

Technology Firms Urge Changes to US Spying

Stephen Braun, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A coalition of the nation's leading technology firms joined an international protest Tuesday against the U.S. government's spying programs, urging more limits on collections of Americans' electronic data and greater oversight and transparency about the secret operations.

Top executives from Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, Facebook, AOL, LinkedIn and Twitter published a joint statement and sent a letter Tuesday to President Barack Obama and members of Congress. The coalition of tech firms, known as Reform Government Surveillance, urged changes that would include a government agreement not to collect bulk data from Internet communications.

Technology companies expressed outrage last year after media accounts based on leaks from former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden disclosed that the U.S. and the Britain intercept massive amounts of electronic Web metadata abroad from foreign computer users and sometimes from Americans. Executives highlighted their concerns during talks with administration officials about the spying programs, but Obama did not commit to curtailing the NSA's sweeps of data from the Internet.

The stance taken by the technology firms provided a public boost to "The Day We Fight Back," a day of protest against the government's spying operations organized by civil liberties and privacy advocates. Activists urged Americans to write and call members of Congress in protest. By midafternoon, "The Day We Fight Back" claimed backers had sent 104,000 emails and made nearly 50,000 calls to Congress.

"Reports about government surveillance have shown there is a real need for greater disclosure and new limits on how governments collect information," said Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in a statement on the Reform Government Surveillance website. "The U.S. government should take this opportunity to lead this reform effort."

The civil liberties groups, which include the ACLU and the Electronic Frontier Foundation, are trying to mirror the success that activists had in 2012, when a similar protest effort helped derail two major anti-piracy bills in Congress. The organizers oppose a bill sponsored by Senate Intelligence Committee chairwoman Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., that would codify and provide legal underpinnings for many of the NSA's current operations.

"The Day We Fight Back" movement prefers a bill co-sponsored by Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., that would end the bulk collection of phone records and restrict sweeps for electronic and other data.

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The Reform Government Surveillance coalition urged the U.S. and other governments to "codify sensible limitations on their ability to compel service providers to disclose user data that balance their need for the data in limited circumstances." The group also called for strong "independent" court review that includes "an adversarial process."

Obama has committed to the involvement of a panel of public advocates in some proceedings of the secretive Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court, which oversees electronic spying operations. But under Obama's proposal, the advocates would have limited ability to intervene.

During a White House appearance Tuesday with French President Francois Hollande, Obama said his administration is "committed to making sure that we are protecting and concerned about the privacy rights of not just Americans, not just our own citizens, but of people around the world, as well."

White House spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden said later that Obama's plans for limited surveillance changes "help chart a path forward that should give the American people greater confidence that their rights are being protected, while preserving important tools that keep us safe."

Google CEO Larry Page said on the coalition's site that the security of users' electronic data "is undermined by the apparent wholesale collection of data, in secret and without independent oversight, by many governments around the world. It's time for reform and we urge the U.S. government to lead the way."

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer said the Snowden revelations "have shaken the trust of our users." She urged Congress to "change surveillance laws in order to ensure transparency and accountability for government actions." The remarks by Zuckerberg, Page and Mayer were echoed by statements from Twitter CEO Dick Costolo, AOL CEO Tim Armstrong, Microsoft General Counsel Brad Smith and LinkedIn General Counsel Erika Rottenberg.

In addition to its Reform Government Surveillance supporters, the protest effort was also backed by other tech firms, such as Tumblr, Mozilla and Reddit. The day-long protest claimed support from more than 6,000 web entities. But, conspicuously, Verizon and AT&T, two major U.S. phone service providers that turn over bulk customer data to the NSA every day, did not join in.

The tech coalition also hired a lobbyist to handle the group's interests in Washington. The Washington lobbying firm Monument Policy Group LLC filed a formal lobbying registration last week with Congress, citing the coalition as its client.

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