Drones

Terminators guided by algorithms

Miles Pouchez

2013

A July 13, 2012 New York Times article, "That's No Phone. That's My Tracker," by Peter Maass, suggests that we should consider smartphones, computers, and other connected devices as tracking machines rather than appliances of personal convenience.

The manufacturers of these now ubiquitous gadgets claim that aggregating data about individuals favors the consumer, so when you visit a web page, it might display ads relevant to your tastes and needs. But it's widely speculated that far more sinister use is made of this information–that the government enjoys a cozy relationship with the private data gatherers, that information can and will be used against us, and/ or to the advantage of the military-industrial complex.

I assume that Amazon and the NSA know a truckload of tangential information about me; that is, who I befriend and communicate with, the web pages I visit, where I am and where I've been, the stores at which I spend money and the items purchased therein. But they're still missing the most important component; that is, who am I, what do I intend to do? If I purchase fertilizer, am I making a bomb or helping my crops? If I purchase boots with deep heels and correspond with persons with Arabic names, am I a terrorist?

Let's say my eldest granddaughter, April Rose, joins the Peace Corps. April is already an accomplished farmer, so she travels to Africa, proselytizing for sustainable agriculture. While there, April befriends local persons her same approximate age; many are illiterate, and relatively unsophisticated in Western terms.

Some are reluctant rebels who, as women, can face recrimination by death, rape, stoning, starvation. They live in a pressure cooker of male dominance, and without futures. During informal conversations, April argues against violence or suicide so she should be judged as a worthy asset by the US government; a loyal American ambassador attempting to win hearts and minds, spreading the gospel of peace.

However, a government, any government, decides that April might be a threat, not because they really know anything about her moral compass, but because her spreadsheet calculates a suspicious result. In an over-simplified attempt to decide whether she's enemy or friend, the government decides to intercept her conversations as best they can.

Problem is, April is technically savvy and suspects her friends are being scrutinized by evil forces everywhere. In all communication she uses various encrypted (read: privacy protected) mechanisms so strong that even the NSA probably can't decipher all the content. Contemporary computer science suggests they know her physical circumstance (accurately) and might be deciphering trigger words plucked from various data streams (inaccurately/ partially), including encrypted voice (Skype). We really can't grasp the extent of NSA capability, but when the mechanisms of encryption are cracked, we'll be the last to know.

In this equation, consider the deployment of weaponized drones in all shapes, sizes and capabilities which will soon outstrip the presumed benefit of human intervention. When a young drone pilot is incapacitated because of a hangover, or a quota is missed, or the master target map spikes beyond capacity, Gen X flips a switch and allows the robots to think for themselves, or even as an interconnected hive. It's incorrect to assume that algorithm will

spare life because of a compassionate sub-routine (read Kill Decision by Daniel Suarez, wherein sinister, deployable math, is modeled on the activity of aggressive insects).

April's life ledger might not meet any reasonable standard of proof, but the surreptitiously obtained and commercially available information is fed to a target probability list when sufficiently elevated by algorithm. Let's add it up. She lives in an African nation where dangerous persons are known to exist, she even shares meals with them. She arranges the purchase of fertilizer and, most importantly, she continues frequent conversations with her multinational friends after leaving Africa. April's life and death spreadsheet; simplified, incomplete, misleading.

Although April aims to convert her new social group to peaceful purposes, the aggregated content of her life is, at best, 50 per cent decipherable (looks for keywords, like bomb, or jihad, analyzes compression algorithms for probable content, etc.). After leaving Africa, April continues to contact them from all over the globe. April's life and death spreadsheet; simplified, incomplete, and misleading; beta.

If in the US, she might be tracked, harassed, or arrested. If still in Africa, she and her friends are vaporized by an invisible, silent drone launched from thousands of miles away designed to remove her by automated, tangential analysis.

Think this is fanciful or improbable? Ask a member of a wedding party in Afghanistan or Yemen that was just blown to bits by a drone operator in Colorado Springs right before she left duty in time for Happy Hour at the local saloon. And, what happens when Iran, Russia, China, Syria, gangs, thugs, Mafia, and/or other outliers deploy similar, competing technology?

Don't blink, it's happening already, right under our noses.

We live in a world ruled by government and a gaggle of omnipotent corporations making fundamental, serious judgments about our fellow humans by inadequate proxy. They have the capability to gather enough information about us to sell products or kill ten thousand miles away, but we have no direct knowledge. We are in their crosshairs. Nonetheless, when the numbers dictate, they jail us, take our money, make our lives miserable, foreclose our homes, or, if they think the numbers dictate extreme action, a life is gone here or anywhere in the world.

Whose granddaughter, nation, political movement will be next? The enemy algorithm doesn't wait on sufficiently robust technology, rather it turns bits to bombs when the software is deemed good enough. Popular opinion and an endless stream of apocalyptic news forces/allows aggression without proof. Governments and their corporate overlords jail/kill with circumstantial evidence, incredibly flawed human observation, and no moral mandate.

Death by spreadsheet.