

Facebook releases report on requests from governments for information on users

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30 August 2013

Facebook, the world's most visited social media site, released a report on August 27 on the number of requests for information from government agencies throughout the world during the first half of 2013. According to its "Global Government Requests Report," government agencies internationally demanded information on over 38,000 separate Facebook users.

Between 20,000 and 21,000 requests on separate users originated with US agencies—Facebook claims the government will not permit it to specify the number. India was next with 4,144, followed by the United Kingdom with 2,337, Italy with 2,306 and Germany with 2,068. In contrast, Russia, which the US government routinely castigates for police state measures, made only one request.

Facebook says it complied with 79 percent of US government requests. It declined to break down the number of US requests between inquiries on criminal investigations versus national security inquiries, again claiming the US government will not permit disclosure of such specifics.

Facebook, like Twitter, has been used to organize anti-government movements in countries such as Egypt and Turkey. Although Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called social media "the worst menace to society," Facebook's report says it complied with 47 percent of the 96 requests the Turkish government made for information on 170 account holders. This is representative of Facebook's practices.

Facebook, like other giant Internet companies, is keenly aware that government spying on Internet postings, email, texting and phone calls is opposed by a high percentage of the population. Colin Stretch, Facebook's General Counsel, asserted in a posting accompanying the report, "We want to make sure that

the people who use our service understand the nature and extent of the requests we receive and the strict policies and processes we have in place to handle them."

The Facebook report directs readers to <https://www.facebook.com/safety/groups/law/guidelines> to view what the report calls "stringent processes in place to handle all government data requests," which "requires governments to meet a very high legal bar with each individual request in order to receive any information about any of our users."

But that link in fact provides only the vaguest of standards for handling such requests. Subscriber information such as name and length of service are routinely provided in criminal cases, but also IP addresses, actual conduct and other unspecified information in other unspecified situations.

Facebook's guidelines say that it provides only name and service length in response to "national security letters," which are demands for information sent by agencies without court review. But its report does not state that the US figures take into account collection of communications under the FISA Amendments Act, which allows the National Security Agency (NSA) to target non-US persons without an individual warrant, and gags companies from disclosing even basic information about such cases.

Based on documents provided by Edward Snowden, the Guardian newspaper in June revealed that the NSA sweeps up communications between such persons and those in the US via the agency's Prism collection program. Documents provided by Snowden show that the NSA has considered Facebook as a corporate partner in this program since June 2009.

Apart from failing to include requests under Prism from the NSA's Special Source Operations division,

which oversees all programs that target US telecommunications via such corporate partnerships, Facebook's report also assuredly does not reveal requests made under other NSA programs. Nor, by definition, does it deal with situations where NSA personnel access information without individualized requests for information to Facebook.

In response to the Facebook report Privacy International, a British privacy group, emphasized that the report only details data requests made through what it called "lawful" channels: "We are now aware of a terrifying reality—that governments don't necessarily need intermediaries like Facebook, Google, and Microsoft to get our data. They can intercept it over undersea cables, through secret court orders, and through intelligence sharing."

Snowden's revelations have underscored the extent to which the government has received the active assistance of giant companies that control much of the Internet and telecommunications systems, such as Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, Google, Yahoo!, AOL, Verizon, AT&T and others, to tap into the Internet backbone, and collect the online communications and phone and Internet records of hundreds of millions of people.

Despite the protestations of Facebook and these other companies that they value and protect the privacy of their customers, these companies are part of a state-intelligence-corporate nexus that has been engaged in the systematic and illegal violation of the democratic rights of the population of the United States and the world. In the final analysis, this massive spying is aimed at preventing any challenge to the rule of a narrow corporate and financial oligarchy.



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