



## Study Shows Major Internet Companies Violate User Privacy

Whistleblower Edward Snowden's recent revelations of the federal government's massive and intrusive surveillance of Americans have shown that major Internet giants such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google have not only been compliant with the surveillance programs, but have themselves [violated](#) the privacy of their users.



The British publication *Daily Mail* reports, "Cyber-security company High-Tech Bridge set out to test the confidentiality of 50 of the biggest internet companies by using their systems to send a unique web address in private messages."

Experts at the headquarters waited to see which companies clicked on that website found in the private messages during the 10-day operation. Six of the 50 companies were found to have opened the link, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google.

High-Tech Bridge chief executive Iliia Kolochenko said, "We found they were clicking on links that should be known only to the sender and recipient."

Kolochenko indicated that the findings reveal that users have a right to voice some serious privacy concerns.

"If the links are being opened, we cannot be sure that the contents of messages are not also being read," she added.

Kolochenko believes that the Internet giants clicked on the links in order to use the information obtained for marketing purposes.

"All the social network sites would like to know as much as possible about our hobbies and shopping habits because the information has a commercial value," she continued.

And the fact that the other 44 Internet companies did not click on the link does not necessarily prove that they are innocent, she explained: "The fact that only a few companies were trapped does not mean others are not monitoring their customers. They may simply be using different techniques which are more difficult to detect."

These findings follow disturbing revelations from German scientists earlier this year that Microsoft was spying on its customers through Skype instant messaging.

Facebook has not commented on High-Tech Bridge's findings, but asserts that it has a system in place to fight Internet identity fraud and reduce malicious material. Likewise, Twitter has not commented on the findings, but also stated that it uses a system to combat spam messages.



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on September 3, 2013

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And a source at Google simply remarked, “There is nothing new here. It simply isn’t an issue.”

Of course, the findings from High-Tech Bridge’s study do not likely come as a total surprise to most users as many major Internet companies involved in that study have already been heavily implicated by information leaked by Edward Snowden earlier this year.

Google, for example, is already in defense mode in the aftermath of news about the National Security Agency’s Internet surveillance leaked by Snowden. In the *Guardian* newspaper’s article that broke the story on NSA surveillance, Google was heavily implicated for complying with foreign intelligence requests. The *Washington Post* also claimed that Google’s servers were wide open for the government to obtain user records and communications.

Information leaked by Snowden revealed that the National Security Agency [paid](#) major technology companies like Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Facebook to cover the costs of compliance with the Prism surveillance program.

This information is particularly critical given an October 2011 ruling, which was finally declassified last month, that stated the NSA’s inability to separate domestic communications from foreign traffic violated the Fourth Amendment.

The negative backlash that resulted from those revelations regarding Google’s involvement with the surveillance programs prompted Google to challenge the federal government over gag orders on data requests that inhibited them from being able to speak on the scope of their role in the surveillance programs. Google argued that it has a constitutional right to speak about information it has been compelled to hand over to the government.

Google filed a “Motion for Declaratory Judgment of Google Inc.’s First Amendment Rights to Publish Aggregate Information about FISA Orders.” The motion contends that its reputation has been “harmed by the false or misleading reports in the media” and has raised significant concerns among Google users, and that Google should be permitted to address those concerns. But the Justice Department has refused to lift the gag orders.

Google is now threatening to [sue](#) the United States government, and is being joined by Microsoft, which has also been negotiating with the Justice Department to allow the company to reveal more detailed information about its compliance with data requests collected under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

“We believe we have a clear right under the US Constitution to share more information with the public. The purpose of our litigation is to uphold this right so that we can disclose additional data,” said Microsoft General Counsel Brad Smith.

The government has indicated it will resist efforts to reveal more detailed information about the requests, however.

National Intelligence Director James Clapper told [Reuters](#) Thursday, “FISA and national security letters are an important part of our effort to keep the nation and its citizens safe, and disclosing more detailed information about how they are used and to whom they are directed can obviously help our enemies avoid detection.”

Civil libertarians disagree entirely.

Earlier this year, Judge Andrew Napolitano of Fox News opined on the overreach that FISA has created:



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FISA gives the government unchecked authority to snoop on all Americans who communicate with any foreign person, in direct contravention of the Fourth Amendment. The right to privacy is a natural human right. Its enshrinement in the Constitution has largely kept America from becoming East Germany.

And despite assertions by the Internet giants that their compliance with federal surveillance programs has been inflated, the findings of the recent study by High-Tech Bridge only serve to confirm the Internet giants' positions as components of Big Brother.

Nick Pickles, director of pressure group Big Brother Watch, opined, "This is yet another reminder that profit comes before privacy every day for some businesses. Companies such as Google and Facebook rely on capturing as much data as possible to enhance their advertising targeting. They intrude on our privacy to build an ever more detailed picture of our lives."



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