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The sunnier side of Tor: Andrew Lewman, the Tor Project & the mother of all makeovers

August 29, 2014 · by Thomas Campbell · in Uncategorized ·
(<https://broadbandworldforum.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/andrew-lewman.jpg>)

It's difficult to think of a public organisation more central to the current political-technological zeitgeist than the Tor Project. In case you're one of the dwindling number of people yet to have heard of it, Tor was previously an acronym for 'The Onion Router', the technology that enables people to use the internet anonymously, away from the prying eyes of – for example – governments and corporations.



Inevitably, the less private the Internet gets, the more appealing Tor becomes. But there's a (well publicised) dark side too, since while Tor enables some to access hidden services for journalists and human rights activists, others utilise it to access black marketplaces for illegal goods such as child pornography.

Ahead of his keynote appearance at the Broadband World Forum (<http://broadbandworldforum.com/>), Tor Project executive director Andrew Lewman is seeking to 'normalise' the use of the Tor, to make it more approachable and accessible. Given its aggressive vilification in some quarters, this might just be the *mother of all makeovers*...

Extremists?

Indeed, in the very week I first make contact with Lewman, it is widely reported that the NSA categorises Tor users as *de facto* 'extremists' – *even a visit to the Tor Project website* is enough to fix you firmly on their radar. It is the latest in a long series of backhanded compliments Tor has received from the Internet's self-appointed secret police. "The goal of the NSA seems to be making people feel more

nervous or anxious about using Tor,” Lewman explains. “And that’s a very emotional, human battle to fight. Not a technological battle.”

“When you think of Apple, people think of a friendly, happy company, that helps you do creative things,” he goes on. “But when I work with victims of sex-trafficking, they all have iPhone, and they’re controlled by the iPhone, and they do FaceTime chats—whether it’s child abuse or sexual abuse or whatever, and obviously Apple’s not going to promote that at all.”

So how does Lewman plan to overcome the preconception that there’s something inherently sinister about the technology?

“The way you fight bad speech is with more good speech. You get more organisations to go public and talk about how they use Tor for positive uses.”

There is, in other words, a sunnier side to Tor...

And we’ll get to it. But it just so happens that the very week of our chat, Tor was embroiled in *another* controversy, this one concerning a widely debated article (<http://pando.com/2014/07/16/tor-spooks/>) online concerning its own military-industrial origins.

“You clearly know it’s the Navy.”

To cut a long story short, Tor’s encryption technology was developed by the US Navy for online intelligence purposes (I know! *somebody call Alanis Morissette*). There was never any point in keeping such an invention under lock and key, however, because then (in Lewman’s words), “while you don’t know what soldier it is in the Navy you clearly know it’s the Navy.”

In other words, while observers might not be able to tell who precisely is using Tor or for what purpose, *they can tell it is being used*, and, if only one organisation alone was using it, then *who*—not much good, say, for a spy.

As such, the release of Tor to the wider world was *always implicit in the concept*. In the minds of some cyber-libertarians, to whom Tor has long represented a way of avoiding government snooping, the realisation that Tor was and remains an intelligence tool is... disconcerting.

Lewman, however, sees such thinking as guilty of an oversimplified notion of government (not to mention research: at the time of Tor’s development, he points out, the very notion of traffic analysis were considered far-fetched by many).

“Governments are not monolithic, thankfully. There are parts of the US government that really like us, that really want to see us succeed, and that really want to help improve our software, our designs, our code. And then there are different parts that really don’t like us and wish we’d just go away, because we make them do a lot of work. And so far the parts that do like us are winning.”

Indeed, in various forms, the US Department of Defence remains a massive source of funding for the Tor Project. Even the Tor browser itself, which has made Tor accessible to much greater numbers of users, was the result of a commission by the State Department’s “Broadcasting Board of Governors” (a pro US media organisation). “They said, if you could just make a browser, that was full of links you wanted people to see, and hid the complexity of Tor, that would make our lives much easier,” Lewman remembers. The upshot of this was that Tor consequently became easier for *other users too*. “The more diverse the users of Tor the better everyone is protected, which often includes the

military.”

Of course, the Tor Project isn't told *which* parts of the military or government are using Tor...

“I thought it was kind of funny that the latest Snowden release shows the GCHQ [the Government Communications Headquarters] had entire exploits that relied on Tor. And here's the GCHQ saying, 'we have to have Tor working, because our exploits don't work without it.' I guess there's one usage that probably isn't too popular but it is a usage.”

Yes, among the growing list of Tor's users – ranging from the US Navy to human rights groups, journalists in hostile regimes to wary businesses, parents looking to protect their child's online identity to cyber anarchists looking to protect their own – are none other than the GCHQ, its own natural adversaries (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/04/nsa-gchq-attack-tor-network-encryption>).

The technology is *versatile*. “We've had 120 million downloads in the past year, but we're still new to this game,” Lewman points out. And in fact, he is attending the Broadband World Forum (<http://broadbandworldforum.com/>) not only to spread the Tor gospel of online freedom, but to learn from the attendant ISPs about things like scalability.

Privacy, it would seem, is a boom industry.

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