FBI Plans Initiative To Profile Terrorists

Potential Targets Get Risk Rating

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The Federal Bureau of Investigations is developing a computer-profiling system that would enable investigators to target possible terror suspects, according to a Justice Department report submitted to Congress yesterday.

The System to Assess Risk, or STAR, assigns risk scores to possible suspects based on a variety of information, similar to the way a credit bureau assigns a rating based on a consumer's spending behavior and debt. The program focuses on foreign suspects but also includes data about some U.S. residents. A prototype is expected to be tested this year.

Justice Department officials said the system offers analysts a powerful new tool for finding possible terrorists. They said it is an effort to automate what analysts have been doing manually.

"STAR does not label anyone a terrorist," the report said. "Only individuals considered emergent foreign threats (as opposed to other criminal activity such as U.S. bank robbery threats) will be analyzed."

Some lawmakers said, however, that the report raises new questions about the government's power to use personal information and intelligence without accountability.

"The Bush administration has expanded the use of this technology, often in secret, to collect and sift through Americans' most personal sensitive information," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which received a copy of the report on data-mining initiatives.

The use of data mining in the war on terror has sparked criticism. An airplane-passenger screening program called CAPPS II was revamped and renamed because of civil liberty concerns. An effort to collect Americans' personal and financial data called Total Information Awareness was killed.
Law enforcement and national security officials have continued working on other programs to use computers to sift through information for signs of threats. The Department of Homeland Security, for example, flags travelers entering and leaving the United States who may be potential suspects through a risk-assessment program called the Automated Targeting System.

STAR is being developed by the FBI's Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force, which tracks suspected terrorists inside the country or as they enter.

Both the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI's STAR programs create their ratings based on certain rules. In the case of STAR, a person's score would increase if his or her name matches one on a terrorist watch list, for example. A country of origin could also be weighted in a person's score.

After STAR has received the names of persons of interest, it runs them through an FBI "data mart" that includes classified and unclassified information from the government, airlines and commercial data brokers such as ChoicePoint. Then it runs them through the terrorist screening center database, which contains hundreds of thousands of names, as well as through a database containing information on non-citizens who enter the country. It also runs the names against information provided by data broker Accurint, which tracks addresses, phone numbers and driver's licenses.

The report said access to STAR would be limited to trained users and that data would be obtained lawfully. Results would be kept within the FBI's terrorist task force, the report said.

Privacy expert David Sobel, senior counsel for the nonprofit advocacy group Electronic Frontier Foundation, said the government's system depends on potentially unreliable data. "If we can't assess the accuracy of the information being fed into the system, it's very hard to assess the effectiveness of the system."

The STAR system would be subject to a privacy-impact assessment before launched in final form.