

Scientist urges new look at government 'Web-tapping'

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The technology of government surveillance has changed dramatically, and the rules governing surveillance should be changed accordingly. Chris Bronk, a fellow in technology, society and public policy at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, makes that argument in a paper published in *First Monday*, a free, openly accessible, peer-reviewed journal devoted to the Internet.

The article, "Web-tapping: Securing the Internet to Save Us From Transnational Terror?," appears in the November issue, <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/issue/view/271>.

The concept of wiretapping is obsolete, Bronk said, because Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) allows two-way voice communications over the Internet. "Effective wiretapping," Bronk wrote in the article, "is Web-tapping, listening to (and reading and watching) everything transmitted in digital form."

Bronk traced the evolution of eavesdropping from attaching a listening device to a telephone wire to computer-enabled listening to efforts to monitor the latest Internet communications. Technological progress, according to Bronk, often leaves government snoops playing catch-up.

"For an intelligence establishment created to pull back the veil and peer inside the Iron Curtain when human spy networks were rolled up with surprising ease by Soviet counterintelligence forces, the new tasking is to

watch, read and listen for cues emanating from al-Qaida and its regional franchises, largely on the Internet," he said.

In addition to tracking potential threats, Bronk noted, U.S. officials are also charged with defending cyberspace from infiltration. "If scanning the digital communications of the world's telecommunications grid for actionable intelligence information isn't enough work for any government agency, then protecting that telecommunications grid along with every important piece of national infrastructure connected to it fills the plate considerably," Bronk wrote. He advocates an update of that aspect of communications law as well.

The U.S. government has been debating how best to protect its interests in cyberspace for more than a decade, Bronk wrote. Much of that debate remains classified, but Bronk described the challenge as "establishing firm boundaries for the cyberinitiative, a secret mandate that ostensibly covers potentially immense quantities of unclassified data." Bronk questioned whether it covers all government networks. "What about those of contractors or subcontractors? How about those of the companies who create computer hardware and software purchased off-the-shelf by government agencies?"

Bronk said the current debate on government surveillance is "bogged down in descriptive terminology from another time, nearly a century old." Regardless of what direction any new legal framework takes, clear, openly stated policies adapted to the latest technology are needed, Bronk said. "With skepticism of government in the United States clearly part of the political terrain, the wiretapping/information-security issue requires greater scrutiny, albeit in a manner that does not compromise the all-important sources and methods of intelligence collection or cyberdefense," he wrote.

Source: Rice University

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