European Economic & Social Committee
Hearing on
"Use of Security Scanners at EU Airports"
Brussels, 11 January 2011

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Presentation on:
The politico-military-industrial security complex
& the sale of snake-oil
The politico-military-industrial security complex & the sale of snake-oil

The political and security context:

• Major social challenges, including (but not limited to) terrorist threats
• Extreme difficulties in meeting those challenges
• Wish to be proactive, leading to State (and social) protection being “moved forward” (Cobler, 1970s!)
• Political need to be “seen to be doing something”
• Industry likes to sell (even if the product is snake oil)
• Politicians don’t understand the technologies, or the limitations of the technologies

The result:

“We are building the biggest, most comprehensive, most expensive, most intelligent IT system in the world to counter [whatever!]”
The un-understood limitations:

- All identifiers are probabilities, not certainties
- “Live” systems suffer from serious intolerances: what works in the lab may not work on the ground
- Analyses of personal behavioural characteristics even less reliable
- Lie detectors are snake oil (Eriksson & Lacerda, 2007: see last slide for reference), but new, worse types of snake oil are increasingly being peddled, such as:
  - “Human Threat Identification at a Distance” (HTID)
  - “non-invasive neuro-logic sensors”
  - “intention-detectors”
  - Etc.
    - NASA, DARPA - but also the EU 7FP:
  - “Automatic Detection of Abnormal Behaviour & Threats”
Assessing the systems and their limitations (I):

- First check the very validity of the assumptions underpinning any proposed system (Eriksson & Lacerda showed that the lie detector systems they investigated could not even work in theory):

  If something cannot even work in theory, if the very assumptions on which it is built are demonstrably false, it cannot ever be used in a “proportionate”, acceptable manner!
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Assessing the systems and their limitations (II):

• Next, beware of the built-in limitations and risks:

(i) Always remember the BASERATE FALLACY!! (see Schneier’s blog entry: reference in last slide):
If you are looking for extremely rare incidents or targets (such as terrorists) in a large population (like everyone passing through a major airport), there are always going to be either too many “false positives” or too many “false negatives”: this is mathematically unavoidable; you cannot defeat the baserate fallacy by throwing more money at the system!

(ii) “Threat-detectors” and “profiles” are norm-confirming:
- It is a major threat to our democratic societies if “abnormal” behaviour is ipso facto classified as a (potential) threat (see the very recent ICHR report listed on the last slide)
- If this is done by increasingly unchallengeable, supposedly “intelligent” and “(self-)learning” computer systems, we are undermining the very fabric of a civilised society under the Rule of Law!

(ii) Partly as a result of the above, such systems can lead to built-in, automated (even if perhaps unconscious) discrimination
We don’t want or need “safeguards” to ensure that such systems will only be used in an “appropriate”, “proportionate” manner - we want and need to make sure that they are never used, ever, in Europe (or if we could help it, elsewhere)!

Thank you!
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Handout:


See also:

• Douwe Korff, TIA & PNR, Paper No. 3 in: Ian Brown and Douwe Korff, Privacy & Law Enforcement, study by FIPR (the Foundation for Information Policy Research) for the UK Information Commissioner, 2005.

• Douwe Korff, Guaranteeing Liberty or Big Brother: Surveillance in the United Kingdom, presentation at the 2007 Summer Academy of the Schleswig Holstein Independent Privacy Protection Centre (ULD), Kiel, 24 August 2007, pp. 16 – 17. The presentation can be found at: https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/sommerakademie/2007/.

• Re the “Baserate Fallacy”, see the blog entry “Data Mining for Terrorists” on the website Schneier on Security, http://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2006/03/, quoted in full (with further references, including a link to a CIA book confirming the “baserate fallacy” limitation) in Douwe Korff, Guaranteeing Liberty (above), under the heading “data mining”, pp. 63 – 66.


See also generally my SSRN webpage: http://ssrn.com/author=1098072