US proving Internet-adept and inept at same time

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This Jan. 3, 2013, file photo shows a Google sign at the company's headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. When it comes to the Internet, the Obama administration appears simultaneously to be a bungling amateur and a stealthy wizard. The same federal government that apparently intercepted communications to and from Google and Yahoo data centers without leaving a trace is facing scorn because it can't put together a working website for health care. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)

When it comes to computers, the Obama administration appears

simultaneously to be an amateur and a wizard. The same government that reportedly intercepted the communications of leading U.S. consumer technology firms, Google and Yahoo, without leaving a trace is criticized because it can't build a working federal website for health insurance.

In a single day in Washington, the extremes were on full display.

Under a classified project called MUSCULAR, the National Security Agency has secretly broken into the main communications links that connect Google and Yahoo data centers around the world, The Washington Post reported Wednesday, citing documents obtained from former NSA systems analyst Edward Snowden. In the past 30 days, the NSA swept up and processed more than 180 million new records, including metadata indicating who sent and received emails and when it happened, the Post reported.

Across town, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius was apologizing to Congress over the troubled healthcare.gov website. New documents obtained by The Associated Press showed that officials had worried that a lack of website testing posed a potentially high security risk. A congressman told Sebelius that she had put Americans' personal financial information at risk.

The difference? National priorities, including big differences in how much the [government](#) spends, plus the talent and expertise of the people the government hires.

The NSA's annual budget was just over $7 billion in fiscal 2013, according to budget documents leaked by Snowden. The budget for the entire Health and Human Services Department was less than $1 trillion, and it spent $118 million on the website plus about $56 million on other IT to support the website, Sebelius said Wednesday.

In these October 2013 photos, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, left, and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius testify at separate hearings on Capitol Hill in Washington. When it comes to the Internet, the Obama administration appears simultaneously to be a bungling amateur and a stealthy wizard. The same federal government that apparently intercepted communications to and from Google and Yahoo data centers without leaving a trace is facing scorn because it can't put together a working website for health care. (AP Photo)

The NSA is famous for employing small focused teams of highly talented, highly recruited experts with special skills, said Chris Wysopal, a former hacker who is chief technology officer for Veracode. But the Health and Human Services Department's website designers? "They are sort of your average developers," he said.

Ex-hacker Marc Maiffret, the chief technology officer at BeyondTrust, said Washington contractors who work on civilian technology projects usually are over-budget and under-performing. Teams putting together large IT systems are complex and must coordinate across different

government agencies, insurance companies, states and contractors.

"They may have underestimated the complexity when they started on it, which is again not surprising," said Purdue University computer science professor Gene Spafford.

Motivation is important, too. Patriotic hacking on behalf of the NSA is exciting, especially among the mostly young and mostly male demographic.

"Breaking in, it feels like special ops," Wysopal said. "Building something feels probably like you're in the Corps of Engineers. You're just moving a lot of dirt around."

It's also widely understood to be easier to break something down than to build it. Siphoning the Google and Yahoo data is simpler to do than building a secure website for millions of people to get health care, Wysopal and Maiffret said.

Besides, if the NSA had failed to collect all the data it wanted during a classified mission, few people would learn about it—unlike what happened almost immediately when the health care [website](#) was launched and immediately experienced problems, said Matt Green, a computer science professor at Johns Hopkins University.

"If the NSA doesn't do something, you and I don't hear about it," Green said.

The government generally spends more money researching how to attack, not defend, computers, said Spafford, director of the Center for Education and Research in Information Assurance and Security at Purdue.

The apparent contradiction between health care and the NSA, Spafford said, "is what makes computers magical."

 More information: Center for Education and Research in Information Assurance and Security: www.cerias.purdue.edu/site/about