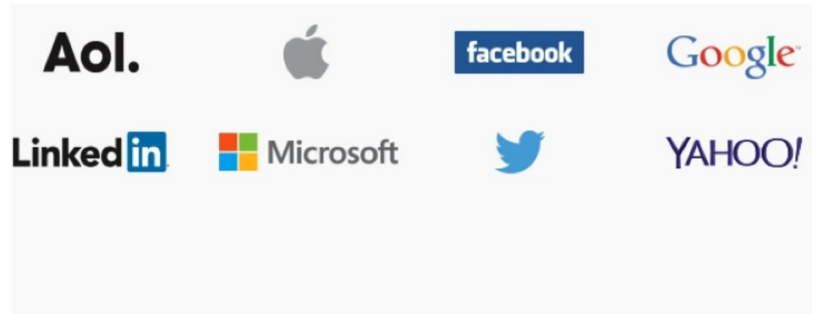




Major Tech Companies Unite to Fight Government Surveillance

Eight of the world's largest [technology companies have combined efforts](#) to launch a website called "[Reform Government Surveillance](#)," designed to expose and counter governmental violations of people's privacy.

The companies include AOL, Apple, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Twitter, and Yahoo. An open letter from the eight companies, posted on their website and addressed to the president and members of Congress, acknowledged that governments "have a duty to protect their citizens," but said that "this summer's revelations highlighted the urgent need to reform government surveillance practices worldwide."



As [Reuters news](#) noted, the "revelations" referred to the exposure last June by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden of top secret government surveillance programs that tap into communications cables linking technology companies' various data centers overseas.

After Snowden's disclosure, observed Reuters, many large Internet companies warned that U.S. businesses may lose revenue abroad as customers wary of such surveillance switch to non-U.S. alternatives.

The companies' open letter to federal officials warned: "The balance in many countries has tipped too far in favor of the state and away from the rights of the individual — rights that are enshrined in our Constitution. This undermines the freedoms we all cherish. It's time for a change."

In order to keep their users' data secure, said the statement, the companies would deploy "the latest encryption technology to prevent unauthorized surveillance on our networks and by pushing back on government requests to ensure that they are legal and reasonable in scope."

The letter included [a link to the Reform Government Surveillance website](#), for those interested in reading the group's set of five principles, which they called on governments to endorse and enact. The principles are:

1. Limiting Governments' Authority to Collect Users' Information

Includes limitations on governments' ability to compel service providers to disclose user data. The limitations should balance the governments' need for the data (in limited circumstances) with the users' "reasonable privacy interests, and the impact on trust in the Internet." Furthermore, "governments should limit surveillance to specific, known users for lawful purposes, and should not undertake bulk data collection of Internet communications."



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on December 9, 2013

2. Oversight and Accountability

Specifies that intelligence agencies that want to collect or compel the production of information should do so under a clear legal framework in which executive powers are subject to strong checks and balances. Also calls for reviewing courts to be independent and to include an adversarial process.

3. Transparency About Government Demands

Insists that “transparency is essential to a debate over governments’ surveillance powers and the scope of programs that are administered under those powers. Governments should allow companies to publish the number and nature of government demands for user information.”

4. Respecting the Free Flow of Information

States that “governments should permit the transfer of data and should not inhibit access by companies or individuals to lawfully available information that is stored outside of the country.”

5. Avoiding Conflicts Among Governments

In order to avoid conflicting laws, “where the laws of one jurisdiction conflict with the laws of another, it is incumbent upon governments to work together to resolve the conflict.”

The Reform Government Surveillance website displays quotes from several of the technology companies top executives, including those of Facebook CEO and founder Mark Zuckerberg, who stated: “Reports about government surveillance have shown there is a real need for greater disclosure and new limits on how governments collect information. The US government should take this opportunity to lead this reform effort and make things right.”

Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo, stated: “Protecting the privacy of our users is incredibly important to Yahoo. Recent revelations about government surveillance activities have shaken the trust of our users, and it is time for the United States government to act to restore the confidence of citizens around the world. Today we join our colleagues in the tech industry calling on the United States Congress to change surveillance laws in order to ensure transparency and accountability for government actions.”

Sebastian Anthony, a British-based writer for the [Extreme Tech website](#), observed that the eight tech companies were asking that a legal framework be established to control government surveillance. He noted that, currently, “governmental surveillance operates in secret and without adequate oversight, allowing for gross overreach by the intelligence community.”

Anthony credited “whistleblowers like Edward Snowden” for exposing how far government surveillance has gone, noting that without such exposure “we’d all still be in the dark.”

A [Washington Post](#) writer called the Reform Government Surveillance an “uncommonly unified front” in that companies that “compete fiercely on business matters” have cooperated in opposing unchecked government surveillance. This cooperation, noted the *Post*, “underscored the deep alarm among technology leaders over revelations that the National Security Agency has collected user data far more extensively than the companies understood, in many cases with little or no court oversight.”

Whistleblower Edward Snowden, a former infrastructure analyst for the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton at an NSA facility in Hawaii, initiated his whistleblowing activities by making contact with Glenn Greenwald of the British newspaper *The Guardian* in late 2012. Snowden communicated to Greenwald using encrypted e-mail to send his information exposing the NSA’s secret surveillance programs. In May 2013, Snowden left Hawaii for Hong Kong, where he remained while *The Guardian*



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published his information. The newspaper made his identity known in June 2013, at his request.

After the U.S. government attempted to prosecute him, Snowden went to Moscow last June and, after staying in the transit section of the airport for more than a month, was granted temporary asylum in Russia for one year.

In an open letter published on November 3 by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Snowden accused the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) and its British counterpart (GCHQ) of being among the “worst offenders” engaged in uncontrolled mass surveillance.

Related articles:

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