

Are you ready for the transparent society?

By Bruce McCabe

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Published in *The Canberra Times* 12 March 2007

I would like to know more about you. Just out of curiosity you understand. Have you ever written or said anything you might regret? What are your politics? And, just wondering, but what kind of people have you been hanging out with lately? No need to answer, because I can always find out for myself—online.

Privacy conscious people are dismayed by closed circuit TV cameras. They eye suspiciously the databases squirreling away information on what they buy and what pills they take. And they howl when Centrelink and Tax Office staffers are caught peering into records for their own edification. They will need to stock up on sedatives, because what's coming is much worse.

Quietly, you see, in places where no one kicks up much fuss, computer scientists have been busy developing technologies that, in a few years, will allow us to be profiled by anyone, anywhere, and most certainly without asking for any permission.

If you are familiar with Googling a person then you will know we are already half way there. If not, try typing someone's name into a search engine to see what you can learn. It's a quick way to find out where they work, what they do and what they have written. Anything they have said to the press will pop up, and with a bit more digging you will probably turn up their photo. Disconcerting, I imagine, for someone trying to hide from a jealous lover, but most of us seem oblivious. Google, after all, only returns a careless list of places to look. It is up to the person looking to join all the dots together to draw the picture.

But computers are fast getting better at joining the dots for themselves. Until now, this has mainly been done for fraud detection and national intelligence purposes—NetMap Analytics is an example of a prominent Australian specialist in this field—but the focus is shifting. Social networking websites such as LinkedIn, MySpace and RSVP are exploding in popularity, and technologists are working hard on technologies to mine them and deliver new value to members. Separately, projects like Friend-of-a-Friend (www.foaf-project.org) are helping machines navigate, using data on the public web, relationships between people, their interests, and other people, and Microsoft will soon release software that analyses email, and maps the knowledge and social relationships of employees, as a way to improve collaboration inside large businesses.

As well as getting smarter, computers are getting access to rich new sources of personal information that have, until now, been off limits. A variety of technologies, for example, are now making it possible for machines to search video footage for names and phrases mentioned in the soundtracks. You can get an idea of where this is going by taking a look at www.blinkx.tv, where worldwide television feeds can already be searched this way, or by going to <http://metavid.ucsc.edu/> to search video of US Senate proceedings. Searching only the title and descriptions of video clips—the way it is done on YouTube, the current poster child for online video—is old hat. If someone's name is mentioned in a broadcast anywhere, then anyone will be able to find it, and listen to it. And machines will too.

Furthermore, once information gets online, it lives forever. A lot of people don't seem to be aware of this, but replacing or deleting a web page does not remove it from the public record because copies have already been whisked away to archives to be picked over by future machines. Anyone, for example, can check out, at www.archive.org, what was posted on a website a decade ago. So, not only are computers getting cleverer at joining the dots, and getting access to new sources of personal information, but they also have ever bigger historic record at their disposal.

The bottom line is this: I expect there to be, within five years, a variety of services that trawl for names in web pages, blogs, videos and news stories to automatically produce very sophisticated social analysis for anyone that wants it—for free.

That means your neighbour will soon know a lot more about you than the car you drive and how often you mow the lawn. Entrepreneurs will use web profiling to find social connections to secure deals. Sales reps will automatically profile prospects before calling. Managers will also—inevitably—profile all their staff as a matter of course. Politicians will have to get used to the idea that any citizen can call up, with just a couple of mouse clicks, an analysis of everything they ever said on a topic on radio, television or in Parliament.

Most of us will be delighted with accountability for politicians, but other consequences will be less agreeable. Conclusions about you based on your public career, for example, won't include the skills you have learned privately. Accidental associations with "undesirable characters" will need explaining. When people change, being held to account for past actions won't be fair. Machine profiling will frequently mislead and sometimes be plain wrong, but responding with "I was young when I said that", or "I didn't know he was a criminal" may not be enough to rescue a job interview.

All of this will creep in gently. No announcements, no alarm bells; people rarely get indigestion when privacy is eaten in small, bite-sized chunks. But start getting ready for the transparent society now. Be thoughtful about what you say, write and do online, because all the footprints you are leaving behind today will certainly be mined by others tomorrow.

Bruce McCabe has researched technology trends since 1995