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The KIT — Knowledge & Information Technology

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Social Data in Russia

As you may remember from a previous issue, Russia cut off access to LinkedIn last November, due to LinkedIn's refusal to host its Russian members' data in Russia. Since then, Facebook rejected a similar demand. The third social media company in the government's crosshairs was Twitter, which (according to this BBC.com article) said that it would comply with the residency requirement.

Messaging applications have also been targeted by the Russian regulators. Telegram, based in Dubai, was asked to hand over its encryption keys to the government, but refused. The fact that it encrypts its messages is precisely what appeals to many of its users.

There is clearly a pattern here: Russia wants to be able to read and control all communication between its citizens. Officially, this is to prevent terrorist acts. You decide whether you believe that this is the whole story. And while Russia's bans have been very visible, other countries must be attempting similar forms of control in less public manner.

Finally, remember that many of the blocks put in place by regulators can be defeated by moderately competent users through proxy servers or virtual private networks. As John Gilmore, founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said in 1993, "The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it."

Fingerprints Are Passé? NSA Perfects Voiceprint

According to this CNBC article, based on documents initially leaked by Edward Snowden, the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) has been using since 2006 voice recognition technology that allows it to identify people through their voiceprint.

The article makes a false comparison with commercial systems such as Alexa or Siri. The primary purpose of those applications is to understand what you say. Identifying you, while useful to avoid obeying requests from other people, does not need to be absolutely correct. NSA's technology also depends on having accumulated a database of voice recordings of known people --something their extensive surveillance programs facilitate.

From a law enforcement and anti-terrorism perspective, or to combat fake news, being able to identify a speaker by voice characteristics is a good thing. Once this technology crosses over to the commercial world, as it certainly will, it could also improve security for the public. For example, it could prevent someone from calling your bank, pretending to be you, or from using social engineering to fraudulently ask for a password reset. But here again, we have to weigh this against the potential for abuse: can you ever trust again that if you call an ethics complaint desk or anonymous police tip line, they really won't know who you are?

The Half-Life of Knowledge

An interesting blog article by Nick Milton, posted three months ago, discusses the way in which knowledge becomes stale at different rates according to the discipline. The author says that the original analogy to the half-life of decaying nuclear isotopes dates back to 1962.

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Surely then, the half-life of knowledge about information technology is one of the shortest -- but with variations depending on which aspect of IT one is talking about. People still use the Zachman framework for enterprise architecture, invented in 1987, or the basic Internet protocols from around 1969. Contrast this with a technology such as AngularJS: it appeared in 2009, and a phaseout plan was announced this year.

When we teach knowledge management, we insist on the fact that the processes of KM do not only include discovery, validation, classification, retention and reuse; we point out the need for maintenance and retirement. While some knowledge can be refreshed (maintenance), other knowledge can become useless, which risks wasting users' time or providing confusing search results, or can be downright dangerous (for an analogy, think of an outdated map that might lead you to drive into a dangerous neighborhood). In that case, the old knowledge must be retired. That's why another principle we insist on is that every "knowledge object" in a KM system must have an owner, who gets periodically notified to validate the currency of the artifact.

Seen Recently...

"Customers expect us to always be open, expect self-service, expect personalization, expect value from every interaction."

-- Chris Coumbe, Autodesk business architect, during a BA Guild webinar, reflecting on how users' experience with Amazon, Lyft, Google, etc., shape the expectation of customers across all types of services.