Coalition seeks release of surveillance data

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A poster protests surveillance programs at a demonstration at the US consulate in Hamburg, Germany, on July 11, 2013. A coalition of Internet firms and activist organizations asked the US government Thursday to issue "transparency reports" on its data collection programs which have sparked an outcry.

A coalition of Internet firms and activist organizations asked the US government Thursday to issue "transparency reports" on its online and phone data collection programs which have sparked an outcry.

"Democracy requires accountability and accountability requires transparency," said Kevin Bankston at the Center for Democracy and

Technology, a digital rights group leading the effort.

"Yet the American people lack basic information about the scope of the government's surveillance of the Internet, information that many companies would eagerly share with their users if only they weren't gagged by the government."

Revelations last month about the so-called PRISM programs, which scoop up massive amounts of Internet and phone records to help thwart terrorist attacks, sparked a spate of protests and lawsuits claiming a violation of privacy and constitutional rights.

The groups released an open letter Thursday backed by major companies like Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Twitter and dozens of other companies and organizations. It was sent to President Barack Obama, his head of national intelligence and key members of Congress.

Also endorsing the effort were venture capital firms investing in the tech sector, including Union Square Ventures and Y Combinator; non-profits like the Reporters Committee for Freedom of The Press and the Wikimedia Foundation; and trade groups including the Computer & Communications Industry Association.

The letter asked the US government to "ensure that those companies who are entrusted with the privacy and security of their users' data are allowed to regularly report statistics" on the number of government requests under these programs.

It also called on the administration to issue its own regular "transparency report" providing the same information.

"This information about how and how often the government is using these legal authorities is important to the American people, who are

entitled to have an informed public debate about the appropriateness of those authorities and their use, and to international users of US-based service providers who are concerned about the privacy and security of their communications," the letter said.

Earlier this week, 19 US organizations filed suit against the National Security Agency claiming their constitutional rights were violated by its secret data collection programs.

The suit filed in California federal court alleges that the mass collection of phone records under the so-called PRISM program violates Americans' constitutional rights.

Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and other top Internet and technology companies have come under heightened scrutiny since word leaked of the vast, covert Internet surveillance program US authorities insist targets only foreign terror suspects and has helped thwart attacks.

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