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Test 'reveals Facebook, Twitter and Google snoop on emails': Study of net giants spurs new privacy concerns

- Study set out to test confidentiality of 50 of the biggest Internet companies
- Researchers sent unique web address in private messages through firms
- They found six of the companies opened the link from the message

By [Martin Delgado](#)

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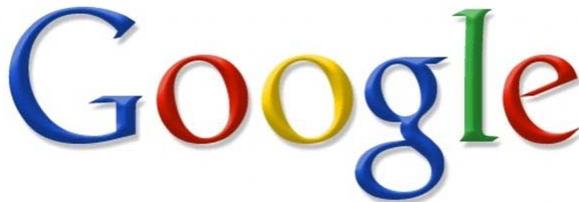
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More to worry about: NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, who has revealed how far the U.S. and UK governments spy on our emails

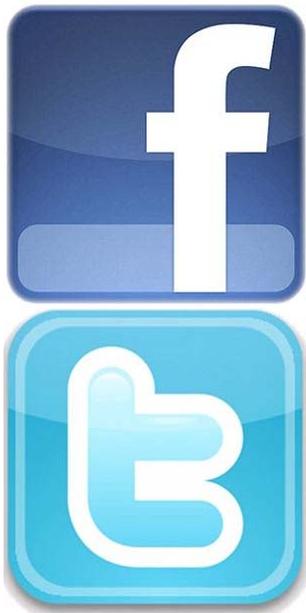
Facebook, Twitter and Google have been caught snooping on messages sent across their networks, new research claims, prompting campaigners to express concerns over privacy. The findings emerged from an experiment conducted following revelations by US security contractor Edward Snowden about government snooping on internet accounts. Cyber-security company High-Tech Bridge set out to test the confidentiality of 50 of the biggest internet companies by using their systems to send a unique web address in private messages. Experts at its Geneva HQ then waited to see which companies clicked on the website. During the ten-day operation, six of the 50 companies tested were found to have opened the link. Among the six were Facebook, Twitter, Google and discussion forum Formspring. High-Tech Bridge chief executive Iliia Kolochenko said: 'We found they were clicking on links that should be known only to the sender and recipient. 'If the links are being opened, we cannot be sure that the contents of messages are not also being read. 'All the social network sites would like to know as much as possible about our hobbies and shopping habits because the information has a commercial value. 'The fact that only a few companies were trapped does not mean others are not monitoring their customers. They may simply be using different techniques which are more difficult to detect.' Earlier this year scientists in Germany claimed another big computer company, Microsoft, was spying on customers using its Skype instant messaging service.



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Curiously: Google is among the tech companies which have been caught snooping on messages sent across their networks, new research claims, prompting campaigners to express concerns over privacy

Facebook declined to comment on the latest research but said it had complex automated systems in place to combat phishing (internet identity fraud) and reduce malicious material. Twitter also declined to comment directly but said it used robotic systems to bar spam messages from customer accounts. A source at Google said: 'There is nothing new here. It simply isn't an issue.' An independent expert explained: 'In principle these companies should not be opening the links, but in practice they are giving a service to customers. 'The protection provided outweighs any potential commercial gain.'



Snooping or safety? Facebook and Twitter were also caught following the links, but spokesmen for the firms claimed that they had done so merely as part of automated spam-reduction systems to protect users

But campaigners called for stricter safeguards.

Nick Pickles, director of pressure group Big Brother Watch, said: 'This is yet another reminder that profit comes before privacy every day for some businesses.

'Companies such as Google and Facebook rely on capturing as much data as possible to enhance their advertising targeting.

'They intrude on our privacy to build an ever more detailed picture of our lives.'

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Here is a better test (IMO). Place a message with the dis-assembled web address in the draft folder and then see if it is assembled and visited.

- [john smyth](#) , Los Angeles, 02/9/2013 21:40

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I believe the "test" required the web address to be re-assembled from the text in the email, not a "click on this" link. That is how they verified the monitoring.

- [john smyth](#) , Los Angeles, 02/9/2013 21:26

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Sorry, but this is absolutely flawed "testing" by people who don't understand the technology. Do you really think with the billions and billions of email sent every day that they have a group of interns sitting in a basement reading them one at a time? The reason those were detected as being 'opened' with the test of putting in a unique link is because the emails ARE opened - by automated virus scanners. They scan links looking for phishing sites and links to malware. I work for a small ISP and administer a mail system. This IS what happens. These "testers" should immediately recant their "results" and offer an apology for being utterly incompetent.

- [GJA](#) , Anyville, 02/9/2013 20:42

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Simply confirmation of what we paranoids have known for years. I don't have any social media accounts. Don't use any "free" email accounts. I don't use any of the large providers for my email accounts. And, despite my precautions, I never email anything to anyone that might upset my mother.

- [andyllt](#) , Milwaukee, 02/9/2013 19:39

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Shazzlemail is physically located in USA. So who will recommend it as the fully private e-mail service after Lavabit closed their e-mail service? I would follow the Lavabit creator's advice!

- [mycn777](#) , Oceanside, United States, 02/9/2013 17:58

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Why in the world do NEWS stories not tell the WHOLE story? Why only name four out of the six? It's irrelevant whether the other two are comparatively lesser known brands and you don't think they're headline material; they should still be in the article. Journalism these days is a joke.

- [Canof Sand](#) , USA, 02/9/2013 17:09

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Then stop using their services - it's easy to walk away.

- [Michael](#) , Middletown CT, 02/9/2013 16:00

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It IS possible to go through life without Google or posting to Facebook or Twitter. ?...the web community should refrain from participating with these entities.

- [JohnS](#) , D.C., United States, 02/9/2013 14:29

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I view target marketing in the same light as viruses. Both negatively affect my ability to freely use the web. I hate that someone is limiting my choices without my consent. Travel sites also track users. They use the information to decide how to respond to user searches. If one primarily travels on a budget, they limit search results to budget hotels and flights therefore limiting options. It feels as if Big Brother is deciding what is good for me.

- [opinionated2](#) , Weston, United States, 02/9/2013 14:02

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- [opinionated2](#) , Weston, United States, 02/9/2013 13:54

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