

Globe Talk: Money power vs. the NSA

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Outraged that some telecom companies are selling out their customers to the government? Then vote with your wallet, or so argues one activist group. But the seemingly good idea may be rather difficult to follow through.

BuyBlue.org, a California-based Democratic advocacy group that encourages people to buy from businesses that support workers' rights, environmental standards and corporate transparency, pointed out to its proponents that keeping accounts with AT&T, BellSouth and Verizon would be ill-advised if subscribers are concerned about maintaining their privacy from the government.

While AT&T, BellSouth and Verizon have all denied reports that they have abided by the National Security Agency's request to provide calling data of millions of subscribers, many still believe that all three have gone out of their way to work together with the government, rather than protect their clients' interests.

In fact, of the four major U.S. carriers, only Qwest reportedly flatly refused to comply with the NSA's request and refused to hand over the information. Still, changing telephone carriers is not as easy as switching from Coca-Cola to Pepsi, as phone users simply may not have much choice when it comes to avoiding carriers that have allegedly cooperated with the NSA.

For instance, Qwest only serves those in a 14-state region from Arizona north to Wyoming and east to Minnesota. So those on the east and west

coasts cannot subscribe to the carrier even if they wanted to.

"As a practical matter, we recognize that these companies don't provide service everywhere," Martha Ture, research director at BuyBlue.org, told United Press International.

Another real problem for phone users is that changing carriers means changing phone numbers, which can be a serious inconvenience. Those two reasons alone may explain why despite all the media attention being paid to the NSA's dealings with the private carriers, Qwest is not reporting any significant increase in subscribers, nor is there seemingly a sharp decline in clients by AT&T, BellSouth and Verizon.

Still, the negative publicity against AT&T in particular may well increase. After all, non-profit group Electronic Frontier Foundation had filed a class-action lawsuit as early as January this year against the nation's biggest carrier for allegedly "violating the law and the privacy of its customers by collaborating with the National Security Agency in its massive and illegal program to wiretap and data-mine Americans' communications."

The lawsuit accuses AT&T of giving the NSA direct access to its facilities and databases without a warrant, including its so-called Daytona database, which is one of the largest databases in the world. As such, the EFF filed papers with the court on March 31 and April 5 to get the carrier to stop disclosing contents of its customers' communications to the U.S. government.

Meanwhile, there are growing concerns that other companies in other sectors may be pressured to comply with NSA demands, too. After all, Internet giants Google, Yahoo! and MSN among others were approached by the U.S. government to provide e-mail registration information and content in its quest to crack down on child pornography. But while all

companies flatly refused to cooperate in the name of protecting their users' privacy, Yahoo! in particular has subsequently gone out of its way to provide information to Chinese authorities that have led to the arrests of dissidents.

As a result, many consumer-rights advocates are concerned that Internet companies -- as well as other companies rich with individuals' data such as online retailers -- may eventually bend to government pressure to provide data.

At the same time, BuyBlue's Ture recognized that it would be impractical if consumers were to try to avoid all companies that had some controversy.

"Life is messy. We don't approve of the hypocrisy (of the Internet companies cooperating with the Chinese government), but very, very few companies have a record that's 100 percent consistent," she said.

There may well be few choices but to protest loudly against the companies and hope they will think twice before providing client information, but boycotting offending corporations may not be a pragmatic solution.

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