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Osama, R U there?

The U.S. Intelligence Community funds ways to spy on chat rooms.
September 17, 2004

Terrorists may be plotting online, but spooks don't have the time to sift through the chat room chatter.

Spurred by the United States Intelligence Community, the National Science Foundation (NSF) recently awarded a six-figure grant to a computer science professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, to investigate a more sophisticated, self-monitoring means of spying on chat rooms.

Not surprisingly, privacy advocates say the initiative is more evidence that the United States government's war on terror is impinging on the liberty of its citizens. And one chat room operator discounted the idea that Internet meeting places harbor terrorists as "nearly ridiculous."

Popular chat room operators AOL and Yahoo declined to comment for this story.

As pedophiles and other criminals have learned the hard way, law enforcement officials regularly patrol chat rooms. But according to the NSF grant outline, detailing an anti-terrorist intelligence officer to lurk in online communities hoping to nail al Qaeda is not a wise use of time or money.

Enter professor Bulent Yener, the recipient of the NSF grant titled "Surveillance, Analysis and Modeling of Chat Room Communities" – awarded under the NSF program Approaches to Combat Terrorism (ACT).

Mr. Yener seems to be less interested in government surveillance and more into the structure of the Internet, or, how it works. Chat room chitchat is easy to obtain, but difficult to analyze, making it the perfect focus of his study, according to Mr. Yener.

This grant, aimed at making chat room surveillance *fully* automated, is a good next step for research by Mr. Yener; he already has developed software for collecting data from chat rooms.

After learning of the one-year, $157,673 chat room surveillance study grant that Mr. Yener will receive starting January 1, 2005, Privacy Rights Clearinghouse director Beth Givens expressed concern. "I worry about the oversight. How far and wide will the research be used? Where are the checks and balances? So far, I haven't seen any." She's also worried about an ongoing development of a "large interwoven structure of government intelligence, industry and academics" in an effort to spy on U.S. citizens.

Crafty intelligence
The U.S. Intelligence Community funds a large chunk of ACT research – nearly half. "We talk to the Intelligence Community and we ask them what areas they'd be interested in," said Leland Jamison, ACT director. After coordinating with the Intelligence Community, ACT solicits research from the academic community, namely mathematics and physical science programs, including those of computer science. Less than half of ACT funding comes from the Intelligence Community, he said.

Though the Intelligence Community is involved, all ACT research is unclassified. The catch is, ACT has no idea what the Intelligence Community does with their research. "We'd be the last to be able to tell. It would be up to them to pick it up. We're there to help the process begin," Mr. Jamison said.

Both the CIA and the FBI declined to comment on the study specifically, but offered some other thoughts. "We don't surf the Net looking for these types of things," said FBI spokesperson Bill Carter on

the topic of surveying chat rooms as a method to combat terrorism. He explained that the FBI would need indication of criminal or national security-related activity that would fall into the government organization's jurisdiction. One example of an instance where the FBI would intervene: "If you have a group planning to blow up a building," Mr. Carter said.

"The CIA is aggressively pursuing terrorists," said CIA spokesperson Anya Guilsher. But she officially declined to comment when asked about specific methodology and technology used in the war on terror.

The grant outline describes chat rooms as being "particularly vulnerable for exploitation by malicious parties."

One excerpt from the grant offers a scenario where an "adversary (uses) a teenager chat room to plan a terrorist act." This fictional example was discounted as "nearly ridiculous" by NetFX Media president Mike Brede. His company runs a popular teen chat room from his Teenspot Web site. "While I mentioned the scenario is farfetched, we still take jokes or pranks from our users surrounding terrorist activity seriously," Mr. Brede said. "If our chat rooms are being 'watched' we are unaware. We have never been notified of such activity," he added.

"On a broad scale I'd say it's an invasion of privacy – we don't even monitor private chats. If there was a specific warrant then we would be obligated and happy to cooperate in any means we could," Mr. Brede said.

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Tuesday, October 26, 2004

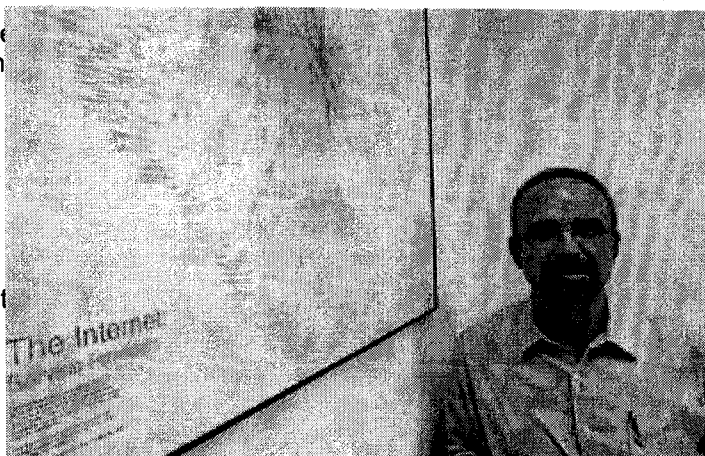🖶 Printer Friendly Version ✉ E-Mail This Article

Bush Funds US Spying on Internet Chat Rooms
by Michael Hill

TROY, N.Y. -- Amid the torrent of jabber in Internet chat rooms - flirting by QTpie and BoogieBoy, arguments about politics and horror flicks - are terrorists plotting their next move?

The government certainly isn't discounting the possibility. It's taking the idea seriously enough to fund a yearlong study on chat room surveillance under an anti-terrorism program.

A Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute computer science professor hopes to develop mathematical models that can uncover structure within the scattershot traffic of online public forums.

CYBERSNOOP
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute computer science professor Bulent Yener poses in his office in Troy, N.Y., on Thursday, Sept. 30, 2004, with a map created by Bell Labs of the major Internet Service Providers as they existed on Aug. 19, 1999. Yener wants to develop mathematical models that can uncover structure in the scattershot traffic of chat rooms. (AP Photo/Jim McKnight)

Chat rooms are the highly popular and freewheeling areas on the Internet where people with self-created nicknames discuss just about anything: teachers, Kafka, cute boys, politics, love, root canal. They are also places where malicious hackers have been known to trade software tools, stolen passwords and credit card numbers. The Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates that 28 million Americans have visited Internet chat rooms.

Trying to monitor the sea of traffic on all the chat channels would be like assigning a police officer to listen in on every conversation on the sidewalk - virtually impossible.

Instead of rummaging through megabytes of messages, RPI professor Bulent Yener (yener@cs.rit.edu) will use mathematical models in search of patterns in the chatter. Downloading data from selected chat rooms, Yener will track the times that messages were sent, creating a statistical profile of the traffic.

If, for instance, RatBoi and bowler1 consistently send messages within seconds of each other in a crowded chat room, you could infer that they were speaking to one another amid the "noise" of the chat room.

"For us, the challenge is to be able to determine, without reading the messages, who is talking to whom," Yener said.

In search of "hidden communities," Yener also wants to check messages for certain keywords that could reveal something about what's being discussed in groups.

The $157,673 grant comes from the National Science Foundation's Approaches to Combat Terrorism program. It was selected in coordination with the nation's intelligence agencies.

The NSF's Leland Jameson said the foundation judged the proposal strictly on its broader scientific merit, leaving it to the intelligence community to determine its national security value. Neither the CIA nor the FBI would comment on the grant, with a CIA spokeswoman citing the confidentiality of sources and methods.

Security officials know al-Qaida and other terrorist groups use the Internet for everything from propaganda to offering tips on kidnapping. But it's not clear if terrorists rely much on chat rooms for planning and coordination.

Michael Vatis, founding director of the National Infrastructure Protection Center and now a consultant, said he had heard of terrorists using chat rooms, which he said offer some security as long as code phrases are used. Other cybersecurity experts doubted chat rooms' usefulness to terrorists given the other current options, from Web mail to hiding messages on designated Web pages that can only be seen by those who know where to look.

"In a world in which you can embed your message in a pixel on a picture on a home page about tea cozies, I don't know whether if you're any better if you think chat would be any particular magnet," Jonathan Zittrain, an Internet scholar at Harvard Law School.

Since they are focusing on public chat rooms, authorities are not violating constitutional rights to privacy when they keep an eye on the traffic, experts said. Law enforcement agents have trolled chat rooms for years in search of pedophiles, sometimes adopting profiles making it look like they are young teens.

But the idea of the government reviewing massive amounts of public communications still raises some concerns.

Mark Rasch, a former head of the Justice Department's computer crimes unit, said such a system would bring the country one step closer to the Pentagon's much-maligned Terrorism Information Awareness program.

Research on that massive data-mining project was halted after an uproar over its impact on privacy.

"It's the ability to gather and analyze massive amounts of data that creates the privacy problem," Rasch said, "even though no individual bit of data is particularly private."

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