

New study explores the mind of a cyberterrorist

December 16 2015, by Joanna Carver

A new study by Max Kilger, director of Data Analytics Programs at The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) College of Business, is delving into an aspect of cybersecurity rarely explored before now: the human component. Kilger's research utilizes his talents as a social psychologist to show that at the beginning of any digital threat is a real person with unique motivations.

"I've spent a fair amount of time trying to get people to understand that the human component of cybersecurity is very important," Kilger said. "Understanding the motivations of cyberterrorists was a foreign concept until very recently and still is to many information security professionals."

Kilger recently represented UTSA, which is home to the nation's top cybersecurity program, at a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) training facility in Ankara, Turkey. There, he stressed the importance of understanding that cyberterrorists are different from traditional terrorists. There are several motivations for the attacks they carry out. Kilger said that while some are driven by ego, politics or entertainment, the most common reason is money.

"You can basically rob a bank without actually robbing a bank," he said. "The risk of getting caught is fairly low and the chance of success is pretty high."

Kilger is among the UTSA faculty leading the charge in studying the

human component of cyberterrorism. He has unique expertise in cybersecurity and [social psychology](#).

The reason why this topic is lesser known, he said, is that security professionals become very focused on the technological side of responding to attacks and lack the social psychology background to analyze and understand the human being on the other side of that attack.

"Being able to project future scenarios is one of the most important aspects of [cybersecurity](#)," he said. "A lot of [information security](#) efforts are defense-based and reactive. We need a more proactive approach."

According to Kilger, a new approach is needed because now a single person can effectively attack a nation-state. In his study, published in *Availability, Reliability and Security*, he explains that the dramatic shift in power between a country and an individual is very enticing and it's one sign that a [cyber terrorism](#) community could be on the rise.

"As a [social psychologist](#), you look at markers and clues. You analyze what's happened before and how that informs what's going on now," he said. "Losses are adding up significantly. They're recruiting all the time and they're very organized."

As societies become more reliant on the Internet the threat of cyber terrorism looms larger. It's something Kilger said needs to be kept in mind moving forward in a world where cars and airplanes are connected to the Internet.

"There's no easy solution," he said. "We need more understanding of why these attacks occur and why people do them. Then we can start figuring out what their targets will be and what they're likely to do. With that, we can stop them from happening."

More information: "Integrating Human Behavior into the Development of Future Cyberterrorism Scenarios."

[ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stam ... jsp?arnumber=7299981](http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stam...jsp?arnumber=7299981)

Provided by University of Texas at San Antonio

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