CDT Supports New “Surveillance Transparency Act”

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Kevin Bankston, Senior Counsel and Director of CDT's Free Expression Project

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CDT applauds today’s introduction [2] of Senator Al Franken’s “Surveillance Transparency Act of 2013 [3]” (bill summary [4]) as an important step toward achieving greater transparency and accountability when it comes to the National Security Agency’s surveillance of Internet and telephone users.

The bill, with a long list of cosponsors including Senate Judiciary Chairman Patrick Leahy, comes just two weeks after CDT organized an unprecedented coalition [5] of Internet companies and privacy organizations to send a letter to Congress pressing for new transparency legislation. That group asked Congress to pass a new law that clearly allows companies to publish general statistics about how many and what types of national security-related demands they receive from the government, and further requiring that the government regularly publish its own comprehensive “transparency reports.” The Franken bill does just that, specifically authorizing companies to say how many requests they’ve received under particular foreign intelligence surveillance laws and how many users have been affected, while also requiring much greater transparency from the government itself through new mandatory reporting requirements.

“The American people can’t have a meaningful debate about the government’s surveillance of Internet and telephone users when it lacks even the most basic information about the scope of that surveillance,” said CDT Senior Counsel and Free Expression Director Kevin Bankston. “As evidenced by our joint letter that brought together privacy advocates and the Internet industry to push for more transparency, major Internet companies like Google, Facebook and Apple have information about what they do—and don’t do—in response to government demands, and this is information that they want to share with the public and that the public needs to know. This legislation is a first step to ensuring that we the people get the information we need in order to ensure accountability and achieve reform when it comes to America’s surveillance laws.”

“The Center for Democracy & Technology strongly supports the Surveillance Transparency Act and thanks Senator Franken and his cosponsors for introducing it,” Bankston continued. “This is the first legislation attempting to implement the many transparency reforms that have been jointly recommended by privacy advocates in coalition with Internet giants like Microsoft, Twitter and Yahoo!, and we look forward to working with the sponsors of the bill to improve it and make sure that it is the strongest transparency bill possible. Because the American people need to know.”

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[1] mailto:brian@cdt.org
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