Canada privacy czar warns against spies trawling social media

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A view of the Facebook homepage on May 6, 2012

Canada's interim privacy commissioner on Tuesday urged lawmakers to crack down on government spies who trawl without cause on social media websites to gather people's personal data.

"It is our view that (government) departments should not access personal information on social media sites unless they can demonstrate a direct

correlation to legitimate government business," said Interim Privacy Commissioner Chantal Bernier.

In a special report to Parliament, Bernier noted that technical capabilities for surveillance have "grown exponentially" in the digital age.

Canadians meanwhile are posting an unprecedented amount of personal information online, for example, on social media website Facebook.

Bernier warned that this "has the potential to become the predominant collection channel" of spy agencies.

She said information often is posted online with an expectation of privacy.

"The public availability of personal information on the Internet does not render personal information non-personal," she said.

The report calls for the development of guidelines for the collection, use and dissemination of intelligence from online sources and social network sites.

It also urges increased oversight of the spy agency Canadian Security Intelligence Service and electronics eavesdropping agency Communications Security Establishment Canada.

It also called for Canada's Privacy Act, which has remained essentially unrevised since 1983, to be modernized.

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