IRS Becoming Big Brother With $99-Million Supercomputer

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is building a $99-million supercomputer that will give the agency the "unprecedented ability to track the lives and transactions of tens of millions of American citizens," tax expert Daniel Pilla reports.

The IRS is already dangerous enough, notes Pilla. "The IRS lays claim to your data without court authority more so than any other government agency. And to make matters worse, they share the data with any other federal, state or local government agency claiming an interest, including foreign governments."

The IRS already receives billions of tax documents annually, and the amount of information the agency receives continues to grow. According to the IRS' 2018 – 2022 Strategic Plan, the agency's data volume increased a hundredfold between 2007 and 2017, while the number of users with access to that data grew by a factor of 23.

But that's not enough for the IRS, which states in its Strategic Plan that it wants "to increase its access to data, and use that data more effectively to drive its agency-wide decision making, as well as case evaluations and selections for enforcement purposes," pens Pilla. Thus, the agency is investing $99 million in a contract with Palantir Technologies of Palo Alto, California, to provide hardware, software, and training to "capture, curate, store, search, share, transfer, perform deconfliction, analyze and visualize large amounts of disparate structured and unstructured data."

Specifically, Palantir is tasked with building and training IRS employees to use a supercomputer to "search, analyze, visualize, and interact with a wide variety of disparate data sets so users will be able to leverage the platform to perform advanced analytics, such as link, pattern, statistical, behavioral, and geospatial analysis on an investigative platform that is scalable and interoperable with existing IRS equipment and systems."

Under the terms of the contract, writes Pilla, the system has to meet the following criteria:

> Allow for the rapid ingestion of massive amounts of data.
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> Users should be able to immediately use the imported data in the imported format to perform queries, analysis and identify links.
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> Allow users to drill down on massive amounts of disparate data to find connections.
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> Allow users to visualize connections from millions of records with thousands of links by grouping data visualization by the commonalities and roles.

The dangers of such a supercomputer in the hands of the IRS should be obvious, but in case they aren't,

Pilla spells them out:

> This would allow the IRS to meaningfully link tens of millions of tax returns, billions of information returns, and trillions of bank and credit card transactions, phone records and even social media posts. For example, if a U.S. citizen moves money from a Swiss bank to some other offshore bank, then uses credit or debit cards to spend the money in the U.S., Palantir's software can link those transactions. It could also flag a person whose tax return shows relatively low annual income but whose social-media posts indicate something entirely different.

In other words, the IRS would have what it needs to squeeze every last penny — and then some — out of every taxpayer. That is precisely what the agency wants to do to create its so-called "up-front tax system." "Under that system," says Pilla, "the taxpayer is essentially removed from the tax preparation process because the IRS knows everything there is to know about your personal, business and financial affairs to the point where the agency prepares the return for you."

Needless to say, all this data in the hands of the IRS will make future abuses of that agency's power even more likely. Think how much simpler it will be for the IRS to target groups that use unapproved terms like "Tea Party" or are associated, however tangentially, with disfavored persons or organizations, when all it has to do is run a query over its zillions of interconnected electronic records. Add to that the fact that the number of users with access to the data is growing by leaps and bounds, and the opportunities for personal score-settling and data breaches abound.

The IRS' ongoing quest for omniscience needs to be thwarted as soon as possible, preferably by abolishing the abominable agency before it becomes too powerful to confront.

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