

Feds Collecting More Immigrants' Social Media Data

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September 28, 2017

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) will begin collecting data from the social media accounts of all immigrants residing in or visiting the country. The Trump administration has asserted that expanding its program for social media data collection will help bolster national security, while privacy advocates have warned it could lead to overreach and political litmus tests.

On Sept. 18, DHS proposed on the Federal Register that it would implement a new rule to collect comprehensive social media information from immigrants and permanent residents, BuzzFeed News reports.

The new rule would expand DHS data collection to include immigrants' "social media handles, aliases, associated identifiable information, and search results."

The new rule would go into effect on Oct. 18. Several lawyers and privacy groups have voiced alarm about the expansion.

"There's a growing trend at the Department of Homeland Security to be snooping on the social media of immigrants and foreigners and we think it's an invasion of privacy and deters freedom of speech," said attorney Adam Schwartz of the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Schwartz noted that the new rule meant that DHS could also collect social media information on U.S. citizens who communicate online with immigrants.

DHS released an official statement asserting that the new rule was not a government overreach but an update for existing rules.

"DHS published this notice in the Federal Register on Sept. 18 to comply with the administrative requirements of the Privacy Act to help address these requirements, not launch a new policy

initiative," DHS said. "DHS, in its law-enforcement and immigration-process capacity, has and continues to monitor publicly-available social media to protect the homeland."

The new rule was reportedly prompted by Tashfeen Malik, who had lived in the U.S. with a green card. She and her husband, citizen Syed Rizwan Farook, murdered 14 people in San Bernardino, California in 2015. Some argued after the terrorist attack that Malik's social media activity could have tipped off law enforcement of impending violence if they had monitored her more closely, according to Newsweek.

Immigration policy analyst Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute asserted that the DHS surveillance expansion was "another example of the government changing security protocols based on a previous incident that will impose an enormous cost and that is of dubious value for the future."

Faiza Patel of the Brennan Center noted that the Trump administration could use the program to deny visas to applicants based on their political views and not the threat they posed to national security.

"The question is do we really want the government monitoring political views?" Patel said. "Social media may not be able to predict violence but it can certainly tell you a lot about a person's political and religious views."

Schwartz added that this could have a chilling effect in how people communicate online.

"People may censor themselves because they're worried about coming up for a status upgrade -- from being a student visa to being a worker visa or from a work visa to a lawful permanent resident ... DHS could open up their file and see that in 2017 they said 'Donald Trump makes me so angry, sometimes I wish he wasn't the president,'" Schwartz told Wired.