

Governments mining Google for more personal data (Update)

November 14 2013, by Michael Liedtke



In this Wednesday, May 15, 2013, file photo, Larry Page, Google's co-founder and chief executive, speaks during the keynote presentation at Google I/O 2013 in San Francisco. Google is becoming less likely to comply with government demands for its users' online communications and other activities as authorities in the U.S. and other countries get more aggressive about mining the Internet for personal data. The latest snapshot of the intensifying focus on Google as a government surveillance tool emerged Thursday, Nov. 14, 2013, in a report that the company has released stating that in the first half of 2013 Google Inc. received 25,879 legal requests for people's data from governments throughout the world. (AP Photo/Jeff Chiu, File)

Google is rebuffing governments more frequently as authorities in the U.S. and other countries get more aggressive about mining the Internet for information about people's online activities.

The latest snapshot emerged Thursday in a report that the company has released every six months for the past three years. Several other companies, including Microsoft Corp., Apple Inc., Facebook Inc. and Yahoo Inc., have since followed Google's practice of disclosing government requests for personal data, which cover such things as email communications and the search queries made.

The breakdown for the first half of this year shows that Google Inc. received 25,879 legal requests for people's data from governments around the world. That represented a 21 percent increase from the six months before that. It's also more than twice the number of government requests that Google was fielding at the end of 2009.

U.S. authorities accounted for 10,918 of the requests during the first half of the year, more than anywhere else. They came from federal authorities as well as police departments around the country. The number has nearly tripled since the end of 2009.

"And these numbers only include the requests we're allowed to publish," wrote Richard Salgado, Google's legal director of law enforcement and information security.

The report didn't provide specifics about the number of orders that Google has been receiving through a confidential U.S. court set up under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to fight terrorism.

Google, Microsoft, Facebook and Yahoo all are suing for the right to share more detailed information about the FISA demands made by the National Security Agency and the FBI. The technology companies

believe that more forthrightness will ease privacy concerns raised by NSA documents that depicted them as willing participants in a U.S. spying program dubbed PRISM.

The Obama administration is opposing the transparency-seeking lawsuits, maintaining that more detailed disclosures would make it more difficult to sniff out terrorist plots.

Thursday's report also didn't mention the clandestine ways that the NSA may be grabbing personal data without asking permission. Citing documents provided by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, The Washington Post last month revealed that the agency has been hacking into communications lines connecting the data centers of Google and Yahoo to intercept information about what people do and say online.

Governments zero in on Google because its services have become staples of our digital-driven lives. Besides running the Internet's most dominant search engine, Google owns the popular video site YouTube, operates blogging and email services and distributes Android, the top operating system on mobile phones. Google says its social network, Plus, now has 540 million active users.

Google's latest disclosures show that the Mountain View, California, company is rejecting a higher percentage of government demands than it was when it began releasing the figures three years ago. That trend reflects Google's belief that the governments frequently don't have a legal justification for obtaining the requested information.

In the first half of this year, Google provided some of the information sought in 83 percent of the government requests in the U.S. During the same period in 2010, the compliance rate was 93 percent.

Worldwide compliance rates were lower, but showed a similar

downward trend.

After the U.S., the governments peppering Google with the most requests were in India (2,691), Germany (2,311) and France (2,011).

Google's latest report "illustrates the government's steadily growing appetite for more data from more users," said Leslie Harris, president of the Center for Democracy & Technology, a civil rights group.

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