

Privacy and Online Surveillance

Author: Ethan Davies

Student Number: 828633

Swansea University Department of Computer Science



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe

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Abstract

Research was conducted to answer the question of how much information we are sharing, and where is it going? The research was conclusive and it showed that there were surveillance programs being implemented by the U.S Government which allowed them to access a large amount of internet user's data without the people in question or the firms responsible for holding the data knowing so. Terms of service are also discussed where we delve into detail on the terms that we agree to on sign up of online services. A review into the amount of data that we are sharing online with social media websites and search engines with an analysis on the rights of Europeans and Non-Americans where we find that they were the intended target of U.S Government surveillance programs. We can see the extent of such surveillance programs such as NSA's PRISM scheme and the types of data that was collected. Fundamentally, it's shown that our data does not truly safe and it can be exploited without our consent or knowledge for that matter.

Privacy and Online Surveillance

In this report I will be looking at the attitudes of some major firms in regard to our online privacy and also looking at online surveillance, the main focus will be on the NSA and the PRISM scheme where it was revealed that the NSA had been collecting internet users data without consent and storing it, thus raising questions about privacy online (Greenwald, G & MacAskill, E. 2013).

Terms of Service

The terms of service agreements are more often than not written incredibly ambiguously with firms such as Twitter and Facebook being guilty of this. The Commons Science and Technology Select Committee have recently claimed that these firms terms and conditions are far too long and complex, they have even gone as far to say that reading these documents is like “engaging with Shakespeare” (Cellan-Jones, R. 2014).

Social Media

Recently Facebook has changed its terms and conditions policies stating that the firm has "listened to people who have asked us to better explain how we get and use information" (Cellan-Jones, R. 2014). The updated webpage where the new policies are held can be found here (<https://www.facebook.com/policies/>).

Even though some firms like Facebook are claiming to make their terms of service easier to comprehend there are still issues with the length of the documents and also the structure in which they are written which could be disconcerting for many users. This is a summary of one of Facebook's terms of service that has been highlighted in many reports and articles "On sign up you give the company royalty free license on your photos and videos, Facebook then has the right to give it to other firms for whatever use they want." (Lane, S. 2014).

These conditions can be viewed as quite alarming when you consider the possibility that there could be many more terms like this embedded in the agreement that you might not have read. Ultimately it is not the concept of sharing all our information on these social media websites or the terms of service that is the worrying part, it is the attitudes of the firms who recognize themselves the potential they have with the information that users give them. It was Mark Zuckerberg who said whilst talking at the Crunchie awards that "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people" (Johnson, B. 2010) and "That social norm is just something that has evolved over time." (Johnson, B. 2010). For me, the most worrying attitude is of the executive chairman of Google, Eric Schmidt who said "With your permission you give us more information about you, about your friends, and we can improve the quality of our searches. We don't need you to type at all. We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about." (Richmond, S. 2010). He was also quoted stating "Google policy is to get right up to the creepy line and not cross it." (Richmond, S. 2010). This emphasises not only the amount of information we are giving these firms but also the perceptions that these firms in

regard to our online privacy, when shown what is possible with the data that we share it raises the question, who really has control of our data?

Surveillance

We would all like to think that our privacy online will be forever undisturbed, but sadly this is not the case. One of the biggest recent revelations in the breach of internet user's privacy was the revelation of the NSA's PRISM scheme through a series of leaked documents. Before we continue I would like to share this extract "The momentum of technology is irresistible. The problem is that technology creates its own imperatives and will come to be used in whatever ways possible." (Barnhizer, D. 2013). For me, this is the outlook that should be adopted by more internet users, although the discovery of the breach in many internet users privacy is truly shocking, can we honestly say in unity that we didn't expect anything of the sort from leading governments?

NSA

Documents were leaked by whistleblower Edward Snowden to journalists of The Guardian newspaper (Edward Snowden. 2014, November 26). These documents were top secret and were the product of a NSA presentation on the mass collection of internet user's data from multiple internet giants. The original use for the scheme was to help combat terrorism in the U.S but it is hard to believe that a powerful tool like this is limited to a single use.

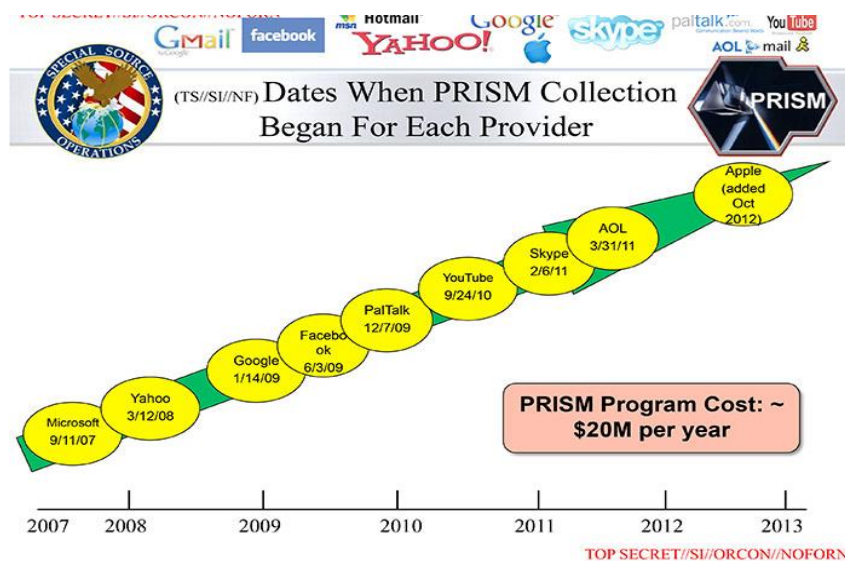


Figure 1. (Greenwald, G & MacAskill, E. (2013).

It is quite alarming the amount of data that was collected during this scheme, and even more astonishing despite its revelation and the fact that there is evidence of the scheme it has been renewed as of 2012 for a further 5 years under the Obama administration (Kelion, L 2013). For me, the most amazing part of this whole revelation was the amount of data that was being gathered by the scheme from all these internet giants, as users of many of the services listed in figure 1 I think it is fair to expect that the data we decide to share with them should be kept private and should not allowed to be accessed or gathered without our consent. Despite this there is a group called Freedom Watch which are a Florida based activist group are claiming that “PRISM violates the US constitution.” (Kelion, L 2013).

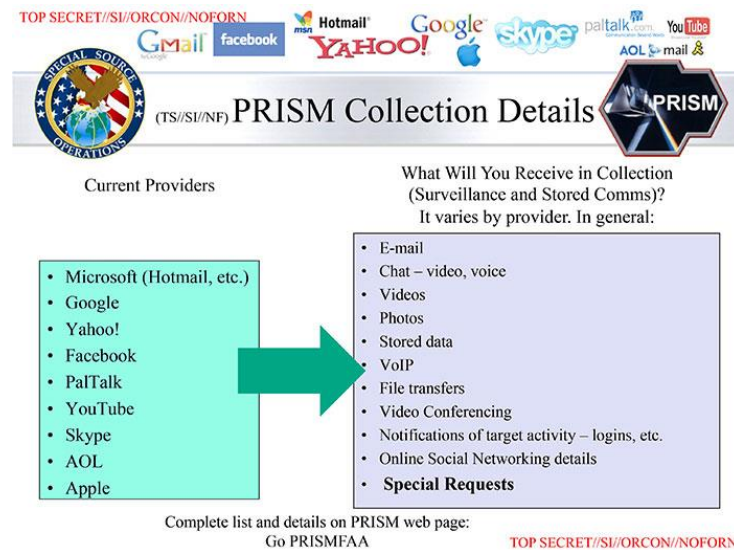


Figure 2. (Greenwald, G & MacAskill, E. (2013).

Whilst taking all this evidence into consideration, the question may be asked, what about users outside the U.S? In truth the rights of non-Americans have not been discussed in the U.S, it was only in a report published where the rights of non-Americans even discussed. “As noted earlier, one of the most extraordinary aspects of the PRISM affair is that not only have the rights of non-Americans not been discussed in the US, they were not even discussed by the European media until well after the story first broke. The rights of non-Americans were rarely raised, and a casual reader would not understand that the intended target of surveillance was non-Americans, and that they had no rights at all” (Bowden, C. 2013).

Conclusion

It is clear when we combine the attitudes of some firms with the notions of internet surveillance programs that we can never truly assume where our data is secure on the internet. As we seen with the terms of service our data can be manipulated and transferred anywhere but we trust these firms not take part in any misconduct regarding our information. The bottom line is that we share a large amount of information online and most of the time we are short sighted in sharing it, if we take into consideration what Eric Schmidt was quoted saying, the potential is there for firms like Google to know our every move with the amount of data we are allowing them to store on us when using their services. If we combine this prospect with the revelations of the NSA's PRISM scheme then the truth is that we are not in control of the data that we share online. The one thing that I would ask you take from this report if nothing else is that it should now be apparent that no data is truly safe online and the concepts of privacy are forever evolving in the age of the internet. The PRISM scheme is also still operational until 2017. The figures shown only represent from 2007 – 2013, there is still an extraordinary amount of information that we do not know about this scheme or what is happening with the data they have gathered.

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Mark Scheme (out of 30 marks total)

Note: to obtain each mark boundary, all the requirements for previous mark boundaries must also be met. For example, to receive 3 marks for spelling, you must meet all the criteria for 3 marks and not have spelling errors that a spell checker would find (a criteria for 2 marks)

<i>Spelling and grammar (5 marks)</i>		
Grade boundary	Description	Self-assessment
5	The document reads well throughout with none of the issues identified above ever appearing. The writing would not look out of place in an academic publication	X
3-4	The document does not contain spelling or grammatical mistakes but it is not easy to read. Sentence construction is awkward and/or there are comma splices, copy splices or poor phrases used	
0-2	The document is poorly written or contains spelling or grammatical mistakes that a spellchecker would find	

<i>Information Presentation (5 marks)</i>		
Grade boundary	Description	Self-assessment
5	The document consistently uses formatting appropriately. The document includes some graphical information produced by the student to help emphasise their point. Information is consistently presented in graphical form where appropriate	
3-4	The document generally makes use of formatting to clarify its information (bolded text, subtitles, italicised text, bulleted or numbered lists where appropriate) and presents information in forms besides text such as graphs, tables or images	X
0-2	The document makes no use of anything other than written text to present its information, formatting is inconsistent	

Grade boundary	Description	Self-assessment
6	The document backs up all claims that it makes with appropriate references, the document includes a large number of references (at least 8)	
4-5	A large number and wide range of sources including at least one book section and one academic paper are used appropriately in the document	X
2-3	The references includes at least one appropriate academic paper the content of which is discussed, the document includes a range of other types of sources, and the formatting of the reference section is appropriate and consistent	
0-1	The document includes a limited number of sources of low quality (e.g. 3 websites). The formatting of the reference section is inappropriate or inconsistent	

Structure of the document and completeness (12 marks)		
Grade boundary	Description	Self-assessment
11-12	The document includes many non-obvious insights into the topic being discussed that are clearly grounded in evidence. The student consistently makes the distinction between fact and opinion clear and does an exception job of making both clear	
9-10	The document explains the domain being presented clearly and great depth. The document includes a good amount of discussion and analysis coming in just below or at the word count. Some non-obvious insight is presented by the student.	X
7-8	The document clearly explains the domain being presented. The document includes a good amount of discussion and analysis coming in just below or at the word count. Some non-obvious insights are presented by the student. The student rarely confuses opinion and fact in their discussion. The student only frequently engages critically with their source	

5-6	The document includes a limited amount of discussion and analysis coming in below the word count. The document generally lacks insights into the problem area only regurgitating others' information or does not make the domain being explored clear. The student only engages critically with their source on an infrequent basis	
0-4	The document includes a limited to no discussion and analysis coming in well below the word count. The document presents little to no critical analysis. The writing sometimes confuses fact with opinion	