NSA revelations reframe digital life for some

July 22 2013, by Oskar Garcia

In this Thursday, July 18, 2013, photo, information technology professional Josh Scott looks up at a visual he uses while hosting a monthly "Cryptoparty" in Dallas. Across the Internet, users are talking about changes small and large, from using more encryption and stronger passwords to much more extreme measures such as ditching cellphones and using cash over credit cards. The conversations play out daily on Reddit, Twitter and other networks, and have spread to offline life with so-called "Cryptoparty" gatherings in cities including Dallas, Atlanta and Oakland, Calif. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

In Louisiana, the wife of a former soldier is scaling back on Facebook posts and considering unfriending old acquaintances, worried an

innocuous joke or long-lost associate might one day land her in a government probe. In California, a college student encrypts chats and emails, saying he's not planning anything sinister but shouldn't have to sweat snoopers. And in Canada, a lawyer is rethinking the data products he uses to ensure his clients' privacy.

As the attorney, Chris Bushong, put it: "Who wants to feel like they're being watched?"

News of the U.S. government's secret surveillance programs that targeted phone records but also information transmitted on the Internet has done more than spark a debate about privacy. Some are reviewing and changing their online habits as they reconsider some basic questions about today's interconnected world. Among them: How much should I share and how should I share it?

Some say they want to take preventative measures in case such programs are expanded. Others are looking to send a message—not just to the U.S. government but to the Internet companies that collect so much personal information.

"We all think that nobody's interested in us, we're all simple folk," said Doan Moran of Alexandria, Louisiana. "But you start looking at the numbers and the phone records ... it makes you really hesitate."

Last month former government contractor Edward Snowden leaked documents revealing that the National Security Agency, as part of its anti-terrorism efforts, had collected the phone records of millions of Americans. A second NSA program called PRISM forces major Internet firms to turn over the detailed contents of communications such as emails, video chats, pictures and more.

Moran's husband, an ex-Army man, already was guarded about using

social media. Now she is looking through her Facebook "friends" to consider whom to delete, because she can't know what someone in her network might do in the future. Moran said she's uneasy because she feels unclear about what the NSA is keeping and how deep the agency's interests might go.

In Toronto, attorney Bushong let a free trial of Google's business applications expire after learning about PRISM, under which the NSA seized data from Google, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook and AOL. Bushong is moving to San Diego in August to launch a tax planning firm and said he wants to be able to promise confidentiality and respond sufficiently should clients question his firm's data security. He switched to a Canadian Internet service provider for email and is considering installing his own document servers.

"I'd like to be able to say that I've taken all reasonable steps to ensure that they're not giving up any freedoms unnecessarily," he said.

Across the Internet, computer users are talking about changes small and large—from strengthening passwords and considering encryption to ditching cellphones and using cash over credit cards. The conversations play out daily on Reddit, Twitter and other networks, and have spread to offline life with so-called "Cryptoparty" gatherings in cities including Dallas, Atlanta and Oakland, California.

In this Thursday, July 18, 2013, photo, information technology professional Josh Scott speaks at a monthly "Cryptoparty" in Dallas. Across the Internet, users are talking about changes small and large, from using more encryption and stronger passwords to much more extreme measures such as ditching cellphones and using cash over credit cards. The conversations play out daily on Reddit, Twitter and other networks, and have spread to offline life with so-called "Cryptoparty" gatherings in cities including Dallas, Atlanta and Oakland, Calif. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

Information technology professional Josh Scott hosts a monthly Cryptoparty in Dallas to show people how to operate online more privately.

"You have to decide how extreme you want to be," Scott said.

Christopher Shoup, a college student from Victorville, California, has been encouraging friends to converse on Cryptocat, a private messaging

program that promises users they can chat "without revealing messages to a third party." Shoup isn't worried that his own behavior could draw scrutiny, but said the mere idea that the government could retrieve his personal communications "bothers me as an American."

"I don't think I should have to worry," he said.

Cryptocat said it nearly doubled its number of users in two days after Snowden revealed himself as the source of leaks about the NSA's programs. Two search engine companies billed as alternatives to Google, Bing and Yahoo are also reporting significant surges in use.

DuckDuckGo and Ixquick both promise they don't collect data from users or filter results based on previous history. DuckDuckGo went from 1.8 million searches per day to more than 3 million per day the week after the NSA revelations came to light. Ixquick and sister site Startpage have gone from 2.8 million searches per day to more than 4 million.

Gabriel Weinberg, chief executive of DuckDuckGo, said the NSA programs reminded people to consider privacy but that government snooping may the least of an everyday computer user's concerns. DuckDuckGo's website warns of the pitfalls of Internet search engines, including third-party advertisements built around a user's searches or the potential for a hacker or rogue employee to gain access to personal information.

Potential harm is "becoming more tangible over time," said Weinberg, who is posting fewer family photos, dropping a popular cloud service that stores files and checking his settings on devices at home to ensure they are as private as possible.

At Ixquick, more than 45,000 people have asked to be beta testers for a new email service featuring accounts that not even the company can get

into without user codes, spokeswoman Katherine Albrecht said. The company will levy a small charge for the accounts, betting that people are willing to pay for privacy. As computer users grow more savvy, they better understand that Internet companies build their businesses around data collection, Albrecht said.

"These companies are not search engines," she said. "They are brilliant market research companies. ... And you are the product."

Representatives for Google, Yahoo and PalTalk, companies named in a classified PowerPoint presentation leaked by Snowden, declined comment. Microsoft, Apple and AOL officials did not return messages. Previously, the companies issued statements emphasizing that they aren't voluntarily handing over user data to the government. They also rejected newspaper reports indicating that PRISM had opened a door for the agency to tap directly into companies' data centers whenever the government pleases.

"Press reports that suggest that Google is providing open-ended access to our users' data are false, period," Google CEO Larry Page said in a blog post.

It's not clear whether big Internet companies have seen changes in how their products are used. An analysis released this month by comScore Inc. said Google sites accounted for two-thirds of Internet searches in June—about 427 million queries per day.

In Tokyo, American expat Peng Zhong responded to the spying news by swapping everything from his default search engine and web browser to his computer's operating system. Zhong, an interface designer, then built a website to help others switch, too. Called prism-break.org, the site got more than 200,000 hits in less than a week after Zhong announced it on social networks.

Since then, Zhong said he's seen numerous people talking online about their own experiences in changing their computing habits.

"It's a start," he said.

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