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Exclusive: Widespread cell phone location snooping by NSA?

Posted by Chris Soghoian

6 comments



If you thought that the National Security Agency's warrantless wiretapping was limited to AT&T, Verizon and Sprint, think again.

While these household names of the telecom industry almost certainly helped the government to illegally snoop on their customers, statements by a number of legal experts suggest that collaboration with the NSA may run far deeper into the wireless phone industry. With over 3,000 wireless companies operating in the United States, the majority of industry-aided snooping likely occurs under the radar, with the dirty-work being handled by companies that most consumers have never heard of.

A recent article in the *London Review of Books* revealed that a number of private companies now sell off-the-shelf data-mining solutions to government spies interested in analyzing mobile-phone calling records and real-time location information. These companies include ThorpeGlen, VASTech, Kommlabs, and Aqsacom—all of which sell "passive probing" data-mining services to governments around the world.

ThorpeGlen, a U.K.-based firm, offers intelligence analysts a graphical interface to the company's mobile-phone location and call-record data-mining software. Want to determine a suspect's "community of interest"? Easy. Want to learn if a single person is swapping SIM cards or throwing away phones (yet still hanging out in the same physical location)? No problem.

In a Web demo (PDF) (mirrored here) to potential customers back in May, ThorpeGlen's vice president of global sales showed off the company's tools by mining a dataset of a single week's worth of call data from 50 million users in Indonesia, which it has crunched in order to try and discover small anti-social groups that only call each other.

How we can identify targets

Profiling on Telecommunications identifiers

Internet account & login
+Account: abu_bakar
+Password: ab430456

Multiple Sims

Location

Multiple Handphones

PSTN phone

georgeb@gmail.com
ali@hotmail.com
baddy@yahoo.com

IP address
MAC address
Metadatas

We can track a specific target through ALL his electronic communications - if the data is available from the Operators. We can

- detect change of SIM and change of handset after identifying 1 suspect Number
- We can even detect that profile again even if the phone AND SIM are changed - (Call fingerprinting)

Slide from "Identification of Nomadic Targets" ISS Webinar (Credit: ThorpeGlen)

Clearly, this is creepy, yet highly lucrative, stuff. The fact that human-rights abusing governments in the Middle East and Asia have deployed these technologies is not particularly surprising. However, what about our own human-rights-abusing government here in the U.S.? Could it be using the same data-mining tools?

To get a few answers, I turned to Albert Gidari, a lawyer and partner at Perkins Coie in Seattle who frequently represents the wireless industry in issues related to location information and data privacy.

When asked if there is a market for these kinds of surveillance data-mining tools in the U.S., Gidari told me: "Of course. It is a global market and these companies have partners in the U.S. or competitors."

The question is not if the government would like to use these tools--after all, what spy wouldn't want to have point-and-click real-time access to the location information on millions of Americans? The real mystery is how the heck the National Security Agency can legally get access to such large datasets of real-time location information and calling records. The answer to that, Gidari said, is the thousands of other, lesser-known companies in the wireless phone and communications industry.

The massive collection of customer data comes down to the interplay of two specific issues: First, thousands of companies play small, niche support roles in the wireless phone industry, and as such these firms learn quite a bit about the calling habits of millions of U.S. citizens. Second, the laws relating to information sharing and wiretapping specifically regulate companies that provide services to the general public (such as AT&T and Verizon), but they do not cover the firms that provide services to the major carriers or connect communications companies to one other.

Thus, while it may be impossible for the NSA to legally obtain large-scale, real-time customer location information from Verizon, the spooks at Fort Meade can simply go to the company that owns and operates the wireless towers that Verizon uses for its network and get accurate information on anyone using those towers--or go to other entities connecting the wireless network to the landline network. The wiretapping laws, at least in this situation, simply don't apply.

Gidari explained it as follows:

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About Surveillance State

full viewing access to data to key infrastructure components and processing. A single communication is handled by many more parties than the named provider today. Moreover, interoperability protocols include network

Christopher Soghoian, a graduate student in the school of Informatics at Indiana University, delves into the areas of security, privacy and e-crime. He is a member of the CNET Blog Network. His homepage is www.dubfire.net/chris and his research group is available at www.stop-phishing.com. He is a member of the CNET Blog Network and is not an employee of CNET. [Disclosure](#).

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