

Software Not Smart Enough to Sort Human Relationships

Sumner Lemon, IDG News Service

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Internet search engines and software applications can catalog huge volumes of information, but they aren't smart enough to trace personal relationships between people, according to the executive chairman of World-Check, a company that maintains a database of individuals that banks and other companies might want to think twice about doing business with.

World-Check's database contains the names of individuals deemed to be "high-risk," including those with reported ties to organized crimes, terrorism, or business and political connections to countries sanctioned by Western governments. Other names in the database may have no connection to crime but may simply be high-profile individuals, such as politicians or celebrities.

The names contained in World-Check's database, used by banks and other institutions, are culled from public sources on the Internet, including media reports, by a team of in-house analysts. "They are almost always -- 99.9 percent -- Internet-based," said David Leppan, executive chairman and founder of World-Check.

When a relationship is established or an individual is identified as high-risk, World Check documents that relationship or description of the individual with links to multiple information sources.

World-Check doesn't rely on automated tools to build its database. That responsibility lies with analysts employed by World-Check to sift through primary sources of information to identify high-risk individuals and document their connections and relationships with other people. While automated tools are useful to some extent in uncovering these relationships, they have their limitations, Leppan said.

As an example, Leppan cited an unnamed software program that was used by U.S. intelligence agencies and demonstrated to him several years ago. The program relied heavily on the proximity of names contained in media reports and other sources to identify relationships and connections between individuals. But during a test to see what personal connections it could identify for former U.S. President George W. Bush, the program returned the name of Osama bin Laden as a connection, he said.

"There is still a long way to go on using applications to insinuate or to identify possible relationships," Leppan said.

Part of the challenge is that media reports and other sources sometimes do not explicitly state the two individuals have a business or personal relationship, leaving it to readers to make that connection. "I'm not yet aware of a program that can read between the lines," Leppan said.

"We use good old human beings, bums on seats," he said.