a bit of a [buzzword](#)⁷, but it is a fact that there is just a huge, a [gargantuan](#)⁸ amount of information and data in existence, and vast amounts are created every millisecond about every single thing we do, everything that happens in the world.

[00:05:19] You can think of Palantir as the company that is able to process this kind of data and actually draw conclusions from it.

[00:05:32] If you imagine a detective movie with someone working through the night, trying to [piece together](#)⁹ clues, plane tickets, pictures, phone records, all that kind of stuff, and sticking them all on a wall, and [scratching their head](#)¹⁰, trying to find the connection and then drawing lines from one to another.

[00:05:55] And finally, after working through the night, they finally [crack](#)¹¹ the pattern and understand the connections between the dots.

[00:06:05] This is basically what Palantir does, but [infinitely](#)¹² faster and on an [infinitely](#) larger scale.

⁷ a word or expression from a particular subject area that has become fashionable by being used a lot, especially on television and in the newspapers

⁸ very large

⁹ if you piece together facts or information, you collect them in order to understand a situation

¹⁰ to be confused about something, unable to figure it out

¹¹ solve

¹² very or very much

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:06:15] Palantir might [piece together](#) data from millions of different sources that can tell us that someone has missed days from work recently, has visited a [hardware](#)¹³ store and bought unusual things, has bought a plane ticket to somewhere where they don't have connections and has visited certain websites, and this means, for example, that there is a high probability of a attack being committed.

[00:06:47] While I don't think that anyone would argue that fewer terrorist attacks is a good thing, the danger comes when we think about our own personal freedoms and [weigh up](#)¹⁴ the advantages of solutions that help prevent things that would harm us against the disadvantages of an [erosion](#)¹⁵ of personal liberty.

[00:07:11] If we aren't free to go to a shop, to book a plane ticket or send an email without thinking that some [all-seeing](#)¹⁶ company or indeed government can see what we are doing and is able to [comb](#)¹⁷ through all of our digital footprints, what is the impact of this on our own sense of personal freedom?

[00:07:37] And what would happen if this technology wasn't used for good purposes?

¹³ metal tools, materials, and equipment used in a house or a garden, such as hammers, nails, and screws

¹⁴ to think carefully about the advantages or disadvantages of a situation before making a decision

¹⁵ the fact of a good quality or situation being gradually lost or destroyed

¹⁶ something that can see everything

¹⁷ to search a place or an area very carefully

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:07:44] Indeed, the American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU, has [spoken out](#)¹⁸ about Palantir and described what would happen if the software got into the wrong hands as *"a true totalitarian nightmare, monitoring the activities of innocent Americans on a mass scale."*

[00:08:07] The fact is that to [monitor](#)¹⁹ the bad guys, [in inverted commas](#)²⁰, you have to at least have the ability to [monitor](#) everyone.

[00:08:18] And are we prepared to give up all of our personal freedoms in order for us to be a little bit safer?

[00:08:26] If you've seen the film Minority Report, Palantir may seem [eerily](#)²¹, strangely, familiar.

[00:08:36] Minority Report, if you haven't seen the film or if you need a reminder, it's based in the year 2054 and the police use a tool that allows them to stop crimes before they're committed.

[00:08:51] Palantir actually makes a version of this possible, or at least they tried to make a version of this possible.

¹⁸ to say in public what you think about something such as a law or an official plan or action

¹⁹ to watch and check a situation carefully for a period of time in order to discover something about it

²⁰ used in spoken English after a word or phrase to show that it has not been used accurately or that the opposite meaning is intended

²¹ in a strange, frightening, and mysterious way

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:09:00] They created a tool that predicted when a crime would be likely to take place, and so agents, police men and women would be sent to that particular area.

[00:09:14] How this worked was that the technology relied on an [algorithm](#)²² that absorbed data on locations, times and dates of previously committed crimes, and then gave hotspots, gave areas, to police officers to patrol.

[00:09:35] [Creepy](#)²³, right?

[00:09:37] Well, not just [creepy](#), but also full of [bias](#)²⁴.

[00:09:42] There was a study done in 2016 which showed that this [algorithm](#) heavily [weighted](#)²⁵ towards people of colour, and previous crimes weren't actually the best indicator of future crimes.

[00:09:59] Essentially the [algorithm](#) was racist.

[00:10:03] And even some Palantir employees are upset at some of the ways in which the software has been used.

²² a set of mathematical instructions or rules that, especially if given to a computer, will help to calculate an answer to a problem

²³ strange or unnatural and making you feel frightened

²⁴ the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment

²⁵ prepared and arranged in a way that is likely to produce a particular effect, usually an advantage, rather than any other

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:10:10] Palantir has a big contract with ICE, the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement department in the US and the software is used to track down and then [deport](#)²⁶ suspected illegal immigrants.

[00:10:28] And while some software engineers might have signed up to the mission of a company that aims to help stop terrorist attacks, catch child sex offenders and violent criminals, they had soon discovered that the software that they were creating could also be used to carry out policies that they might not agree with.

[00:10:53] But despite the [pleas](#)²⁷ and protests from employees, the company didn't [back down](#)²⁸, and it actually just renewed a huge \$42 million contract with ICE.

[00:11:08] The view of Palantir is that it's not the job of a technology company to decide US government policy and that it would be [treasonous](#)²⁹ to not provide services to the US government.

[00:11:23] However, [cynics](#)³⁰ might say that these contracts are just too [lucrative](#)³¹ to turn down, they pay too well.

²⁶ to force someone to leave a country, especially someone who has no legal right to be there or who has broken the law

²⁷ an urgent and emotional request

²⁸ to admit that you were wrong or that you have been defeated

²⁹ involving or guilty of the crime of betraying one's country

³⁰ people who believe that people are only interested in themselves and are not sincere

³¹ (especially of a business, job, or activity) producing a lot of money

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:11:31] Indeed, Palantir can charge \$3,000 per day per engineer, and one of its largest US army contracts is worth \$800 million.

[00:11:44] Palantir as a company has evidently done a lot of good.

[00:11:49] It's said that it has helped prevent a massive global [web](#)³² of cyber [intrusion](#)³³ by the Chinese government, it has predicted the locations of bombs in Afghanistan before they could go off and it helped convict the [fraudster](#)³⁴ Bernie Madoff.

[00:12:08] However, the question mark remains over how deep Palantir can see into our lives and what we are prepared to give up in order to live in a slightly safer world.

[00:12:22] The company's name certainly suggests that it wants to see everything, to be [omnipotent](#)³⁵.

[00:12:29] If you remember Lord Of The Rings, a Palantir is a seeing stone, the dark [orb](#)³⁶, the crystal ball used by the evil wizard Sarumon, to be able to see in darkness or [blinding](#)³⁷ lights.

³² a large connected group of

³³ an occasion when someone goes into a place or situation where they are not wanted or expected to be

³⁴ someone who gets money by deceiving people

³⁵ having unlimited power and able to do anything

³⁶ something in the shape of a ball

³⁷ extremely bright

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

[00:12:47] That's certainly how Palantir seems to think of itself.

[00:12:52] Well, you could say that things didn't end that well for Sarumon, or you could say that the idea of a Palantir in the hands of the government is almost as scary as it gets.

[00:13:06] Okay then, I hope that this has been an interesting look into this secretive, mysterious, but incredibly important company.

[00:13:16] It's pretty fascinating, but terrifying at the same time.

[00:13:21] As always, if you have thoughts, feedback, questions on the podcast, I'd love to hear from you.

[00:13:27] You can get in touch at hi - HI - @leonardoenglish.com or over on Facebook or Instagram.

[00:13:35] And again, if you haven't yet checked out our new animating transcripts, then do go and check those out.

[00:13:42] You can head to leonardoenglish.com and have a look.

[00:13:47] Using the animated transcripts means that the words flash across the screen as you hear them, so you should be able to follow every single word and not miss one thing.

[00:13:59] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #029
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[00:14:04] I'm Alastair Budge and I will catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Poses	to cause something, especially a problem or difficulty
Libertarian	a person who believes that people should be free to think and behave as they want and should not have limits put on them by governments
Doublespeak	language that has no real meaning or has more than one meaning and is intended to hide the truth
Anything but	used to mean the opposite of the stated quality
Connect the dots	bringing together information from different places, find a pattern
Insider trading	the illegal buying and selling of company shares by people who have special information because they are involved with the company
Buzzword	a word or expression from a particular subject area that has become fashionable by being used a lot, especially on television and in the newspapers
Gargantuan	very large
Piece together	if you piece together facts or information, you collect them in order to understand a situation

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

Scratching their head	to be confused about something, unable to figure it out
Crack	solve
Infinitely	very or very much
Hardware	metal tools, materials, and equipment used in a house or a garden, such as hammers, nails, and screws
Weigh up	to think carefully about the advantages or disadvantages of a situation before making a decision
Erosion	the fact of a good quality or situation being gradually lost or destroyed
All-seeing	something that can see everything
Comb	to search a place or an area very carefully
Speak out	to say in public what you think about something such as a law or an official plan or action
Monitor	to watch and check a situation carefully for a period of time in order to discover something about it
In inverted commas	used in spoken English after a word or phrase to show that it has not been used accurately or that the opposite meaning is intended
Eerily	in a strange, frightening, and mysterious way

Palantir: The Most Important Company You've Never Heard Of

Algorithm	a set of mathematical instructions or rules that, especially if given to a computer, will help to calculate an answer to a problem
Creepy	strange or unnatural and making you feel frightened:
Bias	the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment
Weighted	prepared and arranged in a way that is likely to produce a particular effect, usually an advantage, rather than any other
Deport	to force someone to leave a country, especially someone who has no legal right to be there or who has broken the law
Pleas	an urgent and emotional request
Back down	to admit that you were wrong or that you have been defeated
Treasonous	involving or guilty of the crime of betraying one's country
Cynics	people who believe that people are only interested in themselves and are not sincere
Lucrative	(especially of a business, job, or activity) producing a lot of money
Web	a large connected group of

Intrusion an occasion when someone goes into a place or situation where they are not wanted or expected to be

Fraudster someone who gets money by deceiving people

Omnipotent having unlimited power and able to do anything

Orb something in the shape of a ball

Blinding extremely bright

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.