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Data Mining and Mining Disasters: Terrorism Information Awareness

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Abstract. This article identifies problems with data mining approaches to antiterrorism and counterterrorism.

A majority of members of the United States (US) Congress seem to have never had or have lost faith in the Defense Advanced Research Project Agency's project formerly known as both the Total Information Awareness and the Terrorism Information Awareness Program. Regardless of name, the Program was to have identified terrorist-related concatenations of data and led to antiterrorism and counterterrorism acts to meet the threat depicted by the data through interpretive rules. Public rationales for never having or losing faith in the Program have varied not only in substance but in relevance to the purposes of antiterrorism and counterterrorism.

One significant rationale bears on real and putative violations of civil rights. The degrees of freedom for US and other citizens given up by collecting, analyzing, maintaining, and acting on information is deemed too egregious a phenomenon to be counterbalanced by antiterrorism and counterterrorism benefit.

A related rationale bears on the threat of human rights violations. Here the Program's data and predictive statements could be used to an unacceptable degree in effecting noxious acts proscribed by law against individuals who turn out to be innocent and guilty of terrorism operations or support.

A third rationale bears on the sophisticated reconnaissance, surveillance, and research capabilities of formal and informal terrorist networks, organizations, and partially overlapping social entities. The problem here is at least threefold. The interpretive rules of the Program can be identified. Acts leading to a terrorist operations can be chosen and effected to "fly under the radar" of the rules. And this two-step procedure can be repeated as new rules are developed, identified, and avoided.

A fourth rationale bears on the constraints of empirical science. Given that data mining cannot address all data and that interpretive rules are subject to the vulnerabilities of inductive—and, to a lesser degree, deductive—logic, antiterrorism and counterterrorism benefit may not be obtained. A related belief can be characterized by the seemingly magical properties attributed to a science of reliable and valid prediction of extremely low probability social events.

A fifth rationale bears on the social transformation of knowledge. An example of this transformation is that the speed with which a specific piece of information changes its terrorism-related meaning as perceived by various observers may be faster than the speed with which reliable and valid interpretive rules can be devised for the Program.

Public oppositional discourse on the Program has been and continues to be weighted much more along the lines of civil and human rights violations than on the Program's security, reliability, and validity. And this discourse continues to create a huge misperception that opposition to the Program will lead the US Government (USG) to fight terrorism with one hand tied behind its back. Instead, it may well be that

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opposition is only keeping the USG from having a weapon in hand that would not work. In this regard, the change from Total to Terrorism in the Program's Title may be not only an exemplar of propagandistic rhetoric but also an admission that total can't be accomplished and, regardless, can't work. (See Campbell, C., Williams, B., & Gilgen, D. (2002). Is social capital a useful conceptual tool for exploring community level influences on HIV infection? An exploratory case study from South Africa. AIDS Care, 14, 41-54; Drobics, M., Bodenhofer, U., & Winiwarter, W. (2002). Mining clusters and corresponding interpretable descriptions -- A three-stage approach. Expert Systems: International Journal of Knowledge Engineering & Neural Networks, 19, 224-234; Markoff, J. (May 21, 2003). Experts say technology is widely disseminated inside and outside military. The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com; Menczer, F. (2003). Complementing search engines with online web mining agents. Decision Support Systems, 35, 195-212.) (Keywords: Data Mining, Profiling, Terrorism.)

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