

The NSA Is Still Looking for a Way to Capture iMessages and FaceTime



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In its second official statement on the matter, Apple has clarified its relationship with the U.S. government claiming that at least FaceTime and iMessages are safe from the National Security Agency's prying eyes, due to super-encryption. "Conversations which take place over iMessage and FaceTime are protected by end-to-end encryption so no one but the sender and receiver can see or read them," says Apple. "Apple cannot decrypt that data." We've known that this very security has angered the NSA since before these latest leaks. In a 2011 testimony before Congress, the FBI's general counsel called this problem "going dark:"

[S]ome providers are currently obligated by law to have technical solutions in place prior to receiving a court order to intercept electronic communications, but do not maintain those solutions in a manner consistent with their legal mandate. Other providers have no such existing mandate and simply develop capabilities upon receipt of a court order. In our experience, some providers actively work with the government to develop intercept solutions, while others do not have the technical expertise or resources to do so. As a result, on a regular basis, the government is unable to obtain

communications and related data, even when authorized by a court to do so.

Even with a court order or warrant, the government can't get into Apple's iMessage, which it would very much like to do.

As of now, when the feds seize, say, the Verizon call records of an expected terrorist — with a warrant, of course — there are holes because of iMessage's encryption, according to an internal as reported by CNET's Declan McCullagh and Jennifer Van Grove in April:

They discovered that records of text messages already obtained from Verizon Wireless were incomplete because the target of the investigation used iMessage: "It became apparent that not all text messages were being captured."

Because of these techniques, a year earlier, the FBI asked tech companies to support amendments to a wiretapping bill that would allow the government to build "backdoors" for surveillance into websites. At one point way back in 2011, it had said that didn't mean ways to get around encryption. And in the latest proposal from May of this year the FBI had abandoned a requirement that would give the feds a key to unscramble these messages if presented with a court order, according to *The New York Times's* Charlie Savage.

Of course, just because Apple doesn't give up your FaceTime calls and iMessages doesn't mean much of your iPhone communications are safe. Any iMessages sent to a non-Apple phone user turn into a text message, which are very readable to the government. And, remember, any non-FaceTime phone calls made with any American carrier get sent in the form of very useful metadata to the NSA. Though, in a semi-comforting statement given to *The Wall Street Journal's* Siobhan Gorman and Julian E. Barnes, the NSA claims it doesn't record the "geolocation" part of that data. "Office of the Director of National Intelligence said the NSA program doesn't collect 'any cell phone locational information.'" Apple also claims it keeps Siri and Maps data safe from the government's prying eyes: "We do not store data related to customers' location."

We have to take that all of that face value, which is hard to do these days. Plus, there is all that G-mailing and Facebooking we do that supposedly the government can access through PRISM. Though, there are ways to encrypt Gmail and Facebook messages, that only goes so far if the recipient isn't also actively using third party encryption as well. But, for the most privacy concerned users out there FaceTime and iMessages are safe, assures Apple, at least for now.

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