

Surveillance System Being Sold that can Track Mobile Phones across the World

August 26, 2014
Craig Timberg



Illustration: Michael Mucci

Makers of surveillance systems are offering governments across the world the ability to track the movements of almost anybody who carries a mobile phone, whether they are blocks away or on another continent.

The technology works by exploiting an essential fact of all mobile phone networks: They must keep detailed, up-to-the-minute records on the locations of their customers to deliver calls and other services to them. Surveillance systems are secretly collecting these records to map people's travels over days, weeks or longer, according to company marketing documents and experts in surveillance technology.

The world's most powerful intelligence services, such as the National Security Agency in the US and Britain's GCHQ, have long used mobile phone data to track targets around the globe. But experts say these new systems allow less technically advanced governments to track people in any nation with relative ease and precision.

Users of such technology type a phone number into a computer portal, which then collects information from the location databases maintained by mobile phone carriers, company documents show. In this way, the surveillance system learns which tower a target is currently using, revealing his or her location to within a few blocks in an urban area or a few kilometres in a rural one.

It is unclear which governments have acquired these tracking systems, but one industry official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to share sensitive trade information, said that dozens of countries have bought or leased such technology in recent years. This rapid spread underscores how the burgeoning, multibillion-dollar surveillance industry makes advanced spying technology available worldwide.

"Any tin-pot dictator with enough money to buy the system could spy on people anywhere in the world," said Eric King, deputy director for Privacy International, a London-based activist group that warns about abuse of surveillance technology. "This is a huge problem."

Security experts say hackers, sophisticated criminal gangs and nations under sanctions also could use this tracking technology, which operates in a legal grey area. It is illegal in many countries to track people without their consent or a court order, but there is no clear international legal standard for secretly tracking people in other countries, nor is there a global entity with the authority to police potential abuses.

In response to questions from *The Washington Post* this month, the US Federal Communications Commission said it would investigate possible misuse of tracking technology that collects location data from carrier databases. The United States restricts the export of some surveillance technology, but with multiple suppliers based overseas, there are few practical limits on the sale or use of these systems internationally. "If this is technically possible, why couldn't anybody do this anywhere?" said Jon Peha, a former White House scientific adviser and chief technologist for the FCC who is now an engineering professor at Carnegie Mellon University. He was one of several telecommunications experts who reviewed the marketing documents at *The Washington Post's* request. "I'm worried about foreign governments, and I'm even more worried about ,,,

To read this article in its entirety, go to:

<http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/surveillance-system-being-sold-that-can-track-mobile-phones-across-the-world-20140825-108cb0.html>