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Diluting data profiles with obfuscation, a hot topic at HOPE X hacker conference

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People spend a lot of time concerned about getting their information off the internet and out of the hands of organizations that collect it, but the concept of **obfuscation** – injecting false, misleading and ambiguous data – can be an equally effective privacy tactic.

At hacker conference HOPE X, which kicked off Friday morning, the subject of obfuscation was a hot topic spoken about by Daniel Howe, a critical technologist who focuses on networked systems for image, sound and text, and on the social and political implications of computational technologies.

Initially drawing comparisons to radar chaff, loyalty card swapping and the famous “I’m Spartacus” scene from the 1960 Stanley Kubrick film, Howe introduced a few recent “do it yourself”-style obfuscation tactics used to muddle up some of the data that groups are collecting on users.

TrackMeNot, a tool that Howe helped create, provides “privacy in the context of a web search,” by sending “fake, but realistic queries,” essentially “hiding your interests” by “polluting the engine’s search logs,” Howe explained.

Howe is also one of the creators of AdNauseum, a software tool that he said is designed to block ads in the user’s browser – much like other ad-blocking software – but also to click on the ads in the background, therefore making it so a “data profile is diluted with noise.”

But does any of that noise really matter?

Critics claim that this type of obfuscation tactic is ineffective because the noise can be filtered by learning algorithms, Howe said. He also cited statistics showing that 60 to 80 percent of data mining time is dedicated to cleaning noise.

Howe also presented an ethical perspective – obfuscation is lying, it is dishonest, it is breaking the web, it is making others pay the price, it is waste, it is pollution, it damages the system – and explained that it creates tension.

“It’s a quick and dirty solution to thorny problems,” Howe said.

HOPE X includes sessions on art and workshops on physical lock picking and soldering, going well beyond debates on privacy issues and learning the latest hacking techniques.

In a session entitled “The CSI Effect,” speakers explored how popular crime shows offer unrealistic perceptions of how law enforcement agencies and lab technicians operate, and how those perceptions invariably shape future legislation. Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers in 1971, will keynote on Saturday and will interview NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden via satellite later in the day.



Hacker conference HOPE X kicked off on Friday, with obfuscation being one of the hot topics.

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