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The Psychology of Intelligent Video Analysis

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Abstract: This article examines issues surrounding software-enhanced video analysis in an intelligence context.

One of many products marketed to confront a post-9/11 terrorism challenge—a challenge that has morphed into an attempt to foster a world of security in a world of insecurity—is that of the combination of behavior-recognition software and intelligent video analysis. Most often the combination is hooked into a closed-circuit television system and will identify a putative security threat based on the detection of specific behaviors that are presumed to be indicators of threat.

A common set of behavioral indicators of security threat are an individual running who should be walking, lurking who should not be lurking—perhaps merely going about some business—and seeming erratic who should be no such thing. There are significant problems with such indicators. One is that the indicators are premised on acting in a statistically deviant fashion from people who are in the area. Another is the premise of acting in a statistically deviant fashion from how people should act in the immediate area—even if there are no other people in the area. Still another is the nature of some behaviors—e.g., lurking—that only can be simplistically constrained by another set of definitional behaviors or subjectively intuited. Yet another is that a tried-and-true modus operandi of security violators seeking to act as much as possible like people who are not security violators would seem to immediately invalidate the subjective basis of the objective security technology to be installed and employed.

The class of product in question exemplifies a common post-9/11 phenomenon: significant progress in the sophistication of technology coupled with no progress in the realm of thinking about the nature of security and its threat. This phenomenon has been well exploited in the history of terrorism by terrorists to the disadvantage of their security adversaries (See Mount Vernon bolsters video surveillance. (September 24, 2003). Homeland Security and Defense, 2(39), 5; Pollak, S. D., & Tolley-Schell, S. A. (2003). Selective attention to facial emotion in physically abused children. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 112, 323-338; Salgado, P.B. (1998). When a toy comes alive: A computer product as a study in material culture. Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences, 59, (1-A) 0224; Steele, C. M., Spencer, S. J., & Aronson, J. (2002). Contending with group image: The psychology of stereotype and social identity threat. In M. P. Zanna, (Ed.). Advances in experimental social psychology, Vol. 34. (pp. 379-440). Academic Press, Inc.) (Keywords: Intelligence Analysis, Security, Software, Terrorism.)