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SDSU gets $1.3 million grant to track info on Web

Wednesday, October 6, 2010

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A $1.3 million grant from the National Science Foundation will help San Diego State University researchers create new ways to analyze the spread of information and ideas on the Internet.

The multi-disciplinary cyber-infrastructure innovation project will map cyberspace by tracking the flow of information and monitoring its movement on the Internet.

"The spread of ideas in the age of the Internet is a double-edged sword; it can enhance our collective welfare as well as produce forces that can destabilize the world," said Ming-Hsiang Tsou, associate professor of geography and the project's lead investigator. "This project aims at understanding the process by which the impact of co-related events or ideas disperse throughout the world over time and space."

The project seeks to map both the geography and the chronology of ideas over cyberspace, as the ripples of information radiate outward from a given event epicenter.

Mapping and analyzing such ripples will provide new insights into the role of new media in biasing, accelerating, impeding, or otherwise influencing personal, social and political uses of such information.

One application of the project will be to track terrorist and extremist ideas on the web to see where the information originates and how it spreads. As an example, the news of an obscure preacher's intention to burn the Koran spread like wildfire in various media throughout much of the world in general, and in the Islamic world in particular.

By identifying the path of information online, researchers hope to learn what makes a place more prone to the spread of any particular idea. In addition to terrorist ideas, the project will also seek to establish ways to map the spread of information on other ongoing topics, such as epidemics and global climate change and other event-based topics such as wildfires, earthquakes and hurricanes.

-- Doug Sherwin

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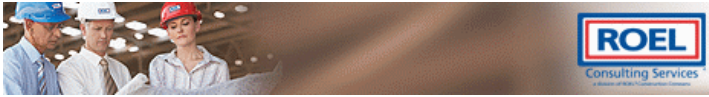
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