

Anti-terror tech leashes puppy farmers

Jerome Starkey
Countryside Correspondent

Pet detectives are deploying software used to tackle terrorists to trawl classified ad websites and identify thousands of potential puppy farms.

Keith Hinde, a software designer and animal rights activist, has developed a programme known as Project Capone, which scans sites to identify sellers' covert networks.

Puppy farmers often use false identities and multiple phone numbers to disguise the fact that they are selling so many animals across different websites. Mr Hinde's software, which utilises technology similar to that used by police and intelligence services to tackle serious crime including terrorism and child abuse, scours for identical photographs or common phone numbers and physical addresses.

His latest figures showed there were more than half a million pets for sale online in Britain and Northern Ireland last year, including 330,000 dogs, 150,000 cats and 50,000 rabbits. His work has led to two raids on illegal puppy farms in Ireland, with 86 dogs recovered from one site and 39 from another.

While most of the ads came from legitimate breeders who keep animals in loving homes, the software flagged at least 3,000 suspicious networks. These were group of sellers advertising the same animal multiple times, or individuals selling more than one species over multiple websites.

Mr Hinde shared the information with animal welfare charities, including Blue Cross and Dogs Trust, as well as HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) because most of the illegal puppy trade is untaxed.

Mel Stride, financial secretary to the treasury, said HMRC played a key role "in undermining this unfair trade by going after the unpaid tax and hitting puppy-smugglers where it hurts".

Puppy farming is not inherently illegal but volume breeders must be licensed and adhere to minimum welfare standards. In England breeders must be licensed if they sell puppies from more than three litters a year. The government has pledged to ban the third-party sale of puppies under six months old to crackdown on networks of farmers selling through middlemen.

"This will mean that anyone looking to buy or adopt a puppy or kitten under six months must either deal directly with the breeder or with an animal rehoming centre," a spokesman for the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said. "This will help to crack down on puppy farms and make it much harder for high-volume low-welfare breeders, both licensed and unlicensed, whose trade relies on third-party sellers."

Mr Hinde, 44, who is married to a veterinary nurse, developed the soft-



Pedigree dogs are highly sought after and more than 3,000 suspicious puppy farms were identified by the spy software, with many being investigated for cruelty

How to avoid the cruelty

- If you are buying a puppy then the RSPCA's advice is to insist on seeing it with its mother and its siblings. The charity says a responsible breeder will never make excuses such as the mother being at the vet's and that if its mother is not there then the puppy was not bred there.
- Responsible breeders will spend time chatting

- to you on the phone. They will also not rush you into parting with cash and will answer your questions and have plenty of their own to ensure that you will provide a good home.
- If the puppy is advertised as having a passport then it has probably been imported. If the advert says a puppy has been

- vaccinated then check how old he or she is. A puppy cannot be vaccinated before between four and six weeks so if a person is advertising a three-week-old vaccinated puppy, they are lying.
- If in doubt contact a welfare organisation or consider taking a dog from a registered re-homing centre.

Source: RSPCA

ware when he was helping the Rabbit Welfare Association, but has since shared it with much larger charities. "If you post an ad up on a website we are monitoring then within about five minutes it will be in our dataset. If you have previously listed dogs we will be able to see how much selling you are involved in," Mr Hinde said.

"It is the same sort of tech that GCHQ uses to map terrorism suspects

and their contacts. Police investigating child abuse use similar technology to check whether a picture is a new image or not."

Mr Hinde, from Basingstoke, has set up the not-for-profit Tech4pets organisation to handle the research as demand for his services has grown. He said the first challenge was establishing the scale of the problem. "Now the challenge is enforcement," he said.

Andrew Kelly, the chief executive of the Irish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (the ISP-CA), said the software led to two raids in the country in August. It also helped investigators to link three cruelty cases to the same breeder, although welfare officers have been unable to take action against them because they were licensed.

In the first case a family bought a cava-chon puppy online, collected it from a "neutral location," and it died of parvovirus within 48 hours. Mr Kelly said puppy farmers often choose service stations or car parks to prevent the buyers seeing their squalid kennels.

In the second case a family ordered a Maltese puppy online. They realised immediately that it was not the animal they had chosen, but bought it anyway out of pity. They took it to a vet the next

day because it was struggling to breathe.

The puppy was diagnosed with an enlarged heart 24 hours later and had to be put down. The third case involved a cockapoo that needed £1,000 of medical treatment.

Mr Hinde conducted a four-month pilot study for the European Commission which found 500,000 advertisements from 114,000 sellers in eight countries, including Poland and Bulgaria. More than 40,000 mentioned the phrase "pet passport" which suggested they would be sold overseas, Mr Hinde said.

Under EU law puppies sold overseas must be microchipped and vaccinated against rabies but unscrupulous sellers often shirk those requirements. Separate research by the Blue Cross found 400,000 dogs and 100,000 pets offered for sale online across Europe every day.



Severn Bridge closed after man scales tower to fly drone

Graeme Paton Transport Correspondent

The Severn Bridge was forced to close after a man climbed one of the towers to fly a drone.

Traffic was stopped for about half an hour on the bridge between England and Wales.

The man, who is in his 20s, was arrested after voluntarily climbing off the 47m-high (154ft) bridge, which carries traffic on the M48 north of Bristol. Motorists faced long queues on the motorway because of the incident at 8am yesterday.

The closure came a week after drone

sightings near Gatwick forced Britain's second busiest airport to shut down. About 1,000 flights were cancelled during the chaos that crippled the airport in the pre-Christmas rush between December 19 and 21. No culprits have been identified in the Gatwick incident. Two people were arrested but released without charge.

Yesterday's incident will raise further questions over the security used to guard Britain's transport infrastructure. The Gatwick chaos led to a resurgence of calls for mandatory registration of drones, training for owners and for technology to be deployed around



Emergency services on the bridge yesterday morning. A man in his 20s was arrested after climbing down

vulnerable areas to create no-fly zones. People took to social media to criticise the actions of the man behind the Severn Bridge incident.

One said on Twitter: "Iconic landmarks are also popular subjects for drone photos. This was a very irresponsible disruptive action by this drone operator."

Another added: "Will 2019 be the year of the rogue drone? Because 2018 is finishing strong."

The Severn Bridge incident started when a man was spotted climbing one of the towers on the crossing. Traffic remained at a standstill as officers

attempted to arrest him. The road was closed in both directions.

A spokesman for Avon and Somerset police said: "Officers attended the M48 Severn Bridge at 8.10am this morning after concerns were raised for a man who appeared to have climbed one of the towers and was flying a drone off it. The man came down from the tower voluntarily and has since been arrested for causing a public nuisance."

The original Severn Bridge was opened in 1966. The Second Severn Crossing, now called the Prince of Wales Bridge, was opened in 1996. The tolls for both were scrapped this month.