

Confronting terror online

Posted on Wed, Sep. 10, 2008

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A colleague interrupted me with a phone call while working in my office in the Eshkol tower building of the University of Haifa on Sept. 11, 2001. "Something catastrophic is happening in New York." I clicked on to CNN.com and news.sky.com and watched in horror as the situation developed. Thousands of miles away, weeping, my sister-in-law Judy watched the same scene, in person, live from her car at a safe distance, as the second tower imploded.

The free world is engaged in a war unlike any of those waged during the 20th century. This war, the war against terror online, is one that invades our living rooms and our offices, threatening every aspect of our lives. It is taking place in an arena that does not grab headlines, but it is as menacing to our way of life as physical attacks. The arena is the digital information environment and the Internet.

The 9/11 terrorists freely used the Internet for their deadly planning that I (and many of you) used to watch the vivid, horrible shots of their actions. They continue to exploit the open underbelly of free society at every opportunity.

War and technology have always waltzed hand in hand. War has often spurred the creation of new technologies that have benefited us later in peacetime. The Internet itself was born of a desire by the U.S. military to have a secure means of communication with our allies. The extension of terror into cyberspace, and the war against it, is not just another development in this dance macabre between war and technology. The unique power of the digital environment impacts on our individual lives. Internet communication is the engine of civilization in post-modern times, and therefore threats to its integrity threaten us all.

Cyber-terrorists exploit the Internet to cause loss of life and property in order to promote propaganda and political goals. They can and do try to destroy our financial systems, take over air traffic control and paralyze communications networks. We are vulnerable because in the age of information, information systems run our infrastructure.

Terror propagandists use and abuse the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press to sow fear in the target group, to curry favor in the court of public opinion, to distort government responses and to mobilize support through fundraising and the recruitment of supporters. To a certain degree, we play right into their hands by providing cyber-terrorists with free publicity in the mass media, giving them exactly what they want, what Margaret Thatcher called "the oxygen of publicity." The more coverage they receive, the greater the potential for acts of terror. But how do we shut down this vicious cycle without doing tremendous damage to our democratic values?

We can lock up data with passwords and with technology tools, such as encryption. But what happens when encryption tools, which are readily available on the open market, are used by hostile groups to coordinate their activities and shield them from the government's eye? Should we regulate the use of encryption programs (even if we could)? Would the lack of secure communications have a chilling effect on research and development in either the private or the public sector, or perhaps in both? Actually, the pros and cons of regulating encryption reflect the basic question related to fighting terror online: How do we balance security needs and individual rights?

For surely if there are prisoners of war in this new online struggle against terror, they are the democratic freedoms that we cherish: the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression. The terrorists have taken these freedoms hostage. They are daring us to find an equitable way of balancing human rights with urgent social needs.

The provisions of the law have changed rapidly since 9/11. Statutes and regulations have been revised, reinterpreted or redefined throughout the democratic world. The particulars of the law will vary, but the fundamental issues, dilemmas and questions raised here will last far into the coming decades. The evolution of technology, breakthroughs in scientific research and the relentless determination to fight the evil of terror must lead us, our children and our children's children to find the solutions necessary to protect the individual and society from harm -- and, at the same time, to balance security and civil liberties.

It is a challenge that we must meet, and a war that we must win.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-0-387-73577-1>

Fighting Terror Online

The Convergence of Security, Technology, and the Law

Golumbic, M.C.

2008, XIV, 178 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-387-73577-1