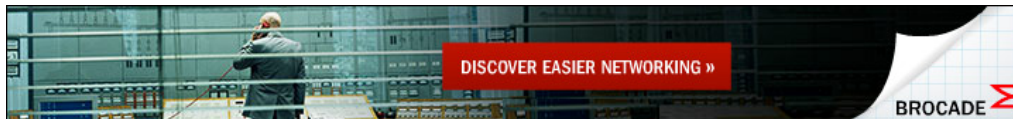


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## Secrecy-focused Web services find a mainstream audience

By Hayley Tsukayama, June 12, 2013

The news that the National Security Administration and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been collecting phone and Internet communication data has provoked [outrage](#), new [Internet memes](#) and plenty of petitions. And it has had other effects, such as getting users to think about their online privacy, and giving attention to services that have long catered to a more privacy-conscious community.

Case in point: DuckDuckGo, a small search engine designed for people who don't want their search results tracked, announced that it had seen a serious bump in users after getting media exposure this week.

According to a [company tweet](#), DuckDuckGo logged 2 million direct daily searches on Monday. That's an all-time high for the small firm, which has been building a niche audience of privacy-focused Internet users since its 2008 launch.

In a Washington Post profile last year, [DuckDuckGo founder Gabriel Weinberg](#) said that he wanted to make a fast, simple search engine — a service very much like Google in the early days — that offers a no-frills search interface and eschews ads. The company also recently joined the Digital Due Process coalition, a group of companies and nonprofit organizations calling for updated surveillance laws more suited for the Internet age.

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Other services, which have operated just under the superficial layer of the Web that most of us see, may also be on the rise. Tor, a secure but reasonably easy-to-use browser bundle that lets users cover their online tracks, has been a go-to product for security-focused surfers. (As my [Post](#) colleague [Timothy Lee](#) noted, a Tor sticker graces the back of NSA leak source Edward Snowden's laptop.) In its annual report for 2012, the nonprofit Tor Project's executive director Andrew Lewman said the group sees about half a million daily users.

But that number may grow. Google searches in the United States for "Tor browser" have also been on the rise this month, according to Google trends. The Tor Project didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on whether those searches have translated to a spike in downloads, but the software's exposure has certainly gone up after being named in [several write-ups](#) suggesting ways to work around using the companies identified as PRISM participants.

Of course, moving off the mainstream comes with its own compromises. Surfing with Tor, for example, [makes everything slower](#) because it's bouncing your traffic off other computers around the world — a trade-off that users make for privacy. And using a service like DuckDuckGo means leaving behind the other search features such as the built-in maps or shopping breakouts that Google and Bing can offer by looking through your data. The question is whether those are trade-offs users are willing to make. Turning to social networking and chat services such as [Diaspora\\*](#) or [Cryptocat](#) can mean leaving your less privacy-conscious friends behind.

Those switching costs are hard for many users to overcome. For all the outrage that usually follows an [unpopular policy change](#) or a data breach, switching from an established service like Google, Facebook or Twitter is tough and often seems like



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more trouble than it's worth.

But privacy is a growing concern, and one that Americans are doing more about, as the [Pew Center on Internet and American Life](#) found last month when looking at teens and their privacy habits. If nothing else, this spike in interest has turned a spotlight on a growing community that's turning away from the mainstream Internet for pastures that, if not always greener, at least have higher fences.

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