

Out in open: US e-surveillance goes beyond America

Obama Defends Programme As Anti-Terror Tool, Says Safeguards In Place To Stop Misuse

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Washington: Uncle Sam is watching you...every electronic step you take, every digital move you make. The world woke on Friday morning to news that the US government's surveillance of people is much broader, wider, and deeper than initially thought and extends beyond America — into the whole world.

For the last six years, the secretive National Security Agency (NSA) has been able to pluck data — including emails, videos, pictures, social networking details, and connection logs — from the main servers of Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Apple, Facebook, Skype and other major US tech companies. Its collection of metadata from Verizon is just the tip of the iceberg that is drifting towards the Obama administration.

The newly disclosed US programme, leaked by a disgruntled insider in the government, is named PRISM, which originally — and innocuously — stood for Publishing Requirements for Industry Standard Metadata, a norm for aggregating content. It has now acquired sinister tones with the disclosure that is a highly-classified, top-secret electronic surveillance programme that allows targeting of any customers of participating corporations who live outside the United States, or American citizens whose communications include people outside the USA.

This pretty much means the entire world, since most of the world's internet infrastructure is based in the US and most of the world's electronic communications also pass through the US, not to speak of the worldwide dominance of the aforementioned US companies.

According to the Guardian and the Washington Post, recipients of the explosive leak, PRISM is “the number one source of raw intelligence used for NSA analytic reports” and “98% of PRISM production is based on Yahoo, Google and Microsoft”.

PRISM is not illegal, at least not under domestic US law. It actually replaced the Bush administration's post-9/ 11 Terrorist Surveillance Program, whose legality was questioned. PRISM on the other hand is authorized under a foreign intelligence law that was recently renewed by Congress, which is why both the administration and lawmakers rushed to defend it.

James Clapper, the director of National Intelligence, issued a statement saying media reports about PRISM contained numerous inaccuracies, but did not deny its existence. Referring to the collection of communications pursuant to Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act cited in the reports, Clapper said the FISA provision is “designed to facilitate the acquisition of foreign intelligence information concerning non-US persons located outside the US. It cannot be used to intentionally target any US citizen, any other US person, or within the US”.

President Barack Obama on Friday staunchly defended the surveillance programme, insisting that they were conducted with broad safeguards to protect against abuse.

“Nobody is listening to your telephone calls. That's not what this programme is about,” Obama said. He insisted that the surveillance programme struck the right balance between keeping Americans safe from terrorist attack and protecting their privacy.

Meanwhile, the tech giants cited in the reports also rushed to distance themselves from the programme, telling the site TechCrunch they had no knowledge of PRISM and they would never cooperate with it if it is not within the bounds of law. Google said it only discloses user data to government in accordance with the law after reviewing all such requests carefully. Microsoft was equally circumspect, saying it provides customer data “only when we receive a legally binding”.

Assange fears for whistleblower WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said on Friday he fears the whistleblower who exposed a vast US surveillance programme could face the same fate as the US soldier Bradley Manning, who leaked files to his website. In an interview from the Ecuadoran embassy in London, Assange defended the public's right to know about the internet data-mining programme. AFP



The National Security Agency headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland