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The truth about LIE DETECTION

The polygraphers vs. the voice stress analysts

By Diana West
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While it may not fizz and pop like the Old Coke-New Coke debate, an older rivalry has been brewing between the old and the new school of lie detection.

If you ask a polygrapher about the new kid in town — the audio stress analyser — he's likely to get a mite touchy, if he answers at all. And if you ask an audio stress analyst about polygraphy, he'll probably admit that polygraphy has its merits — although he'll insist that audio stress analysis is the wave of the future.

So even though it's not exactly the Hatfields and the McCoys, one audio stress analyst saw fit to describe the rivalry as "a running gun battle with the polygraphers."

Polygraphs, as most people know, are devices that record physiological changes brought on by lying. Granted, only Pinocchio's nose actually lengthened when he lied, but according to polygraphers, other palpable changes do in fact occur. The stress of telling a lie makes a person's heart pound faster, his breathing quicken, and his forehead bead with sweat.

And, according to the audio stress analysers, telling a lie also changes a person's voice. The stress of lying actually tightens the vocal cords, producing "sub-audible tremors" which form the basis of audio stress analysis.

Jim Squires, chief analyst and director of training at CCS Communications Control Inc. a New York maker of privacy protection and security systems, has used a voice stress analyser in over 5,000 investigations. "But there's no such thing as a lie detector," he is quick to insist. "There are stress detectors. Stress unto itself is not deception." It is up to the examiner to figure out what the test data can tell him.

On this count, polygraphers and audio stress analysers actually agree. Fred Link, a nationally-known polygrapher who heads Interatec, a polygraph and security company in Atlanta, describes polygraphy as "a technique. The polygraph records changes that occur in the body, just like an X-ray machine [does]. And just like a doctor who reads an X-ray, a polygraph reading is a human diagnostic process."

It is this element of human fallibility that shakes the faith of some. For skeptics, lie detection is a controversial technology that still smacks of snake oil salesmen hawking hair tonic and truth serum. A couple of years ago, in keeping with this carnival spirit, noted criminal defense attorney F. Lee Bailey took lie detection to television in a daily half-hour program called — you guessed it — "Lie Detector." The show was designed to offer individuals a chance to counter accustations made against them. It featured a motley crew, ranging from a man who claimed to have caught a rare fish in Mexico, to pitcher Gaylord Perry who had been accused of throwing a spitball, to former Alabama state Sen. Robert Glass, who was accused of having accepted kickbacks to form a relief agency.

Polygraphy, however, seems to have outlasted this program's failure to catch on. And recently, judging by the overwhelming vote in the House of Representatives to allow the Pentagon to perform polygraph tests on more than 4 million military and civilian personnel with access to classified information, the polygraph has been accepted by the federal government in a big way.

But while that's good news for the polygraphers, the voice stress analysts also want to get in on the act.

Many of them claim that a polygraph test is subject to more pitfalls than a voice stress analyser. A crafty subject with a bag of tricks can "fool" the polygraph — or at least an unwitting polygrapher.

"If you file your fingernails to a point and prick your finger while you're answering a question, the pain waves will mess things up," said one man who markets voice stress analysers.

Or, if that might seem to be a little obvious to a watchful examiner, taking a valium, smearing antiperspirant all over, or putting a thumbtack in a shoe and stepping on it during the examination all are techniques that, when undetected, will distort the polygraph test.

"And moving your anal orifice will also affect your polygraph results," admitted Robert Reed, a polygraph instructor at the Maryland Institute of Criminal Justice. "But we can train polygraphers to be able to catch these countermeasures," he said.

"The only way the voice stress analyser can be fooled is if a person is a pathological liar and believes what he says," said Alice Fribourg, advertising director for CCS.

Otherwise, voice stress analysis proponents claim, a person is simply unable to control his vocal cords under stress. And, unlike a polygraph test, an audio stress analysis may be conducted secretly, without the subject's knowledge, over the phone, or even by using a cassette recording.

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"I think there's no question that [audio stress analysis] is easier to perform than the polygraph. It's easier on the person. But that doesn't mean it's better," said Mr. Link. "The polygraph monitors many different functions of the body. That's why it's called a 'poly-graph,' " he continued. "With the voice analyser, it's like having just one single channel to watch.

In Virginia, the use of voice stress analysers has been banned since the mid-1970s by legislation pushed through by an energetic lobby, the Virginia Polygraph Association.

"They were afraid that the voice stress analysers would come along and take away their business," said one person who actually uses both polygraphs and voice stress analysers in his private security business.

"You've got an old-boy system in the government," said one supporter of voice stress analysis. "It's almost their jobs that are at stake since they've been trained on the polygraph."

As the debate over polygraphs and voice stress analysers simmers in the lie detecting community, the larger debate over lie detection continues to attract attention. Evidence stacks up neatly on both sides.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that lie detection is widely used, often with great success. One common use is by businesses that use lie detector tests in an effort to halt theft of inventory, as well as in pre-employment screening tests.

In the courtroom, it is up to the presiding judge whether to admit lie detector tests as evidence. This spring, a North Carolina court allowed a voice stress analysis test to be used in the defense of a defendant who was later acquitted of rape charges. And in the recent trial of Kathy Boudin for her part in the Brinks holdup, a polygraph test was the key to the judge's decision to allow her to plead guilty to reduced murder and robbery charges.

On the other hand, in the trial of John DeLorean, Judge Robert Takasugi would not allow Mr. DeLorean's polygraph test into court testimony, despite — or perhaps because — of the fact the judge was himself formerly a polygrapher.

The shattering news of the Walker family spy charges undoubtedly provided the impetus that boosted the polygraph measure through Congress last week. (Adding more insults to serious alleged injuries, John Walker's firm actually performed polygraphs for Navy personnel.) Even with such sweeping support, though, the polygraph question will continue to be carefully studied.

F. Lee Bailey (background) watches polygraph examiner Ed Gelb (left) test Dennis Redd on "Lie Detector" TV show. Associated Press