ATO to scrape social media, dark web for scams,...
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ATO to scrape social media, dark web for scams, tax fraud

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THE Australian Taxation Office is looking to scrape social media and the dark web for tax cheats using an automated, open source intelligence tool.

Commonly known as OSINT, these software tools have come to prominence in the signals and intelligence community in the past few years with the increasingly large volume of information available online and the greater sophistication of software tools to capture and analyse these vast troves of information.

Notably, OSINT researchers in the UK were able to spot Russia's invasion of Ukraine before it happened due to live traffic information showing the movement of vehicles about to cross the border into Ukraine.

Now, the ATO is seeking to apply this technology in the fight against tax fraud, to catch users that might be sharing or distributing information about how to avoid paying the correct amount of tax on open and encrypted social media and the dark web.

In a request for tender published online, the ATO outlines it is in the market for a tool to "address the big data challenges facing us through an ability to detect, intercept, and respond to various and evolving threats, using integrated technology to complete advanced targeted digital data collection".

Senior Advisor at the ANU National Security College Ben Scott said more government departments were using OSINT tools to analyse publicly available data, for example Home Affairs.

"If you're trying to understand what's happening in terms of protest movements in Australia, you use what's on social media as much as possible, and that's a form of open source intelligence gathering."

The ATO lists a number of social media platforms it is hoping to scrape for information on tax fraud, including widely used platforms as well as encrypted sites such as Telegram and social media sites used by far right groups and criminals such as Gab and 8kun.

"This will provide the ATO, TPB and ACNC with an essential capability and allow us to be at the forefront of detecting, intercepting, and disrupting serious financial crime which is increasingly being exploited by criminals," the tender documents state.

The ATO sets out it has specific requirements in mind, including the ability to read large numbers of posts to find trends within the data, the ability to read images as text and to interpret how networks of users function.

Already there has been some awareness of how tax fraud can be spread online.

A viral TikTok scam saw the ATO pay out $1.6 billion in fraudulent refunds between April 2022 and June 2023. At least 150 ATO staff were investigated following the scheme's disruption.

Mr Scott said while these tools could be useful, Australia's lax data privacy laws raised concerns about the collection and use of data.

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