

Vodafone report sparks global surveillance debate (Update 4)

June 6 2014, by Peter Svensson



In this Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2009 file photo, people walk by a Vodafone branch in central London. Vodafone, one of the world's largest cellphone companies, on Friday, June 6, 2014 revealed the scope of government snooping into phone networks, saying authorities in some countries are able to directly access an operator's network without seeking permission. (AP Photo/Sang Tan, File)

Telecommunications company Vodafone's report on government surveillance of its customers in 29 countries reveals more than first meets the eye—and is raising questions from Dublin to Delhi about how

much spying on email and telephone chats happens in secret.

In Friday's report Vodafone said most countries required the company's knowledge and cooperation to hear phone calls or see emails, but at least six governments have given their security agencies the power of direct access.

Vodafone didn't identify the countries that have tapped into its network, but the report provided some clues. An 88-page appendix reveals that five countries—Albania, Egypt, Hungary, Ireland and Qatar—have provisions that allow authorities to demand unfettered access.

In vague language, the report also indicated similar powers could exist in India and the United Kingdom, too.

In too many cases, Vodafone said, governments kept both the company and wider society in the dark about what was happening, with laws explicitly forbidding government disclosure of any details of its electronic eavesdropping.

Ireland, a European hub for many social media and communications companies, refused to tell Vodafone anything about how its national police accessed its wireless and internet services. The Irish situation is muddied further by the fact that its laws on the subject date to 1983 and 1993, when mobile and email communication were still in their infancy.

The Irish government defends the need for electronic surveillance to combat Irish Republican Army factions and Ireland's criminal underworld. But Ireland's civil liberties watchdog accused the government of legal laziness over the past two decades of telecommunications innovation.

"Our interception laws were drafted in a pre-digital age and are plainly

no longer fit for purpose," said Mark Kelly, director of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties.

Kelly said he has asked the government to confirm whether it operates "direct access pipes into the networks of telecoms operators."

Other European countries are far more open. In Germany, for example, the government publishes annual statistics. In 2012, the most recent year of disclosure, Germany said it made 18,026 requests to phone companies to hear 23,687 calls.



In this Wednesday, April 9, 2008 file photo, Shami Chakrabarti, director of the human rights group Liberty, gives an address on the British government's counter-terror proposals in London. Vodafone, one of the world's largest cellphone companies, on Friday, June 6, 2014 revealed the scope of government snooping into phone networks, saying authorities in some countries are able to directly access an operator's network without seeking permission. Chakrabarti described

the findings as a worst-case scenario infringement into civil rights. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham, File)

Wiretapping of phones and accessing of call records for law-enforcement purposes is a decades-old and accepted practice even in the most open democracies. With backing from courts, police can request cooperation from phone companies to access communications.

But in developing countries such as Congo, Ghana and Lesotho, Vodafone said it cannot support wiretapping, because governments haven't requested the technology.

By publishing its report, and highlighting its efforts to seek explanations from governments, Vodafone is entering the international debate about balancing the rights of privacy against security. Rather than being stuck with responsibility and backlash when citizens realize their data has been scooped up without their permission, Vodafone is pushing for a debate.

"The government always argues that they have to weigh freedom and security, and security always overrides freedom," said Gautam Navlakha, an activist in India for the Delhi-based People's Union for Democratic Rights.

Navlakha said India's government tapped the lines of every phone company in the country and used the power to gain information in a society where "everything leaks."

Vodafone's report comes one year after former NSA systems analyst Edward Snowden revealed that U.S. and other countries' intelligence agencies indiscriminately gathered and stored data from phone calls and Internet communications.

Norway's Telenor Group, which operates across Eastern Europe and Asia, backed Vodafone's report, noting governments have the ultimate responsibility to act.

Several Silicon Valley companies have attempted to restore consumers' trust by publishing data on electronic spying and raising pressure on President Barack Obama to curb the U.S. government's Internet-based surveillance programs.

Twitter Inc., LinkedIn Corp., AOL Inc., Google Inc., Apple Inc., Yahoo Inc., Facebook Inc. and Microsoft Corp. are pushing for tighter controls over electronic espionage in hopes of protecting their industry's livelihood. The companies are also encrypting emails and other personal information transmitted across their services to make the data more difficult if it's intercepted by government spies.



People walk past a Vodafone shop in London, on Friday, June 6, 2014.

Vodafone, one of the world's largest cellphone companies, revealed the scope of government snooping into phone networks Friday, saying authorities in some countries are able to directly access an operator's network without seeking permission. The company outlined the details in a report that is described as the first of its kind, covering 29 countries in which it directly operates. It gives the most comprehensive look to date on how governments monitor the communications of their citizens. (AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis)

"Companies are recognizing they have a responsibility to disclose government access," said Daniel Castro, senior analyst for the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation in Washington. "This is new."

Vodafone's report is also seen as a response to the company's embarrassing role in the Egyptian protests that ousted Hosni Mubarak from power in 2011. As those protests raged, the government forced Vodafone to bombard its Egyptian subscribers with propaganda text messages. The company said it had no choice but to comply, but was severely criticized for its actions.

Cynthia Wong, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, said Vodafone experienced "a hard lesson" in Egypt. "Even if the government is the ultimate problem, they realized they needed to take steps to mitigate harm to their users," she said.

On the streets of Cairo, citizens interviewed Saturday said they assumed every Egyptian regime sought to spy on them, particularly Mubarak's successors.

"Mubarak underestimated social media and the youth," market researcher Iman Fouad, 26, said as he sipped a lunchtime coffee. He said many Egyptians assumed that security services monitored messages on

Facebook and Twitter.

"In Egypt and most of the Arab countries, where they have this obsession with security and knowing what everyone is up to, I can believe it. They are afraid of another revolution," Fouad said.

A 54-year-old engineer, Ahmed Tarshouby, said the best policy for any telephone user was to talk without fear.

"I talk as I want. I insult as I want," Tarshouby said as he sat on a sidewalk, smoking a shisha pipe. "I don't have any problem with them monitoring. I would say anything. I have no secrets."

More information: Vodafone report, bit.ly/1kFYNZS

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