

Yahoo Secretly Scanned Email Accounts for the Government



Summary: Yahoo allegedly scanned millions of its email accounts to provide information for the federal government.

In recent years, having a Yahoo email account was about as cool as having a Myspace. But after this week's bombshell that the company secretly scanned accounts for the U.S. government, Yahoo's cool factor is the least of its public relations problems.

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Reuters reported that last year Yahoo had complied with U.S. intelligence officials' demand for information. The internet company even created software to secretly scan hundreds of millions of Yahoo Mail accounts in search of certain key words. It was not disclosed what either the National Security Agency or the FBI was looking for.

The government had previously requested bulk data from phone and internet companies, but this case with Yahoo was the first time that information was seized in real-time. Albert Gidari, an attorney who has represented communications companies, likened the scanning to a "wiretap in real time."

Surveillance experts told Reuters that this was the first time that an U.S. internet company has agreed to the government's request to search all incoming messages, instead of scanning stored emails or a limited number of accounts.

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It is reported that troubled Yahoo Chief Executive Marissa Mayer's acquiescence to the government caused some senior management to exit out of protest. For instance, her decision apparently riled up Chief Information Security Officer Alex Stamos to depart in June 2015. Stamos moved to Facebook and heads security there.

Yahoo told Reuters that it was a "law abiding company," and later released a statement that the mail-scanning software is not currently used on company servers. They declined to comment further.

Reuters spoke with Google and Microsoft, who both said that they had not conducted Yahoo-like email searches.

"We've never received such a request, but if we did, our response would be simple: 'No way'," Google said in a statement.

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Microsoft expressed a similar statement. "We have never engaged in the secret scanning of email traffic like what has been reported today about Yahoo."

According to Reuters, Yahoo complied while others did not simply because the company did not believe that they could legally refuse the government's request. This sentiment alarmed Russell Brandom of The Verge who asked, "Was Yahoo's mass wiretap legal?"

The Verge said that, "For privacy groups, the answer is simple: the Fourth Amendment says you need a warrant, and you can't get a warrant for 300 million users at once." Without specific suspicions, the government's search of Yahoo emails was a "clear violation of the Fourth Amendment," experts said. However, groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union have not been able to prove their Fourth Amendment arguments against intelligence agencies in court because of alleged government blockage.

What do you think of Yahoo's scanning of emails? Let us know in the comments below.

Source: Reuters, The Verge