In Debate, Audience Finds That The Cyberwar Threat Is Not Exaggerated

Though hype abounds, the potential for damage from international cyberconflicts is real, experts say

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Resolved: The cyberwar threat has been grossly exaggerated. True or false?

That was the question put to four top security experts last night in a public debate at the Newseum here in the nation's capitol. The debate, which was organized by the Intelligence Squared U.S. Foundation and sponsored by Neustar, was designed to cut through the hype surrounding cyberwar and help determine how serious the threat might be.

The answer, according to two of the debaters and most of the audience: The cyberwar threat is pretty dang serious.

In a lively back-and-forth moderated by ABC News' Nightline correspondent John Donvan, the four experts offered differing perspectives on the threat of cyberconflicts between nations and the potential damage they might cause.

"The threat of cyberwar is part of a long-running campaign to move control of the Internet from the current open model to one that would give the [National Security Agency] more authority to control users' activity," said Mark Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, arguing for the resolution that the threat has been exaggerated.

Bruce Schneier, BT's top security technologist and a well-known speaker and writer on the topic, offered a similar viewpoint arguing for the resolution. "Cyberwar is a rhetorical term that makes people feel good, like the war on drugs or the war on poverty," he said. "But it's a concept that has been grossly exaggerated by a government intent on grabbing the power and money that the threat can generate."

While Rotenberg and Schneier criticized the overuse of the cyberwar threat, former U.S. director of National Intelligence John (Mike) McConnell emphasized that while there is a great deal of hype surrounding cyberwar, there also is a very real threat.

"I'm not talking about hackers," McConnell said. "I'm not even talking about [denial of service attacks from] China. I'm talking about real destruction of data on an order that we have not seen."

McConnell said two U.S. banks currently use electronic means to move $7 billion to $8 billion a day. "If someone with a different world view attacked that data, there would be some very serious consequences," he said.

Jonathan Zittrain, a Harvard Law professor and co-founder of the university's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, also argued against the resolution, though from a different perspective.

"There may not already be a cyberwar going on against us in America, but the potential is there," Zittrain said. He cited examples such as GhostNet, which infiltrated 1,300 computers in more than 100 countries last year, and Pakistan's ill-fated effort in 2008 to censor YouTube, which caused Internet congestion and site outages all across the globe. "I am concerned that if the responses to these threats are too corporate or too military, they won't be effective," he said.

The debaters generally did not argue that cyberattacks could potentially cause significant damage, but Schneier argued it is difficult for such attacks to have a lasting impact. "These sorts of things do happen, but we recover," he said. "The techies are going to have some sleepless nights, but I don't see anything irreparable happening here.

"To have cyberwar, you need war. You need tanks. You need bombs or the sinking of a fleet. You need hostilities between nations that are warlike." While most wars in the future will likely contain a cyberthreat, it is unlikely that a real war would be fought solely in cyberspace, he said.

McConnell disagreed. "Did we have a Cold War?" he asked. "There were no shots fired, but there were real risks, we prepared for them, and we won."

All of the panelists agreed that a chief problem with the cyberwar debate is the question of how to define the term. To have cyberwar, Rotenberg argued, "you have to believe that one country is trying to destabilize another."

But Zittrain said that the definition of the term will not change the seriousness of the threat. "It's sort of like asking if this is a chair," he said. "If it has three legs and you don't see anyone sitting on it, you could make an argument against it. But if it threatens the day-to-day existence of people, I think you can take a leg or two away, and it would still be war."

Schneier agreed that the debate over the terminology "might sound like a petty semantic argument, but it is a very important question. Words make a difference. And I think in this case we're talking about a word that's been exaggerated in an attempt to grab power and money."

Apparently, the arguments of Schneier and Rotenberg worked against their resolution. Before the debate began, 24 percent of the live audience agreed that the threat of cyberwar was grossly exaggerated, 54 percent disagreed, and 22 percent were undecided. After the debate, 23 percent agreed that the threat of cyberwar was grossly exaggerated, 71 percent disagreed, and only 6 percent were undecided.

The debate, all of the panelists agreed, will go on.