



Congressional intel committees should return to protecting American privacy

Patrick Eddington

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On March 7, the extreme transparency organization known as WikiLeaks published thousands of previously classified CIA documents on the agency's offensive online hacking operations and techniques covering the period from 2013 to 2016. Some of the documents were misinterpreted as suggesting the CIA had the ability to hack into your Internet-connected big-screen TV virtually at will.

You would think that these revelations about the extent of CIA cyber operations and techniques would've produced some kind of reaction from its congressional overseers. Instead, their silence has been deafening.

So why the silence thus far? Because the very committees charged with keeping the CIA from going too far have enabled its very behavior and operations.

The day after WikiLeaks published the CIA data online, *Reuters* [reported](#) that U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials had known about the leak since at least the end of 2016. You can take it to the bank that a breach of that magnitude would've been reported to the House and Senate Intelligence committees within a week of its discovery.

And what a breach it is. Although the truth is more complicated, the overall picture is clear. The agency has devoted tremendous human and financial resources to making just about every component of the online world—from our phones, tablets, computers, routers, and other electronic appliances and applications—covertly and remotely accessible.

Indeed, the relative ease with which these government hackers could penetrate commercially available anti-virus software packages was clearly something of a running joke on the inside. In

an unclassified 90-slide presentation, one researcher commented on the larger number of “stupid bugs” present in a widely-used anti-virus product. Similar comments were made about a number of such products.

The CIA could not have created an entirely new directorate dedicated to these kinds of operations without the full—if not enthusiastic—support of Republican and Democrat lawmakers on not only the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, but the respective Appropriations Committees as well. These lawmakers are, too often, spellbound by the very agencies and departments they are charged with policing.

For as long as I live, I will never forget hearing one extremely senior (and now former) Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee in 2007 declare his enthusiasm for trips to Langley, Virginia (the location of CIA’s headquarters) to see “all that cool s*** they have.” That remark took place during a conversation about the need to seriously strengthen congressional oversight of the Intelligence Community.

This latest data dump by WikiLeaks (which promises still more releases from this particular trove of documents) should be a wake-up call for House and Senate members who are not on the primary committees of jurisdiction. Taxpayer funds are being used by Intelligence Community elements to actively seek out and exploit vulnerabilities in the phones, tablets, computers, WiFi routers, and other internet-connected devices that their constituents use to conduct online banking, shop, pay their bills, and monitor their children and pets remotely, among other things. And that same malware is sitting on computers inside the Intelligence Community that are themselves vulnerable to hacking by hostile actors—or exfiltration by whistleblowers concerned about these very issues, which is what WikiLeaks claims motivated the person who provided them with the data.

The fact that the person who supplied this information to WikiLeaks did not, apparently, feel it would be worthwhile to confront the House and Senate Intelligence Committees with these revelations is also telling. Current speculation is that the leaker works for an Intelligence Community contractor, and this classification of contractors lost national security whistleblower protections in 2012 thanks to the House Intelligence Committee.

When the House and Senate Intelligence Committees were created in the wake of the findings of the Watergate and Church Committees some 40 years ago, their purpose was to prevent the kind of lawless and irresponsible spying that had threatened the very foundations of American democracy. Now, by allowing federal hackers to run amok, those same oversight committees have put the liberty of their constituents and the economic vitality of the global economy at needless risk. House and Senate members not on those committees should pointedly tell their colleagues who are that it’s well past time to put an end to this insanity.

Patrick G. Eddington is a policy analyst in homeland security and civil liberties at the Cato Institute.