

Obama reassures Internet CEOs on tech privacy

March 22 2014, by Josh Lederman



This Feb. 24, 2014 file photo shows Facebook Chairman and CEO Mark Zuckerberg during a conference in Barcelona, Spain. President Barack Obama is meeting with CEOs from leading Internet and technology companies to discuss their concerns about privacy and National Security Agency programs. The White House says Obama will host the leaders Friday in the Oval Office. The meeting comes two months after Obama gave a speech proposing changes to NSA spying programs following public and industry concern. Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings will join the meeting. So will Drew Houston of the file storage site Dropbox and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. (AP Photo/Manu Fernandez, File)

President Barack Obama sought Friday to assure leading Internet and tech executives that his administration is committed to protecting people's privacy, a week before a self-imposed deadline for a review of National Security Agency programs.

CEOs from Facebook, Google, Netflix and others spent more than two hours with Obama in the president's White House office discussing their concerns about NSA spying programs, which have drawn outrage from tech companies whose data have been scooped up by the government. Joining Obama and the CEOs were Obama's commerce secretary, homeland security adviser, and counselor John Podesta, whom Obama has tasked with leading a review of privacy and "big data."

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his colleagues departed the White House without speaking to reporters. The White House said Obama gave the CEOs an update on the big data review, which is examining the complex and evolving relationship between the government, its citizens and their private information.

"The president reiterated his administration's commitment to taking steps that can give people greater confidence that their rights are being protected while preserving important tools that keep us safe," the White House said in a statement.



This Sept. 26, 2013 file photo shows Google Chairman Eric Schmidt speaking in New York. President Barack Obama is meeting with CEOs from leading Internet and technology companies to discuss their concerns about privacy and National Security Agency programs. The White House says Obama will host the leaders Friday in the Oval Office. The meeting comes two months after Obama gave a speech proposing changes to NSA spying programs following public and industry concern. Google CEO Eric Schmidt and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings will join the meeting. So will Drew Houston of the file storage site Dropbox and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, File)

Separate from the big data review, Obama in January directed the government to develop and present alternatives for who should store the phone records from hundreds of millions of Americans that the NSA holds. Obama gave the Justice Department until March 28 to report back, with an eye toward eventually stripping the massive data collection from the government's hands.

That review and other limits on secret spying were prompted by disclosures from former NSA systems analyst Edward Snowden that enraged Internet companies like Google when it was alleged that the NSA had secretly tapped into the main communications links that connect Yahoo and Google data centers around the world.

In the lead-up to Friday's meeting, Zuckerberg took to his own Facebook page to strongly condemn Obama's administration for its secret spying tactics, following reports that the NSA had once used spoofs of the social network to infect computers with malware.

Facebook said Zuckerberg raised his concerns directly to Obama on Friday and was grateful for his personal engagement. In a statement, the company called it an "honest talk" about government intrusion and its toll on people's confidence that the Internet is free and open.

"While the U.S. government has taken helpful steps to reform its surveillance practices, these are simply not enough," said Facebook spokeswoman Jodi Seth.

Google recently enhanced the encryption technology for its flagship email service to make it harder for the NSA to intercept messages moving among the company's data centers. Yahoo has promised similar steps.

Representatives for Google and Netflix declined to comment on Friday's meeting. Also attending the session were Reed Hastings of Netflix and Drew Houston of the file storage site Dropbox.

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