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Voice Stress Analysis: Technological Advance or A Step Backwards

Imagine interviewing for a coveted job opening only to be turned down for no apparent reason. Or imagine being rejected for a credit card or mortgage application and never being told why you were turned away. If this has happened to you, the reason for your rejection could possibly have been because, unbeknownst to you, a voice stress analyzer made the assumption that you may have been less than completely truthful in answering questions posed by that HR director or banker.

Voice stress analysis is becoming increasingly popular in the private sector these days. In the UK, some insurance companies subject customers who file claims to such analysis, and have refused to pay on claims based on the results obtained from the analysis. In most cases, the customer is unaware that they are being tested. Their voice is being analyzed over the telephone when they call to make a claim. A computer on the Claims Adjuster desk is busy analyzing the stress level in the caller's voice and makes a determination as to if the caller is being less than candid in his or her statements.

Several police departments in the U.S. are testing the technology on criminal suspects and early reports indicate that they are enthusiastic by the initial results. Voice stress analysis does not require strapping wires to one's body like the traditional polygraph tests used by law enforcement today. And while that less invasive testing method may provide law enforcement with some benefits, it is exactly that feature that causes concern among civil libertarians. Not being necessary to attach any device to the individual being tested, allows anyone with a computer and the right software, to use voice stress testing for any type of decision-making.

Right now, no law exists in the U.S. specifically addressing whether or not these devices can be used by the private sector. But according to a recent New York Times article, several American insurance companies have expressed interest in looking at the software. And beyond that, the American public simply does not know whom, if anyone, is using the software in the United States. Theoretically, it could already be in use by companies and individuals, and those being subjected to the tests could be completely unaware of the fact.

It is important to note that in the same way a polygraph machine can give false readings, the voice stress analyzers can also give false readings. Only a trained professional should use either device. in order

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to obtain accurate results. The polygraph machine measures a change in the physical characteristics of a tested subject and the voice stress analyzer measures a change in the subject's voice patterns. But neither machine will tell you why that measured change took place. True, it could be because the tested subject is trying to conceal the truth. But it could also be from a variety of other physiological or psychological reasons.

For example, if police investigating a murder were to suspect that a witness to the murder was actually the killer, and subject that person to a polygraph examination, when asked, "did you commit the murder", the subject could show a marked physical or emotional change. But that change could be because the question evoked images of what the witness saw and not necessarily because the witness is trying to hide his or her complicity in the crime. That is why professional polygraph examiners use the test as a part of their interrogation of suspects and not as a definitive crime-solving device. It is also the reason why the results obtained from polygraph examinations are not admissible in U.S. courts. But despite their inadmissibility, the American public seems to be highly influenced by the results of such tests that are made public or leaked to the press. And younger generations may be far less suspect of such technological findings than their parents or grandparents. Young people today have grown up surrounded by technology. They have learned to both trust and be comfortable with results displayed on computer screens.

It would be interesting to see if some enterprising person were to open a "truth cafe" and offer couples the opportunity to voice stress-test each other, whether the cafe would be successful. Debate around the office here seems to indicate that it very well could be the next niche business for younger people, but older office staffers solidly reject the idea.

As technology continues to advance there will be many challenges for Americans who prize privacy and civil liberty. In more than a few instances those challenges are already upon us. Historically, our liberty and privacy have been championed in the courts by a small minority of Americans. The ACLU, Labor Unions and social activists have been responsible for the vast majority of court rulings that have preserved human and privacy rights in the United States. But with technological change flying off the design table and into the marketplace at breakneck speed, it may be time to think about putting together some new organization, dedicated solely to examining new technological devices for their efficacy and potential to abuse human rights. Such an organization could serve to encourage designers and manufacturers to make changes in their software or hardware that could prevent unauthorized or untrained use and offer a seal of approval to the companies and inventors who comply with the organization's goal of protecting privacy and civil liberty.

If such an organization did evolve, I hope that one of the first things they would look at would be the potential abuse of voice stress analysis. In the meantime, it might just be in our best interest to put things in writing.

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