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'Big Brother' database for phones and e-mails

Richard Ford

A massive government database holding details of every phone call, e-mail and time spent on the internet by the public is being planned as part of the fight against crime and terrorism. Internet service providers (ISPs) and telecoms companies would hand over the records to the Home Office under plans put forward by officials.

The information would be held for at least 12 months and the police and security services would be able to access it if given permission from the courts.

The proposal will raise further alarm about a "Big Brother" society, as it follows plans for vast databases for the ID cards scheme and NHS patients. There will also be concern about the ability of the Government to manage a system holding billions of records. About 57 billion text messages were sent in Britain last year, while an estimated 3 billion e-mails are sent every day.

Home Office officials have discussed the option of the national database with telecommunications companies and ISPs as part of preparations for a data communications Bill to be in November's Queen's Speech. But the plan has not been sent to ministers yet.

Industry sources gave warning that a single database would be at greater risk of attack and abuse.

Jonathan Bamford, the assistant Information Commissioner, said: "This would give us serious concerns and may well be a step too far. We are not aware of any justification for the State to hold every UK citizen's phone and internet records. We have real doubts that such a measure can be justified, or is proportionate or desirable. We have warned before that we are sleepwalking into a surveillance society. Holding large collections of data is always risky - the more data that is collected and stored, the bigger the problem when the data is lost, traded or stolen."

David Davis, the Shadow Home Secretary, said: "Given [ministers'] appalling record at maintaining the integrity of databases holding people's sensitive data, this could well be more of a threat to our security, than a support."

The proposal has emerged as part of plans to implement an EU directive developed after the July 7 bombings to bring uniformity of record-keeping. Since last October telecoms companies have been required to keep records of phone calls and text messages for 12 months. That requirement is to be extended to internet, e-mail and voice-over-internet use and included in a Communications Data Bill.

Police and the security services can access the records with a warrant issued by the courts. Rather than individual companies holding the information, Home Office officials are suggesting the records be handed over to the Government and stored on a huge database.

One of the arguments being put forward in favour of the plan is that it would make it simpler and swifter for law enforcement agencies to retrieve the information instead of having to approach hundreds of service providers. Opponents say that the scope for abuse will be greater if the records are held on one database.



A Home Office spokesman said the Bill was needed to reflect changes in communication that would “increasingly undermine our current capabilities to obtain communications data and use it to protect the public”.

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