White House may use lie detectors to find leakers, but do they work?

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In the era of fake news, few consumer-facing tools can accurately detect lies

Robert De Niro and Ben Stiller in the 2000 comedy "Meet the Parents." *Everett Collection*

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The White House has a leakage problem.

Since taking office in January, the administration has had a number of embarrassing leaks to the press — the most recent of which included transcripts of the president's calls with foreign leaders. President Trump's senior adviser Kellyanne Conway offered a potential solution on "Fox & Friends" on Thursday: lie detectors. When asked about this technology be used to stop the leaks she replied, "Well, they may, they may not. There are many different ways to figure out who's leaking."

The Employee Polygraph Protection Act prohibits most private employers from using lie detector tests, either for pre-employment screening or during the course of employment. "Subject to restrictions, the act also permits polygraph testing of certain employees of private firms who are reasonably suspected of involvement in a workplace incident (theft, embezzlement, etc.) that resulted in specific economic loss or injury to the employer." The law does not cover Federal, state, and local government agencies.

However,, Renee Ellory, a deception and credibility expert who says she can understand human behavior and spot lies with above-average accuracy, said there is no one sure way — or a solid test — to find who is lying. "Emotions, demeanor, and body language all can reveal deception," she said. "To be accurate at the level that I am you have to take in many pieces of behavioral evidence coming in different patterns and ways."

She relies on a number of factors to identify liars. She was identified by a University of San Francisco study of more than 13,000 people as one of only 31 people able to pick up on micro-expressions to detect lies the majority of the time — a "wizard," as the study called such people.

For non "wizards," polygraph tests are the traditional way of trying to detect if someone is lying, said Todd Mickelsen, chief executive of lie detection company Converus, which sells lie detection technology developed by polygraph experts that is based on tracking eye behavior. It doesn't lend itself well to consumer use, he said. "It's very intrusive and very human intensive."

Polygraphs don't literally detect lies, of course, but monitor physiological reactions to questions that may suggest somebody is not telling the truth, like increased heart rate, sweating and changes in breathing patterns. They are often used to screen employees for state and federal government — asking police about past actions that would disqualify them on the job, for instance.

There are also questions about their validity. Many psychologists believe the results of the test are placebo-like-test takers who are lying become nervous they'll be found out and have their reactions detected. And there is little evidence proving these tests can accurately detect lies, according to the American Psychological Association.

But the technology to detect lies is being enhanced: Brain patterns are thought to be very effective in telling when people are lying and new services are being developed with that technology. Some law enforcement has switched to Voice Stress Technology for interrogation, which is also controversial and has little scientific backing.

Converus is marketing a new lie detecting product called EyeDetect, which the company claims is 85% accurate, or 95% accurate when combined with other manners of lie detection. It is already being used by government officials in some Latin American countries for screening political candidates, Mickelsen said, and works by monitoring pupil dilation to detect deception. While most of these products are used only by law enforcement and governments only, Converus reports it is developing a more consumer-friendly product for lie detection in the coming months.

There are a number of products on the market that call themselves lie detectors, but they are almost all prohibitively expensive polygraph tests or joke apps. The top rated lie detector app in the iTunes store, "Truth and Lie Detector Scanner," for example, carries a warning at the top that reads, "This app is intended for entertainment purposes and doesn't provide true lie detecting or scanning functionality."

Similarly the top lie-detecting products on Amazon AMZN, 0.96% are toys or games, and even those that purport to be true lie detectors have low ratings for inefficacy. Consumers could offer to shell out more than $1,000 for a full polygraph kit or hire a professional to conduct a test locally — but it isn't a guarantee.

"There is so much complexity to deception and understanding human behavior that we haven't gotten to a point where a machine can detect it," Ellory said. And yet she said it is "only a matter of time" before machines develop the ability and emotional insight required to understand when people are lying.

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