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NSA launching 'Big Brother' program to detect cyber attacks

By Gautham Nagesh - 07/08/10 09:37 AM ET

The National Security Agency is launching an expansive program to detect cyber attacks on federal agencies and private sector networks deemed critical to national security, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Sources told *WSJ* the "Perfect Citizen" program would deploy a set of sensors in critical computer networks that would be triggered by an impending cyber attack. The sources said NSA wouldn't have constant surveillance of whole systems. Defense contractor Raytheon reportedly won a classified contract recently for the initial phase of the project valued at $100 million.

The system has raised concerns among officials from both the government and the private sector who see it as an intrusion by NSA into domestic affairs. The report also quotes an internal Raytheon e-mail expressing similar concerns.

"The overall purpose of the [program] is our Government...feel[s] that they need to insure the Public Sector is doing all they can to secure Infrastructure critical to our National Security," said the e-mail. "Perfect Citizen is Big Brother."

Perfect Citizen will focus on older control systems not originally designed to be connected to the Internet and now vulnerable to cyber attacks. Military officials defended the program, claiming it is long overdue and that any invasion of privacy is roughly comparable to a traffic camera. Participation will be voluntary, though there will be government incentives to participate, particularly for companies already doing business with federal agencies.

But the secrecy surrounding the program has raised doubts among civil liberties advocates including Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute.

"If there is to be a federal government role in securing the Internet from cyberattacks, there is no good reason why its main components should not be publicly known and openly debated," Harper wrote Thursday in a blog post. "Benign intentions do not control future results, and governmental surveillance of the Internet for 'cybersecurity' purposes may warp over time to surveillance for ideological and political purposes."

Source:
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