Chapter 12 Ethical and Social Issues in Information Systems

Case 2: Data Mining for Terrorists and Innocents

Tags: online surveillance; data mining software; police state tracking; wiretapping

Summary

A look at how monitoring patterns of behavior online can be construed as subversive behavior, and how errors in interpreting the results can lead the innocent to jail. L= 5:10

URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lKpD7MC22I

Case

Anti-terrorism agencies around the world have made effective use of new surveillance technologies that offer unprecedented abilities to identify and apprehend potential terrorists. Today's terrorists are by nature difficult to track, as disconnected groups of individuals can use the Internet to communicate their plans with lower chance of detection. Anti-terrorist technology has evolved to better handle this new type of threat.

But there are drawbacks to these new strategies. Often, innocent people may find their privacy compromised or completely eliminated as a result of inaccurate information. Surveillance technologies are constantly improving. While this makes it more difficult for terrorists and other criminals to exchange information, it also jeopardizes our privacy, on the Internet and elsewhere, going forward. Is this reason for worry? Are comparisons to Orwell's *1984* appropriate, or overblown?

This video displays both the positive and negative results of new advances in technology. The first segment describes a program called the Dark Web Project being developed by a team at the University of Tuscon that combs the Internet in search of militant leaders and their followers. However, the difficulty with this is that most communication is done via pseudonyms or completely anonymously. The program creates author profiles based on word length, punctuation, syntax, and content, and displays information about the personality type of an individual graphically.

The plotting of information on the graph represents whether the user is violent or militant, inexperienced and seeking advice, or an opinion leader holding sway over many more people. The project is of great interest to intelligence agencies worldwide, who would like incorporate it into their arsenal of terrorist surveillance technologies.

It's unclear if this project infringes on freedom of speech and individual privacy. On the one hand, detection of potential terrorist is an important method of deterring future terrorist attacks. On the other hand, individuals who haven't done or said anything wrong may be profiled and have their private conversations exposed. An additional concern is how to distinguish what kinds of speech are grounds for surveillance.

The second segment of the video describes the plight of a German sociology professor, Andrej Holm, subjected to jail time and 24 hour surveillance thanks to his supposed association with a terror cell. Holm has written extensively on gentrification, or the gap between the rich and the poor. A radical group repeated some of his themes in a letter claiming responsibility for terror attacks arson of police vehicles. Police also found that Holm had spoken to one of the terrorists twice before. Local law enforcement jailed him for three weeks and subjected him to constant surveillance afterwards.

But Holm claims that he is a victim of unfortunate circumstances, and the courts agreed, ruling that his imprisonment was illegal. Holm's phones were tapped and his Internet usage recorded, and while he's been acquitted, he has no assurance that the surveillance has stopped.

Case Study Questions

1. Does the Tuscon data mining project inappropriately violate the privacy of Internet users, or is it an acceptable tradeoff to more intelligently combat terrorism? Explain your answer.

2. Were the local police justified in their handling of Holm? Why or why not? For whichever view you take, briefly describe the opposing viewpoint.

3. What other issues dealing with data and privacy have you encountered on the Web?

4. Review the chapter-ending case in Chapter 6 on the FBI terror watch list. What themes do the two cases have in common? How are they different?

5. What is meant by the 'Dark Web'?