

Globally, people resigned to little privacy online

FRANK BAJAK & JACK CHANG, Associated Press



CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) —

U.S. government snooping does not surprise global Internet users, who say they already have few expectations of online privacy as governments increasingly monitor people's digital lives and Internet companies often acquiesce.

Privacy activists concerned over the U.S. National Security Agency's selective monitoring of Internet traffic called on people to better protect their digital data. But most people eschew encryption and other privacy tools and seemed resigned to the open book their online lives have become.

"It doesn't surprise me one bit. They've been doing it for years," said Jamie Griffiths, a 26-year-old architect working on his laptop in a London cafe. "I wouldn't send anything via email that I wouldn't want a third party to read."

From Baghdad, to Bogota, Colombia, many said they already censor what they write online and assume governments are regularly spying, be it as part of global counter-terrorism or domestic surveillance efforts.

"The social networks and email have always been vulnerable because tech-savvy people know how to penetrate them," said Teolindo Acosa, a 34-year-old education student at Venezuela's Universidad Central who was leaving a cybercafe in Caracas.

Leaked confidential documents show the NSA and FBI have been sifting through personal data by directly accessing the U.S.-based servers of Google, Facebook, Microsoft, AOL, Skype, PalTalk, Apple and YouTube.

U.S. President Barack Obama said Friday that the surveillance did not "target" U.S. citizens or others living in the U.S. — which does not mean their communications were not caught up in the dragnet.

Globally, people resigned to little privacy online

Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

But that didn't dampen the outrage of people who resent what they consider Washington's self-anointed role as the world's policeman.

"To the United States, everyone is suspicious, even the pope!" said leftist Colombian Sen. Alexander Lopez. "Everyone is under observation these days and this should be taken up by the United Nations."

Lopez said he has no plans to close his Google and Microsoft email accounts. He figures he'll be spied on no matter what he does.

The revelation of global data vacuuming could hurt U.S. technology companies if Internet users become disillusioned and abandon them in favor of homegrown alternatives that offer greater security.

U.S. privacy activist Christopher Soghoian said he finds it "insane" that so many politicians outside the United States use Gmail accounts.

"This has given the NSA an advantage over every other intelligence system in the world. The Americans don't have to hack as much, because everyone in the world sends their data to American companies," he said.

Hossam el-Hamalawy, a blogger with Egypt's Revolutionary Socialists, one of the Egyptian groups that helped spearhead the 2011 uprising, said the dearth of locally developed Web tools means many are simply stuck with U.S. sites, even if they know the government is monitoring them.

"The problem is that there is no alternative," he said. "If you don't use Facebook, what is the alternative social network available for the Internet user who is not an IT geek?"

Soghoian predicted an increasing push by governments and companies in Europe in particular, where privacy has been a much bigger issue for voters than in the United States, away from storing data in U.S.-based server farms.

Indeed, under U.S. law it is not illegal for the NSA to collect information on foreigners.

The disclosure of the NSA data-vacuuming program known as PRISM is only the latest "of many U.S. government programs created to infringe on personal freedoms," said Carlos Affonso Pereira de Souza, a technology policy professor at FGV think tank in Rio de Janeiro.

Going back well into the 20th century, the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand ran a secret satellite communications interception network that became known as Echelon and searched information including telexes, faxes and emails, according to experts including U.S. journalist James Bamford. The system was the subject of a 2001 European Parliament inquiry.

Globally, people resigned to little privacy online

Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

According to a U.N. report released this week, such surveillance has been on a global upsurge with governments increasingly tapping into online personal data and even discouraging online anonymity by passing laws prohibiting it.

The governments of China, Iran, Bahrain are among other nations that already aggressively oversee online activity, in many cases putting people in prison for political blog posts and other messages.

Israel's attorney general in April upheld a practice allowing security personnel to read email accounts of suspicious individuals when they arrive at the airport, arguing it prevents militants from entering the country.

China has long imposed tight control over media and spied on private communications among its citizens, especially government critics and activists, sifting through their email, listening in on their phone conversations and snooping on their cyber activities.

Major Internet companies employ internal reviewers who regularly censor content posted by users and scrub off offensive language, including political topics the authorities do not wish to be publicly discussed.

South Korea, one of the most wired countries in the world, has a law that allows authorities to ask telecommunications companies without a court order to provide information such as names, resident registration numbers, addresses and phone numbers of their subscribers. But this doesn't involve the substance of conversations users had using communications software provided by the companies.

Ko Young-churl, a journalism professor and communications expert at Jeju National University in South Korea, said most South Koreans are complacent about security for their personal data online ... "and most South Koreans don't realize authorities could use such tools against them."

The U.N. report said such activity has been expanding as technology advances, and that countries should prioritize protecting people's online rights.

"In order to meet their human rights obligations, States must ensure that the rights to freedom of expression and privacy are at the heart of their communications surveillance frameworks," the report reads.

Its author, Guatemalan Frank La Rue, calls for legal standards to ensure "privacy, security and anonymity of communications" to protect people including journalists, human rights defenders and whistleblowers.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/01/2015 - 3:54am):

<http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2013/06/globally-people-resigned-little-privacy-online>