NSA looking at social-networking spaces

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Amidst the political firestorm generated by revealed wiretapping of domestic phone calls, the National Security Agency has recently been revealed to be funding research to ramp up data-mining efforts to encompass social-networking Web sites.

These sites, which include household names such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com, represent a potentially larger data source for firms like the NSA to tap into. With more than 80 million accounts on MySpace.com alone, the sites offer a wider array of publicly available information such as contacts and shared activities.

This information, if collected and filtered correctly, can be combined with other harvested data to reveal information as to banking, retail and property records and eventually help fill in the picture of a potential terror suspect's activities. Such an aid may prove extremely helpful to the intelligence community in its hunt for both terror suspects and criminals.

In the past, intelligence officials have complained that harvested phone logs, while applicable to their searches, provided a limited scope to a person's social network. Collected data from such sites as these may help to provide a more complete picture of the person in question.

Officially established in 1952, the NSA's core task has been the collection and analysis of foreign communications. Though not officially tasked for domestic surveillance and generally leaving this function to organizations such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which is

specifically chartered for this, the NSA has harvested domestic phone calls since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"There are 80 million individuals who've put their life up for everyone to see," said Tim Bajarin, an analyst for Creative Strategies, a technology analysis firm.

Bajarin then pointed out that the question as to the NSA's actions arose in how the information was collected beyond what was publicly displayed for anyone to read.

"If you get access behind the firewall, you're trying to trigger identities and figure out where the content is originating from," Bajarin said. "Then it comes down to discretion."

Bajarin also mentioned that the NSA searches are also tying into a time when the Internet is evolving towards what's known as the "semantic Web." With simple code revisions to major Web sites, the Internet's content becomes far easier to search through and index, larger systems and search engines seeing the structure of the Internet in a more logical, easily searchable way.

"While it (the "semantic Web") might help surveillance, it helps make searches more accurate," Bajarin said. "It would have to help data mining and surveillance efforts to some degree. If you want serious data mining done for lower-level access, you'd need legal access to the back end."

Others have wondered about the NSA's logic in tracking terrorist connections through social-networking sites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com.

"It seems sort of absurd that a Web site like MySpace would be used,"

said James Fowler, an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Southern California, Davis.

"I can't imagine this would be used, unless it was for cracking something like MP3 downloads," commented Fowler, citing MySpace's popularity among the youth and teen markets.

Fowler then illustrated that terrorist organizations generally rely on telephone-based communications and despite MySpace's accessibility, there may be more value in data harvested from a telephone call.

"In my experience, there are different incentives for using sites like these. You try to link to as many people as possible. It's hard to make 100 calls a day and it's a tangible cost," Fowler said. "You imagine there's a more tangible/invested connection in the phone call than just through the link on MySpace."

"Right now it's unclear as to how much of this data is public and how much is private and this is where concerns arise. We shouldn't be concerned that the data is being used, we should be concerned about where the data is from," said Lisa Singh, a professor of Computer Science at Georgetown University.

"There's a natural tradeoff that occurs between privacy and data mining and analysis. Data mining isn't a bad thing, as it helps us understand trends," Singh said. "Still, it can be misused if there's a lot of private information that gets exposed."

"They shouldn't go behind the firewall," Singh added. "If there's a firewall, then there's the notion that what's beyond the firewall is essentially not public. We can't stop the government from accessing it, but people should be concerned about how much they want potentially millions of eyes to see."

Requests to the NSA for comment were not returned in time for publication.

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