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Brass: UT prof taps into 'net buzz

By **LARISA BRASS**, brass@knews.com
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In the Enron corporate scandal, government investigators were interested in using 1.5 million e-mails sent by company employees to sleuth out damning evidence against its executives.

Michael W. Berry just wanted to see if, by applying an advanced search program to the vast amount of information, he could tap into the company buzz without reading each individual e-mail himself.

Berry, a University of Tennessee professor and interim head of the Computer Science department, is one of several researchers across the country that poked his nose into the once-private e-mails of Enron employees, written primarily between 1999 and 2001.

While others were interested in uncovering social networks of the organization that hid losses, manufactured profits and bilked investors of billions, Berry said he and research associate Murray Browne wanted to see if the sophisticated search engine they had created could gauge the general topics of discussion of employees as events unfolded.

The group analyzed about 500,000 messages, after the mass of information was cleaned up a bit.

The research uncovered some interesting trends.

For instance, Berry said, researchers saw a spike in Fantasy Football participation after Enron declared bankruptcy, indicating employees no longer cared as much about their jobs. Another cluster of messages refers to a series of memos regarding preparation for a possible investigation from a California state senator and another grouping discusses gas and oil contracts.

"The goal here isn't to latch onto someone and read their e-mail every day," he said, adding that most organizations generate too much e-mail to track individual employees.

A company might use the program to gauge general reaction to a new policy, he said, and it could be particularly useful for international organizations with a number of outlying operations and diverse cultural issues.

In addition to corporate applications, he said the technology could be used to organize vast amounts of information - Internet blogs, for example - in a more accessible fashion.

Berry said he's gotten several calls since a New York Times report of his research ran last month, including one venture capitalist interested in searching large digital screenplay archives for use in the video game industry.

And while he joked that he hasn't heard from Donald Rumsfeld, Berry said the technology has huge potential in the homeland security business because it allows users to take a large volume of information "and get a sense of what it's talking about quickly."

Berry admitted there's a Big Brother aura to it all.

While corporations can argue they have a right to access employee e-mail, there's the potential the program could be used to monitor personal e-mail accounts as well.

But, he said, that's a risk you take with most new technologies.

"It's one of those things that can be used in a very positive way," Berry said. "It can be used in a negative way, too."

Business writer Larisa Brass' Tech Talk column appears the second and fourth Mondays of the month. She may be reached at 865-342-6318 or brass@knews.com.

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