The Internet Is the New Battleground, Assange Tells SXSW

AUSTIN, Texas - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange appeared on a giant video screen on Saturday morning before a massive crowd of t-shirted and headphoned technology enthusiasts at the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas, and declared that the Internet has become a battleground between ever-more intrusive governments and the governed. "The transition of the Internet to a political space is the most important phenomenon of the last decade," he declared. His speech ended with enthusiastic applause.

SXSW, a combination movie, music and Internet festival, is among the largest and most important annual events in the tech world, having played a significant role in the fast success of startups like Twitter and Foursquare. It's the sort of freewheeling festival where participants are as likely to run into a zombie flashmob as they are Neil Degrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Recent participants have included inventor Ray Kurzweil and the Foo Fighters' Dave Grohl.

This year, two of the most anticipated presenters, Assange and NSA leaker Edward Snowden, did not attend the event in person for fear of arrest. For more than a year, Assange has been living in a small room in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London where he has been granted asylum from sexual assault charges in Sweden. Snowden is scheduled to deliver remarks via teleconference on Monday from Russia, where he was granted asylum after fleeing the U.S. in June.

Assange discussed how U.S. officials told him to relinquish material given to Wikileaks "or else we would be 'compelled' to do so." Despite continuous pressure, Assange said that WikiLeaks continues to operate. "We continue publishing and expanding. You can stand up to these awful, fearful powers," he said.

It was one of a variety of panels dedicated to privacy issues, the NSA and government surveillance at this year's conference. Many technology industry workers argued that NSA's bulk data collection activities had hurt national security, and not just their bottom lines.

"There's a movement to try and wrest Internet governance away from the U.S.," said Brad Burnham, a managing partner at Union Square Ventures, a company that provides funding to startups. "The people trying to control the Internet are people like Russia and China. That doesn't feel good to me…The NSA has subverted the trust users have in these services, [like Google] most of which have been built in the U.S."

Technologists fear that more countries are pushing ahead with legislation to route Internet traffic or data away from the U.S. A piece of legislation currently under consideration in Brazil would mandate that companies like Google, in possession of data on Brazilian citizens, keep that data on servers or computers physically located in Brazil.

While Assange and Snowden appear to applause at SXSW, back in Washington, Vice Adm. Michael Rogers is set to appear before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday for his nomination hearing to replace Gen. Keith Alexander as head of U.S. Cyber Command (and the NSA). Relatively little is known about President Barack Obama's pick and Rogers' views toward privacy. His expertise lies primarily in cyber-warfare and encryption.

The Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez is cautiously encouraged by Rogers's history in cryptography. As he sees it, the Obama administration may be looking to deemphasize foreign intelligence gathering and refocus the NSA's activities more on the defense on the nation's cyber networks and cyberwarfare.

Other SXSW attendees such as Trevor Timm, founder of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, had a different view. "Of the little I know about him, I don't see him as a reformer."