



The Investigators on News 4

[Tom McNamara](#) Reports

UA scientists probe 'dark web' to uncover potential terrorist threats

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On this day of remembrance the fight against terrorism goes on, even in our own back yard.

University of Arizona scientists have terrorists in the crosshairs of their computers.

They're digging into the most shadowy inlets of the internet -- where terrorists talk, plot and recruit -- trying to uncover potential threats against us.

These scientists do it by keeping close tabs on thousands of websites and hundreds of terrorists.

Tonight, I'll take you inside a cyber-place that scientists have labelled 'the dark web.'

"They're more angry, they're more violent," says Dr. Hsinchun Chen, a professor at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management who says he's frightened by what he sees on the internet.

"We see a shocking increase in terms of the amount of violence, meaning they may be talking about bombing or ambushing U.S. forces in Iraq or different parts of the world," Chen says.

Chen created the 'Darkweb', the largest computer database of terrorist websites and chat forums in the world.

In the four years since Dr.Chen started this effort, terror-related websites have grown from hundreds to almost 5,000 today.

Dr. Chin says, "This could be like a 'myspace' for the terrorist group, how they're interlinking with each other on the web. It's on the web, but you need more sophisticated technology to understand this phenomena."

Chen and his colleagues have developed formulas and algorithms to measure social interaction among terrorists online, as well as levels of violence and hatred in those conversations.

He's tracking almost 400 known terrorists now.

Those connections form 'grids' to illustrate ties between terror groups. The colored dots indicate terrorist activity such as bombings and attacks that has taken place.

Chen gets help from advanced computer science students at UA, all of whom need special security clearance to work on the 'darkweb' project. They ask that we not show their faces due to the nature of their work.

Dr. Chen says, "What kind of ideas are the infecting. I say infecting because this is really an infectious disease, these are infectious ideas."

Chen says that government intelligence experts are drowning with information overload.

'Darkweb' tries to pare-down the noise and cut to the pertinent information on terrorists from all those sites and chat forums.

Much of the information gathered by UA experts is shared with U.S. government agents.

Chen said terror-related websites are often every bit as sophisticated as U.S. government websites and patrolling this virtual battleground is a job that gets bigger every day.

Dr. Chen adds, "I think that's the most scary part of now, the past year or two, that there's not enough counter-message on the internet to this target audience. Just not enough, and the world event is not helping, the war in Lebanon and war in Iraq."

Chen's computers surf the internet at high speed accessing sites that are available to anyone, and, while he does not do the kind of analysis that U.S. Intelligence agency experts perform, some of his staff and students go on to work for agencies like the CIA.