

US Government Quietly Starts Asking Travelers for Social Media Accounts

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Controversial program met with opposition from civil liberties groups when first proposed in June

The U.S. government has quietly started to ask foreign travelers to [hand over](#) their social media accounts upon arriving in the country, a program that aims to spot potential terrorist threats but which civil liberties advocates have long opposed as a threat to privacy.

The program has been active since Tuesday, asking travelers arriving to the U.S. on visa waivers to voluntarily enter information associated with their online presence, including “Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, as well as a space for users to input their account names on those sites,” [Politico reports](#).



Social media accounts are “gateways into an enormous amount of [users’] online expression and associations, which can reflect highly sensitive information about that person’s opinions, beliefs, identity, and community.”

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The U.S. Department of Homeland Security first [proposed](#) the idea in June, when it was met with opposition and criticism from rights groups, consumer advocates, and other entities, including the Internet Association, which represents Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

At the time, a coalition of groups including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT), among others, sent a [letter](#) to the government warning that many travelers would feel obligated to give their information to border agents and that the program would “fall hardest on Arab and Muslim communities, whose usernames, posts, contacts, and social networks will be exposed to intense scrutiny.”

Social media accounts are “gateways into an enormous amount of [users’] online expression and associations, which can reflect highly sensitive information about that person’s opinions, beliefs, identity, and community,” the letter stated.

But it appears the Obama administration ignored their warnings about the threat to privacy and free expression and finalized the program anyway.

“There are very few rules about how that information is being collected, maintained [and]

disseminated to other agencies, and there are no guidelines about limiting the government's use of that information," Michael W. Macleod-Ball, chief of staff for the ACLU's Washington office, told *Politico's* Tony Romm. "While the government certainly has a right to collect some information ... it would be nice if they would focus on the privacy concerns some advocacy groups have long expressed."

The "optional" question is part of the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which visitors on the visa waiver program are required to complete in order to enter the country. The program allows certain travelers to be in the U.S. for up to 90 days without a visa.

Nathan White, senior legislative manager of Access Now, said the program constituted a threat to human rights.

"The choice to hand over this information is technically voluntary," he told Ramm. "But the process to enter the U.S. is confusing, and it's likely that most visitors will fill out the card completely rather than risk additional questions from intimidating, uniformed officers—the same officers who will decide which of your jokes are funny and which ones make you a security risk."

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