

news

A voice of reason on fraud?

Voice recognition technology promoted by the government to identify bogus benefit claimants is also being marketed as a “love detector” to help lonely singles “navigate the dating game”.

The Layered Voice Analysis technology is being trialled by 19 local authorities across the UK. Used to monitor phone calls, the makers claim that it can detect tiny changes in callers’ voices that may indicate that they are lying. Harrow Council, which has been using the system since 2007, claims that it has saved over £330,000 in fraudulent benefit claims.

The system is also set to be adopted by councils across Greater Manchester if trials prove successful. It is being promoted as part of a comprehensive package of measures designed to get tough on claimants by work and



Benefit offices are using the technology to detect fraudulent claims

pensions secretary James Purnell.

Yet precisely the same technology is marketed as an “entertainment-based tool” by its makers, IT company Nemesysco. According to the company, it gives a “pretty good indication of whether there is excitement or interest from your possible date”.

First developed in 1998, the technology works by analysing voice patterns for changes said to reveal wider emotional states. As well as love and lying, the makers claim that it can also detect excitement, confusion, stress, concentration and embarrassment.

It might only give a “pretty good indication” of romantic

interest from a potential partner, but the makers claim an 85 per cent accuracy rate in detecting lying.

These claims are disputed by experts in the field. “You don’t know whether someone is stressed because they are lying, or stressed because they are angry, or stressed because they are embarrassed,” polygraph examiner Bruce Burgess told the BBC.

The polygraph, as the traditional lie detector is known, monitors heart rate, sweat and breathing as well as voice patterns.

A field study funded by the US Department of Justice published in March this year found that the Layered Voice Analysis system could detect lies in “about 50 per cent” of cases tested.

JAMIE KENNY

CRB checks ‘not a failsafe’ for children

Delays in completing Criminal Records Bureau checks may have shortened but the system is ineffective in protecting children from unscrupulous adults, say campaigners.

The CRB, established under the Police Act of 1997, checks job applicants and volunteers against lists of sex offenders and people barred from working in schools, as well as police records of convictions, cautions and warnings.

Last year *The Big Issue in the North* reported that hold-ups in the system were hindering schools in the recruitment of volunteers. Allison Chin, head of Swinnow Primary School in Leeds, said at the time that it was taking 6-8 weeks for checks on volunteers to be returned.

Now, according to Chinn, the system has improved. “The forms now come back within four weeks, which is great as

delays in the past meant people got frustrated and drifted away,” said Chinn. “Also, people are less reluctant to complete the form after I’ve explained the process and we now have many more volunteers of all ages.”

But Josie Appleton of the campaigning body the Manifesto Group said the growing number

“The CRB system doesn’t prevent children being preyed upon by unscrupulous adults.”

of CRB checks did not protect children, and risked damaging relations between age groups.

Government figures show 80,000 people have been

prevented from working with children or vulnerable people as a result of CRB checks but Appleton believed the vast majority of these were people who had committed petty offences such as vandalism, often a long time ago.

“The CRB system doesn’t prevent children being preyed upon by unscrupulous adults,” said Appleton. “The various bits of legislation were brought in because of the Thomas Hamilton shootings in Dunblane and Ian Huntley murders in Soham. Yet in neither case would it have protected the children as neither had previously harmed children or been convicted.”

“It’s not a failsafe and when it leads, as it has, to checking grandmothers then it’s about a loss of perspective away from what we should be focusing on.

“It means before adults can

work with children they have to get state clearance. That says it’s an extraordinary activity to work with children and you’re a paedophile unless proved otherwise.

“It damages relations between different age groups. It also costs millions to run – money we believe should be put into Childline, social work and offender management.”

Home Office figures show that where the applicant was denied a job following a CRB check that the most frequently cited offences were violence, at 24 per cent, theft at 17.5 per cent, fraud/dishonesty, at 10 per cent, and drugs, at 9 per cent.

A Home Office spokesperson said: “The CRB’s priority is the protection of the vulnerable in society and it will not jeopardise accuracy for speed.”

MARK METCALF