No More Secrets?

By Bob Brewin *bbrewin@govexec.com* September 15, 2008

It won't be long before just about everything is out in the open. At least that's the take of Donald Burke, the CIA Directorate of Science and Technology guru who spearheaded development of Intellipedia, the intelligence community's version of the Internet encyclopedia, Wikipedia.

Burke, who has the quite non-bureaucratic title of "Intellipedia Doyen" and serves as the leading proponent on the use of Web 2.0 technologies within the intelligence community, shared a bold prediction with attendees of the Director of National Intelligence Open Source Conference in Washington. The proliferation of new Web tools and technologies will mean the end of secrecy within 15 years, he said, with almost everyone and everything leaving "digital exhaust" that will be as hard to hide as what comes out the tailpipe of a car.

I know I leave some digital exhaust each time I use a credit card or book an airline ticket, but as Burke explained that's just the beginning of what most people will leave in their digital wake in the near future.

He predicted that the incorporation of Global Positioning System technology into cell phones will become near universal, meaning that the digital trail from the phones will make it easy to track the physical location of almost anyone in real time. And, as a NATO intelligence analyst who declined to be identified told me, Google Earth makes it real easy to plot that location on really good satellite-based images.

Security cameras are proliferating everywhere, Burk said, including on top of a growing number of police cruisers, which use the cameras to scan license plates automatically and check them against a database. This all leads to "unintended information aggregation" about people and their movements. This could be a boon to intelligence agents, but it's not good for those of us who value our privacy.

I wonder if I should move to Hermit's Peak, outside my hometown of Las Vegas, N.M.

New IC Web 2.0 Tools?

Burke ran through a list of new Web 2.0 tools he's watching -- with the disclaimer that this did not constitute an institutional endorsement, or indicate plans for their use within the intelligence community. But, if he's looking at them, I have a hunch they may end up being used inside the firewall.

Burke is interested in Twitter a micro-blogging site that lets people send global text messages on what they are doing. But he seems even more intrigued by extensions of this technology including Twitscoop, which allows anyone to check out the hottest topics by keyword on Twitter in real time.

Then there's [Hashtags](), which allow Twitter users to add more context to their posts or tweets, and help group similar tweets. Burke said that at least 10 people were adding hashtags to their tweets on the Open Source conference.

I wasn't one of them; I'm still trying to get into texting on my phone.

No Nail Head Print Ties

I noticed a key difference between the folks at the Open Source conference and your average Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association conference attendees: wilder ties. While AFCEA meetings often are filled with guys wearing the same humdrum nail head print ties, the Open Source conference offered a feast of floral and wildly checked ties or ones with brilliant solid colors.

Sporty intelligence community tie wearers included CIA Director Michael Hayden, who called attention to his iridescent orange tie.

Would someone in the intelligence community please tell me why they beat the C4 folks in the wild tie contest?

There Went That Moment of Silence

The Open Source Conference started on Thursday, the seventh anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and everyone was asked to stand and observe a moment of silence at the minute the first plane hit the Word Trade Center.

You can guess what happened -- multiple cell phones went off and pierced the silence in the auditorium at the Ronald Reagan building in Washington.

Maybe we should send the guilty parties to Hermit's Peak.