We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

Privacy versus security – how to minimize the access to our personal data

Posted on Monday 9th June 2014

Event: Security and privacy in Society, 9 June 2014
Venue: Royal Society, London

Speakers include: Sir David Omand and Sir Francis Richards (former GCHQ directors); Caspar Bowden (privacy advocate); Julian Huppert MP; Ewen MacAskill (Guardian).

On the day of a major event in London today (9 June 2014) to discuss how our data is being used in surveillance and security, scientists at the University of Birmingham announce that they have devised a method to make governments and other agencies more accountable for the data they collect from email communications, mobile phones and travel passes.

The US, UK and other western governments are collecting data on a large scale about the minutiae of everybody's lives. This includes all forms of electronic communications, web accesses, financial and transport data and physical movements through mobile phone location tracking.

The purpose of mass surveillance is well motivated - to detect and prevent serious crimes such as terrorism and cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure and because of this, the privacy of citizens has to be balanced against societal security. But this raises major questions for society about how the masses of data about everybody that is recorded by computers is being used.

Using a new system called 'accountable escrow' the Birmingham scientists have set out a framework where data is held by custodians and can be released to government agencies if required, in a way that guarantees accountability to citizens about how the data is used.

In this new system the public can see how much of their data is passed on to agencies for surveillance purposes, expressed as a percentage of the total amount of data that is held. Data custodians would publish data in tamper-resistant logs that corresponds to the reveal requests they receive.

This system would mean that citizens could obtain verifiable and quantitative measures about the scale and nature of the surveillance that takes place, and would also be able to check the levels of surveillance that are reported by the custodians.

At today's event, scientists, MPs, business leaders and intelligence services will come together to discuss the issues around societal security and privacy for individuals and to explore current and future developments in this field. Professor Mark Ryan, from the University of Birmingham's School of Computer Science, who is hosting the event in London today, said: 'The tension between individual privacy and societal security will become much worse as technology continues to permeate all aspects of human life. In the future, brain-computer interfaces will mean that every thought and action will be recorded by computer, with serious implications for our hopes for privacy.'

He continued: 'More and more information is being created and therefore there is an ever increasing set of opportunities for it to be used and abused. Society needs to agree a set of principles that govern when and how data about communications, finance, and internet usage should be used for preventing and detecting crime. We hope our proposed new system giving accountability of usage to citizens goes some way to addressing these issues.'

Gurchetan Grewal, who is involved in the event, said: 'We understand that intelligence agencies need surveillance to protect citizens but at the same time citizens need privacy. This event is a right step forward as people from both sides are attending it to explore legal, ethical and technological issues, and future directions.'

Ends

Notes to Editors

The event 'Security and privacy in society', is being held on Monday 9 June, at **The Royal Society (https://royalsociety.org/)**, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG.

More details can be found on the **School of Computer Science website (http://www.cs.bham.ac.uk/research/groupings/security_and_privacy/royalsoc2014)**.

For further information, please contact **Kate Chapple (mailto:k.h.chapple@bham.ac.uk)**, Press Office, University of Birmingham, tel +44 (0)121 414 2772 or +44 (0)7789 921164.

© University of Birmingham 2014