

Report: UK spies intercept webcam pics, nudity

February 27 2014, by Raphael Satter

(AP)—Britain's signals intelligence division is stealing screenshots from hundreds of thousands of innocent Yahoo users' webcam videos, according to the Guardian newspaper, which also reported that the years-long operation has swept up a huge haul of intimate photographs.

The newspaper said GCHQ has been scooping up the sensitive images by intercepting video chats such as the kind offered by Yahoo Messenger, an effort codenamed OPTIC NERVE. It's not clear how many Yahoo users were spied on in this way. The Guardian said that in one six-month period in 2008 GCHQ intercepted the video communications of 1.8 million users, but it's possible that the program, which the Guardian says was still active in 2012, has either grown or shrunk in scope since then.

The Guardian said the documents were provided by former U.S. intelligence worker Edward Snowden, who remains in Russia after having sought temporary asylum there.

Yahoo Messenger has 75 million users worldwide, according to a recent estimate by digital analytics company comScore.

If confirmed, the Guardian's report would represent "a whole new level of violation of our users' privacy," Yahoo Inc. said in a written statement. The Sunnyvale, California-based company said it was unaware of such snooping and would never condone it, calling on governments across the world to reform their surveillance practices.

Like the NSA's collection of millions of innocent people's phone, email, and credit card data, the webcam surveillance program was carried out in bulk, creating a massive database where the communications of hundreds of thousands of people could later be scanned by analysts for clues or patterns.

However, unlike the phone database, OPTIC NERVE also automatically downloaded the content of video communications—taking a screenshot from the video feed every five minutes, the Guardian said. One snippet of a leaked document published to the Guardian's website appears to show that GCHQ hoped to eventually "collect images at a faster rate," or perhaps even download all the webcam videos in their entirety.

Even at one screenshot every five minutes, material published to the Guardian's website appeared to show U.K. analysts being deluged with X-rated footage.

"It would appear that a surprising number of people use webcam conversations to show intimate parts of their body to the other person," another snippet of an intelligence document published said. It went on to say that an informal study had found that between 3 and 11 percent of all the images carried "undesirable nudity."

The Guardian said that OPTIC NERVE was intended at least in part to identify targets using automatic facial recognition software as they stared into their computer's webcams. But the stockpiling of sexually explicit images of ordinary people had uncomfortable echoes of George Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four," where the authorities—operating under the aegis of "Big Brother"—fit homes with cameras to monitor the intimate details of people's home lives.

"At least Big Brother had the decency to install his own cameras," British media lawyer David Banksy said in a message posted to Twitter after the

revelations broke. "We've had to buy them ourselves."

The collection of nude photographs also raise questions about potential for blackmail. America's National Security Agency has already acknowledged that half a dozen analysts have been caught trawling databases for inappropriate material on partners or love interests. Other leaked documents have revealed how U.S. and British intelligence discussed leaking embarrassing material online to blacken the reputations of their targets.

GCHQ refused to answer a series of questions about OTPIC NERVE, instead returning the same boilerplate answer it has given to reporters for months.

"It is a longstanding policy that we do not comment on intelligence matters," the agency said, insisting all its work was legal, necessary, proportionate, and subject to rigorous oversight.

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Report: UK spies intercept webcam pics, nudity (2014, February 27) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-02-uk-spies-intercept-webcam-pics.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--