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Could privacy-protecting software become a new Internet standard?

Software developers are rethinking how to protect users' locations and browsing

TECHNOLOGY, MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

TOPICS: NSA, SPYING, INTERNET SURVEILLANCE, PRIVACY, SOFTWARE, TOR, 4 NEWS, TECHNOLOGY NEWS, NEWS

Following NSA surveillance revelations, talks advance on making the privacy-protecting tool Tor an Internet standard.

The Internet's main engineers have asked the architects of Tor—networking software designed to make Web browsing private—to consider turning the technology into an Internet standard.

If widely adopted, such a standard would make it easy to include the technology in consumer and business products ranging from routers to apps. This would, in turn, allow far more people to browse the Web without being identified by anyone who might be spying on Internet
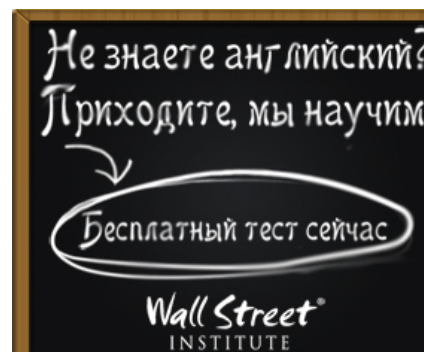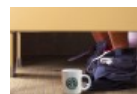
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of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) in response to the mass surveillance by the National Security Administration. Already the IETF is working to encrypt more of the data that flows between your computer and the websites you visit (see "Engineers Plan a Fully Encrypted Internet").

Collaborating with Tor would add an additional layer of security and privacy. When Tor is successfully used, the websites you visit don't know the true address and location of your computer, and anyone watching traffic from your computer wouldn't know where you're browsing—a distinct layer of protection that goes beyond encrypting your communications.

Stephen Farrell, a computer scientist at Trinity College, Dublin, believes that forging Tor into a standard that interoperates with other parts of the Internet could be better than leaving Tor as a separate tool that requires people to take special action to implement. "I think there are benefits that might flow in both directions," he says. "I think other IETF participants could learn useful things about protocol design from the Tor people, who've faced interesting challenges that aren't often seen in practice. And the Tor people might well get interest and involvement from IETF folks who've got a lot of experience with large-scale systems."

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