

'Five Eyes' agencies demand reignites encryption debate

September 4 2018, by Rob Lever



Intelligence agencies from the United States and its allies have stepped up a call for better access to encrypted communications, prompting criticism from privacy and rights activists

Privacy and human rights organizations expressed concern Tuesday after

a coalition of intelligence agencies renewed a call for technology companies to allow so-called "backdoor" access to encrypted content and devices.

The reaction came following a weekend statement from the "Five Eyes" [intelligence agencies](#) calling on "industry partners" to provide a way for [law enforcement](#) to access encrypted content that may not be available even with a search warrant.

The call by the agencies from the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand threatens to reignite a long-simmering debate on [encryption](#).

"Many of the same means of encryption that are being used to protect personal, commercial and government information are also being used by criminals, including child sex offenders, terrorists and organized crime groups to frustrate investigations and avoid detection and prosecution," said the statement from the five countries issued by Australia's Department of Home Affairs.

Without voluntary cooperation, the agencies said, "we may pursue technological, enforcement, legislative or other measures to achieve lawful access solutions."

While some [law enforcement agencies](#) contend that encryption is being used to shield criminal activity, [tech firms](#) and privacy activists argue that any weakening of encryption would harm security for all users.

"The risk is that these countries will compel providers to build a backdoor that not only governments will exploit but hackers, criminals and other bad guys will use as well," said Greg Nojeim of the Washington-based Center for Democracy & Technology.

"It would weaken cybersecurity at the same time governments are preaching that cybersecurity needs to be addressed."

Marc Rotenberg, president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, called the latest effort "a short-sighted and counterproductive proposal" and added that "it has become clear that encryption is vital for both privacy and public safety."



Apple challenged a US government request in 2016 to weaken iPhone encryption, prompting a court showdown that rallied privacy activists

Similar concerns were voiced by Amnesty International, which said in a tweet, "This won't make us safer—it will just weaken security for everyone."

Debate on 'going dark'

Encryption has been a hot-button issue in the United States for years, and came to a head in 2016 when Apple challenged the FBI's request to create software that would enable investigators to access an iPhone used by an attacker in a 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino, California.

The US government eventually dropped its demand after finding another means to access the device, but a number of [law enforcement officials](#) have complained that they are "going dark" with the use of encrypted apps and devices that cannot be accessed by traditional wiretaps.

Nojeim said the claim of "going dark" is vastly exaggerated.

"There has never been more electronic information available to assist criminal and intelligence investigations," he said.

"We leave a digital footprint with virtually everything we do online and most of those footprints can be collected without the hindrance of encryption."

But James Lewis of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who supports better law enforcement access, said tech firms may face more pressure than in the past.

"It's part of the bigger public move to rein in the tech companies and make them more socially responsible," Lewis said.

"The old laissez-faire arguments are losing ground."

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