Tech company "transparency reports" reveal massive NSA spying

Thomas Gaist
5 February 2014

Major US telecommunications companies released figures this week showing that the National Security Agency has requested data relating to tens of thousands of customer accounts in just the first half of last year. The release of the "transparency reports" was part of an agreement reached with the Obama administration allowing limited disclosures of information about the massive police-state spying apparatus.

The accounts spied on were targeted as part of the NSA's PRISM surveillance program, which has been in operation since 2007. Using PRISM, the spy agency obtains orders from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to require telecommunications companies to turn over information. PRISM came to the attention of the public as a result of documents provided by NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

Slides released by Snowden show that PRISM collects email, chat (voice and video), video, photos, stored data, file transfers, video conference data, notifications of target activity and online social networking details from a range of providers including Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, PalTalk, YouTube, Skype, AOL, and Apple.

Yahoo said it turned over information on between 30,000 and 30,999 accounts between January and June 2013. Facebook reported 5,000-5,999 requests. Microsoft reported 15,000 to 15,999, and Google reported 9,000-9,999. The figures released by the company show a steady increase over the past several years.

These figures cover only a small aspect of the convoluted network of spy programs. The information released is subject to a six-month delay imposed by the government on all disclosures of data requests.

Despite claims to be increasing transparency, there is in fact very little information included in the reports aside from aggregate figures. The fact that the information reveals spying on the order of tens of thousands—as opposed to the hundreds of millions of records obtained through other programs—is also aimed at downplaying the extent of the unconstitutional intrusion into the privacy of citizens and non-citizens alike.

Emma Woollacott, writing for *Forbes*, noted that "the transparency reports do little to improve knowledge of just how much data is being accessed by the NSA. They've been described as a tech company PR stunt—but, in fact, they are far more of a PR coup for the government. Permission to release these figures means the government looks more open, a set of comparatively small numbers captures the headlines and attention is diverted away from other types of snooping."

For their part, the tech companies view surveillance as a public relations problem. They have never sought an end to the surveillance, and in fact cooperate closely with the state to facilitate bulk data collection. They are sowing the illusion that measures are being implemented to protect privacy and transparency, while continuing to facilitate spying operations against the population.

Leaks from Snowden last summer exposed the intimate relations between Microsoft and the NSA and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Microsoft has actively facilitated the penetration of its own encryption mechanisms, allowing the spy agencies to monitor communications from Outlook, Hotmail, Messenger, and SkyDrive users.

In addition to sending specific data requests to the telecoms, the NSA taps into the fiber optic cables that carry the majority of the of the world's communications data. Through a combination of these

and other methods, the NSA snoops at will upon the vast majority of data produced worldwide.

The Obama administration has proposed minor measures to provide a fig-leaf of reform while in fact further institutionalizing the programs. One proposal would transfer bulk phone record databases from direct control by the NSA to the telecommunication companies themselves, which would give the NSA access when requested.

Professor Geoffrey Stone, who participated in the Obama administration's hand-picked spying review board, told *Politico*, "We were pleased with that [the possible transfer of bulk data to a third party]."

According to *Politico*, "Stone said that, after receiving the surveillance group's report, Obama spent a month meeting 'with many of the same people we had met with at great length, members of the intelligence community, members of the intelligence committees from Congress largely on one side of the picture.'"

"And instead of our report being truly understood as a middle ground, based upon taking into account all those perspectives on both sides of the spectrum, I think the White House got moved by thinking of our report as a liberal report," Stone said, referring to initial criticisms of the panel's conclusion.

In other words, Obama spent a month consulting with the officials running the surveillance state, and consultations reassured the president that the token reforms proposed in the report would not substantially disrupt the mass spying operations.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact