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DIGITAL PRIVACY

# The Anonymous Internet: Privacy Tools Grow in Popularity Following NSA Revelations

By Victor Luckerson @VLuck | June 20, 2013 | 7 Comments

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With continuing revelations about the scope of the National Security Agency's surveillance of phone and Internet communications, many people are thinking more carefully about how to ensure their privacy online. That's led to a spike in users for a variety of Internet tools that promise a more anonymized experience compared to web giants like [Google](#), [Facebook](#), and [Yahoo](#).



SEAN SIMMERS / THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY IMAGES

Gabriel Weinberg, CEO and creator of DuckDuckGo, the search engine that does not track users history and information, in 2012.

The search engine [DuckDuckGo](#), for instance, has had its number of human search queries almost double since June 6, when Google was identified as one of nine companies that are part of Prism, a secret data-gathering program the government uses to target foreign threats. Its 3 million daily direct searches is still a drop in the bucket compared to the billions Google executes every day, but CEO Gabriel Weinberg says the site's privacy features are steadily attracting more users. DuckDuckGo does not store personally identifiable information about peoples' search queries on its servers. Google, Bing and Yahoo hold onto that data for between nine and 18 months, whether you're logged into accounts on those sites or not.

(MORE: [NSA Scandal: Tech Titans Jockey to Be the Most Transparent of All](#))

"That aspect of our site has been more attractive to a growing portion of users," Weinberg says. "It was pretty creepy when you think about how much the search engine actually knows about you because it's arguably the most personal set of data that you share on the Internet."

Other web services have also seen a boost in recent weeks. Cryptocat, a chat program that encrypts messages before they're sent, saw downloads double in the week after the Prism story broke. Its creator, Nadim Kobeissi, says neither he nor law enforcement officials that might subpoena a conversation can see the content of the messages. "It's less vulnerable to having your conversations monitored or intercepted," he says. "The way Cryptocat is built, we are unable to comply with law enforcement requests even if we wanted to or even if we were forced to."

Tor, a software program that allows users to surf the Internet anonymously by making IP addresses difficult to trace, saw downloads increase between 20% and 30% following the NSA news. Overall the program has been downloaded 36 million times in the past year and has more than half a million daily users, according to Tor executive director Andrew Lewman.



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Anonymization does have its drawbacks. DuckDuckGo isn't as adept as Google at anticipating what you're looking for before you type it. Using Cryptocat means convincing friends to also download the program instead of just logging onto Facebook or Gmail. Tor has been known to attract illicit activity — and in some cases the users who help to hide others' IP addresses end up having illegal actions [attributed to their computers](#).

**(MORE: You Probably Agreed to NSA Snooping When You Accepted That Website's Terms of Service)**

Kobeissi points out that even if these tools help with anonymisation, they can't completely deter dedicated government surveillance. "The real solution is not just telling people to depend on these tools. The real solution is to get an honest political discussion going on to limit or get rid of these surveillance tactics."

Here's a list of some privacy-focused alternatives to the tools most people use to chat, search, and store data online. These are fairly straightforward to install and use, but for the tech-savvy set there are more extensive lists at [Tactical Tech](#) and [Prism Break](#).

**For Web Browsing:** Open-source software program [Tor](#) makes your IP address almost untraceable by routing your web traffic through three different computers scattered across the world before settling on the destination you've clicked online. The technology was originally developed by the U.S. Navy and is still funded mostly by the government.

**For Web Searches:** [DuckDuckGo](#) doesn't save users' search history, unlike the major search engines, which means the company would have much less data to offer up if subpoenaed.

**For Online Transactions:** [Bitcoin](#), the decentralized electronic currency, has burst into the mainstream consciousness this year and is now being accepted everywhere from [New York bars](#) to dating website [OKCupid](#). Buyer beware though: Bitcoin values are [extremely volatile](#).

**For Cloud Storage:** [SpiderOak](#) provides similar functionality to DropBox and Google Drive, but is a "zero-knowledge" client, meaning the company can't see the content of user files, which are automatically encrypted. Taking your data into your own hands has its drawbacks though: SpiderOak can't retrieve your password for you if you forget it.

**For Instant Messaging:** [Cryptocat](#) can be installed on your web browser and encrypts your messages locally before they're sent through Cryptocat's servers. The tool is popular with everyone from journalists to members of LGBT groups trying to ensure private conversations. Mobile apps like [TextSecure](#) offer the same functionality on the go.



**Victor Luckerson @VLuck**

Victor Luckerson is a reporter-producer for Time.com covering business and money.

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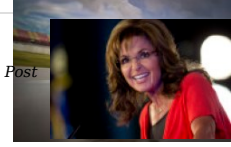
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If, I mean just if, there is another Watergate today, what would it look like, given today's advanced surveillance technology?



JerryNJ

The simplest solution would be to use DuckDuckGo if you want privacy. Why reinvent the wheel?



Blurb

1 Like

I have mixed feelings about this. Somehow I don't think switching services, even if they use encryption, will stop the NSA for long. The only way to fix this is from the law end of things.



youngChinese

@Blurb I believe that Prism is very good for America. American government is responsible for their policies making and executing, and the social information is very useful for both. If there is anything wrong, it's that they try to make sure who send the message, and this makes American feel unhappy and suspect the government.



JesiJekson

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbwA1kbjZXs&list=TLMNRRpfEFM64>



MrThreadThat

It is important to encrypt all "sensitive" electronic communications. You never know who is peeking at the servers through which your electronic files and messages pass or on which that data rests. The problem is that most of us do not have the technical knowledge required to install and use the tools that are available to do the encryption and those tools usually cost more than we are willing to spend. One solution that is both free and easy-to-use is ThreadThat. This web app provides end-to-end military-strength encryption via a simple web interface. It has all the latest security controls to insure that you can share files and messages safely and securely and keep your private data private.



gregl

1 Like

@MrThreadThat All the encryption in the world is useless if the site the info is sent to (Google, Yahoo, Bing, etc.) stores the info and hands it over to the NSA or anyone else.

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