



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on July 5, 2012

## Twitter Complies with 75% of Gov't Requests for User Data

On July 2, social media service [Twitter](#) released its first ever "[Transparency Report](#)," revealing the alarming number of requests it has received from the government of the United States to delete tweets and disclose information about its users.

The report covers activity from January 1, 2012 to the end of June, and although brief, it contains irrefutable evidence of the government's sustained effort to monitor the online activity of citizens of this nation. A fair reading of the report indicates that officials of the federal government are becoming increasingly interested in Twitter and in what is said there and who says it.



That said, however, there's no need to interpret the data included in the report to find evidence of government meddling. Witness the following straightforward statement included in Twitter's report:

We've received more government requests in the first half of 2012, as outlined in this initial dataset, than in the entirety of 2011.

Twitter's goal in publishing the report is to "shed more light on" three critical areas of online privacy:

1. government requests received for user information,
2. government requests received to withhold content, and
3. DMCA takedown notices received from copyright holders.

While that aim is certainly laudable, the report is no Declaration of Independence from government surveillance, however. Twitter insists that the information contained in the report is provided in order to "hold governments accountable," but the data also show that Twitter is more often than not complying with the government's demands.

For example, according to a chart included in the Transparency Report, the government of the United States made 679 requests for user information, and Twitter voluntarily gave up that information 75 percent of the time.

Moreover, the data requested by the government concerned the online activity of 948 different users or account holders.

Twitter assures its millions of users, however, that it is not complying with every request. The report contained the following disclaimer:

Information requests will include data pursued in connection with criminal investigations. Twitter says it does not automatically comply with every request and that users are informed of prying into their accounts in cases where it is legal to do so. Cases in which notification is not permitted would include those involving a National Security Letter. Such a request is a demand for information



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issued by government agencies about which the recipient is forbidden to talk.

Regardless, the frankly disturbing number of requests followed by an even more disturbing number of accessions by Twitter is compounded by the fact that nearly 600 individual tweets (messages posted by users to Twitter) were removed by Twitter after receiving government demands to do so.

In a message included in the report from Jeremy Kessel, Twitter's manager of Legal Policy, the micro-blogging mammoth points to a similar transparency report previously published by Google.

[Google's version of the Transparency Report](#) claims that the government of the United States made 6,321 requests for user data. Of those, Google complied fully or partially with 93 percent. Again, that level of cooperation by an online company with access to the personal data of millions of users is likely shocking to those who use these popular online services.

Regarding the federal government's request for removal of information, [Google made the following disclosure in its report](#):

We received a request from a local law enforcement agency to remove a blog because of a post that allegedly defamed a law enforcement official in a personal capacity. We did not comply with this request, which we have categorized in this Report as a defamation request.

We received a request from a local law enforcement agency to remove 1,400 YouTube videos for alleged harassment. We did not comply with this request. Separately, we received a request from a different local law enforcement agency to remove five user accounts that allegedly contained threatening and/or harassing content. We terminated four of the accounts, which resulted in the removal of approximately 300 videos, but did not remove the remaining account with 54 videos.

We received a court order to remove 218 search results that linked to allegedly defamatory websites. We removed 25 percent of the results cited in the request.

The number of content removal requests we received increased by 103 percent compared to the previous reporting period.

In fairness to Twitter and Google, the United States isn't the only country whose government is trying to keep tabs on the online activity and personal user data of its citizens.

However, besides the United States, only the governments of Canada, Japan, and the United Kingdom made more than 10 requests for user information. Of those requests, Twitter complied with 18 percent, 20 percent, and 18 percent respectively. These figures don't even approach the 75 percent compliance mark reached by the United States government.

In all, Twitter received 849 requests for user information from the governments of 23 countries and it complied partially or fully with 63 percent of those. Nearly 80 percent of all requests for user information came from the United States.

While notable, Twitter's figures pale in comparison to those posted by Google. In the period from July to December 2011, (a comparable six month period), Google received more than 18,257 user data requests from 28 countries.

Google and Twitter's publishing of Transparency Reports are reportedly putting pressure on social media phenomenon Facebook to follow suit. As [one writer commented](#):

But Twitter's release also promises to put additional pressure on Facebook, itself brimming with personal information, to disclose its own cooperation (or lack thereof) with governments that



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request user data and ask for posts to be deleted. Facebook notes in its data use policy that the company “may access, preserve and share your information in response to a legal request (like a search warrant, court order or subpoena) if we have a good faith belief that the law requires us to do so.” Yet the world’s largest social networking site has yet to publicly quantify how frequently it’s asked to hand over or remove users’ details or content, and when it does so.

Facebook’s reluctance to reveal the type of data contained in the Google and Twitter reports likely stems from the shocking number of users whose personal data has been handed over by Mark Zuckerberg and company to agents of the federal government.

Zuckerberg is no stranger to the movers and shakers in government. [In 2011, the co-founder of Facebook delivered a keynote address at the Bilderberg confab](#) in St. Moritz, Switzerland. While in keeping with the shadowy group’s custom of not publishing the transcripts of what goes on in their meetings, freedom has much to fear from a close collaboration between the government and those who have control over the private data of millions of Americans.

Constitutionalists warn that government perpetuates itself by expanding its power. The accumulation of data revealing the vital statistics and habits of citizens is a critical step toward establishment of a surveillance state whose never-blinking eye will record every movement of innocent and guilty alike, storing that information for a time when the recollection of it would best serve the tyrannical interests of the state.

For now, there is hope that Twitter at least is fighting the government’s drive to collect information from its users.

After being taken to court by the Manhattan District Attorney’s office which was seeking access to a user’s tweets, [on July 2 Manhattan Criminal Court Judge Matthew A. Sciarrino Jr. ordered Twitter](#) to give prosecutors access to the tweets posted by Malcolm Harris, an Occupy Wall Street protester who is being investigated after being charged with disorderly conduct.

Twitter will publish updates to this information twice a year.

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