

Bush Surveillance: A Thousand Points of Sight

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TO - Chris Floyd - As with so many of the Bush measures that have quietly stripped away America's liberties, this one too is beginning with a whimper, not a bang: a modest \$2.4 Department of Homeland Security million grant to develop "sentiment analysis" software that will allow the government's "security organs" to sift millions of articles for "negative opinions of the United States or its leaders in newspapers and other publications overseas."

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Sentimental Education:

Academia Signs Up to Track Down Dissent

Chris Floyd

TO UK Correspondent
t r u t h o u t | Report

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I.

Why is the United States government spending millions of dollars to track down critics of George W. Bush in the press? And why have major American universities agreed to put this technology of tyranny into the state's hands?

At the most basic level, of course, both questions are easily answered: 1) Power. 2) Money. The Bush administration wants to be able to root out - and counteract - any dissenting noises that might put a crimp in its ongoing crusade for "full spectrum dominance" of global affairs, while the august institutions of higher learning involved - the universities of Cornell, Pittsburgh and Utah - crave the federal green that keeps them in clover.

But beyond these grubby realities, there are many other disturbing aspects of this new program - which is itself only part of a much broader penetration of American academia by the Department of Homeland Security.

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As with so many of the Bush measures that have quietly stripped away America's liberties, this one too is beginning with a whimper, not a bang: a modest \$2.4 Department of Homeland Security million grant to develop "sentiment analysis" software that will allow the government's "security organs" to sift millions of articles for "negative opinions of the United States or its leaders in newspapers and other publications overseas," as the New York Times reported earlier this month. Such negative opinions must be caught and catalogued because they could pose "potential threats to the nation," security apparatchiks told the Times.

This hydra-headed snooping program is based on "information extraction," which, as a chipper PR piece from Cornell tells us, is a process by which "computers scan text to find meaning in natural language," rather than the rigid literalism ordinarily demanded by silicon cogitators. Under the gentle tutelage of Homeland Security, the universities "will use machine-learning algorithms to give computers examples of text expressing both fact and opinion and teach them to tell the difference," says the Cornell blurb.

At this point, the ancient and ever-pertinent question of Pontius Pilate comes to mind: "What is truth?" Of course, Pilate, being a devotee of what George W. Bush likes to call "the path of action," gave the answer to his philosophical inquiry in brute physical form: truth is whatever the empire says it is - so take this Galilean rabble-rouser out and crucify him already. In like manner, it will certainly be the government "security organs" who ultimately determine the criteria for what is fact and what is opinion - and whether the latter is positive or negative, perhaps even a candidate for the Bush-Pilate "path."

The academics will be trying out the Sentiment Analysis program (let's call it SAP, for short) on four main clusters of articles from 2001-2002, the Times reports. These include: Bush's famous declaration of an "axis of evil" threatening the world; the treatment of his Terror War captives in Guantanamo Bay; global warming; and the failed Bush-backed bid to topple Venezuela's Hugo Chavez in a coup - all of them issues on which the Bush administration was at odds with much of the world, and large swathes of American opinion as well. Obviously, such issues are fertile fields for terrorist thought-crimes to be snagged and tagged by SAP.

For those with concerns about civil liberties, Cornell assures us that SAP will be limited strictly to foreign publications. Oh, really? Hands up out there, everyone who believes that this technology will not be used to ferret out "potential threats to the nation" arising in the Homeland press as well. After all, the Unitary Executive Decider-in-Chief has already decided that the nation's iron-clad laws against warrantless surveillance of American citizens can be swept aside by his "inherent powers" if he decides it's necessary. Why should he bother with any petty restrictions on a press-monitoring program? And wouldn't dissension within the ranks of the volk

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itself actually be more threatening to government policy than the grumbling of malcontents overseas?

II.

Then again, what is so sinister about the plan, exactly? Surely every government is eager to read its notices in the press, foreign and domestic. Surely the Bush administration already has a myriad of minions in the White House, the CIA, the NSA, the DIA and embassies around the world doing just that. True enough - and there's the rub. For if they are already tracking and sifting media sentiment to a fare-thee-well, why do they need SAP's \$2.4 million software?

Here we see the same principle that lies behind Bush's illegal warrantless surveillance program. Long-established law - the FISA court - already provides Bush with the power to spy on anyone even remotely suspected of a connection to terrorism - and to do so immediately, without waiting a single instant or jumping through a single bureaucratic hoop to get the operation going. So who is he actually using his warrantless surveillance program against? It can't be suspected terrorists; they are already covered by existing law. There are only two conclusions to be drawn from this strange state of affairs: 1) The Bush regime is using the program to spy on people other than suspected terrorists. 2) It is using the program to establish the principle that presidential power cannot be restrained by law in any area that the president arbitrarily designates a "matter of national security." These conclusions are not mutually exclusive, of course.

Likewise, we must ask: who is the "Sentiment Analysis" program aimed at? It can't be the major news and opinion drivers in the international and national media; these are already being monitored. And it hardly requires a deus ex machina to determine the political sentiment behind news stories and opinion pieces. Why then would you need multimillion-dollar computer whizbangery to tell you whether a story casts a favorable or critical light on Bush and his policies? And how could critical "sentiment" in the kinds of stories that Cornell, Pitt and Utah are examining in their tests pose any kind of "potential threat" to the nation? Again, there must be something else behind the program because, as with warrantless surveillance, it is clearly redundant on its face.

The key to this conundrum mostly likely lies in the envisioned scope of the program: "millions of articles" to be processed for "sentiment analysis." This denotes a fishing expedition that goes far beyond the "publicly available material, primarily news reports and editorials from

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English-language newspapers worldwide" that Claire Cardie, Cornell's lead researcher on SAP, says that her team will be using in developing the software. The target of such a scope cannot be simply the English-language foreign press, or the foreign press as a whole, or indeed, every newspaper in the world, from Pyongyang to Peoria. It must also be aimed at other modes of textual communication, in print and online.

In fact, later in the PR blurb, Cardie rather gives the game away when, seeking to allay "fears about invasions of privacy" raised by the research, she notes that "the techniques would have to be changed considerably to work on documents like e-mails." Yes; and an intercontinental ballistic missile is just a big, shiny, harmless rocket - until you load it with a nuclear weapon and fire it at somebody. No doubt Cardie is simply a dedicated scientist, focused on the technical problem at hand, and her naiveté on this point is genuine; but once you have built a platform that can churn through millions of pieces of text to uncover criticism and dissent - however the organs deign to define these concepts - then this technology can certainly be adapted to launch all-encompassing "sentiment analysis" against any form of written communication you please.

Nor is this program being developed in isolation. It is part of a larger Homeland Security push "to conduct research on advanced methods for information analysis and to develop computational technologies that contribute to securing the homeland," as a DHS press release puts it, in announcing the formation of yet another university consortium. This group - led by Rutgers, and including the University of Southern California, the University of Illinois and, once again, Pitt - has pulled down a whopping \$10.2 million to "identify common patterns from numerous sources of information" that "may be indicative of" - what else? - "potential threats to the nation."

This research program will draw on such areas as "knowledge representation, uncertainty quantification, high-performance computing architectures" - and our old friends, information extraction and natural language processing. It is in fact closely associated with the "sentiment analysis" work being done by the Cornell group - and note that the Rutgers consortium is designing its info-gobbling software to deal with "numerous sources" of information. Do we sense some synergy going on here?

III.

The Cornell and Rutgers groups are two of four "University Affiliate Centers" thus far established by Homeland Security. All of the consortiums are geared toward the amassing,

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storing and analysis of unimaginably vast amounts of information, gathered relentlessly from a multitude of sources and formats. They are in turn just part of a still-larger panorama of "data mining" programs being developed - or already in use - by the security organs.

These include the "Analysis, Dissemination, Visualization, Insight and Semantic Enhancement" (ADVISE) program, which can rip and read mountains of open source data - such as web sites and databases, as analyst Michael Hampton reports. Two Democratic congressmen, David Obey of Wisconsin and Martin Sabo of Minnesota, have asked the General Accounting Office to investigate the program for possible intrusions on privacy rights, Hampton notes.

While Congressional concern for privacy is all well and good, we know that it means nothing to the Unitary Executive. Earlier this month, Bush used his "signing statement" magic wand to wave away a direct Congressional mandate for reports on whether Homeland Security is obeying privacy laws in compiling its secret "watch lists," which increasingly control more and more aspects of American life, including "who gets on planes, who gets government jobs, who gets employed," as Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, told AP. Using the by-now ritualistic language of presidential dictatorship, Bush's statement said he would ignore Congress's direct order and delay, alter or simply quash the privacy reports as he saw fit.

You don't need a machine-learning algorithm or \$2.4 million worth of Ivy League software to connect the dots here. The Bush administration already has spyware devouring reams of private information in every direction. It is now paying top universities millions of dollars to refine this data into actionable intelligence - including the automated discernment and tracking of dissent against administration policies and criticism of the president. Bush has openly declared that he has no intention of obeying privacy laws - or any other laws safeguarding the Constitutional rights of American citizens - if he doesn't want to.

And if that's not sinister enough for you, consider this: on Tuesday George W. Bush signed the "Military Commissions Act," which states that he can arbitrarily declare anyone - yes, American citizens included - an "unlawful enemy combatant" for any action that he arbitrarily decides constitutes "material support" to terrorists. He can imprison these "UECs" without charge or trial, for the duration of the "War on Terror," which he and Dick Cheney have already assured us will not end "in our lifetime." He can subject these captives to "strenuous interrogation techniques" that by any sane reckoning constitute torture - but this same Act allows Bush himself to determine what is legally torture and what is not, except in the most extreme cases, such as rape and deliberate murder.

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A regime openly committed to wielding arbitrary power over the life and liberty of every person on earth is now equipping itself with intrusive technology beyond the wildest dreams of the most totalitarian states in history. And some of the nation's most respected educational institutions - proud bastions of civilization and enlightenment - are helping them do it. It is simply impossible that such a system will not be mightily abused.

And for all you SAP machines out there: that conclusion is a fact, not an opinion.

Chris Floyd is an American journalist. His work has appeared in print and online in venues all over the world, including The Nation, Counterpunch, Columbia Journalism Review, the Christian Science Monitor, Il Manifesto, the Moscow Times and many others. He is the author of Empire Burlesque: High Crimes and Low Comedy in the Bush Imperium, and is co-founder and editor of the "Empire Burlesque" political blog. He can be reached at cfloyd72@gmail.com.

http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/101706A.shtml