Google asks US secret court to lift gag order (Update)

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In this April 12, 2012 file photo, Google workers ride bikes outside of Google headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. Google on Tuesday, June 18, 2013, sharply challenged the federal government's gag order on its Internet surveillance program, citing what it described as a First Amendment right to divulge how many requests it receives from the government for data about its customers in the name of national security. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma, File)

Google on Tuesday sharply challenged the U.S. government's gag order on its Internet surveillance program, citing what it described as a constitutional free speech right to divulge how many requests it receives

from the government for data about its customers in the name of national security.

The move came in a legal motion filed in the secretive Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court and is aimed at mending Google's reputation after it was identified this month as one of nine U.S. Internet companies that gave the National Security Agency access to data on its customers.

Revelations about the program, known as PRISM, by a former NSA contractor has opened a debate about the privacy of American's communications.

The publication of such data requests by the government would answer questions about the number of Google users or accounts affected by U.S. intelligence activities. But it wouldn't answer more critical questions on how much data is being disclosed, including whether information belonging to Americans has been swept up into investigations on a foreign targets.

"Google's reputation and business has been harmed by the false or misleading reports in the media, and Google's users are concerned by the allegations," the company's motion says. "Google must respond to such claims with more than generalities."

Google has previously disclosed the number of data requests it receives from civilian law enforcement.

A company statement Tuesday said that "lumping national security requests together with criminal requests—as some companies have been permitted to do—would be a backward step for our users."

Alex Abdo, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, said all

the technology companies should be allowed to release as many details as possible, and that the government should divulge its legal justification of the surveillance program.

"The public has a right to know more about the government's sweeping surveillance programs so that it can judge for itself whether they are necessary and legal," Abdo said in a statement.

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