



Criticism of Homeland Security social media plan misses the real problem

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A group of top US technology companies recently raised concerns with a Department of Homeland Security proposal that “[would prompt travelers to volunteer ‘information associated with \[their\] online presence](http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/social-media-screening-homeland-security-224786)” (<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/social-media-screening-homeland-security-224786>),” such as the social media platforms they use, as well as user names.

DHS’s proposal was released as a response to the terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, in which terrorist Tashfeen Malik received a spousal visa despite allegations that she had made pro jihadi comments on social media.



(<http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/RTX1XR93-e1471963676931.jpg>)

Tashfeen Malik and Syed Farook. Obtained by Reuters December 8, 2015.

Specifically, the [technology companies, including Google, Facebook, and Twitter, stated that DHS's proposal](http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/social-media-screening-privacy-227287) (http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/social-media-screening-privacy-227287) "would grant customs officials unprecedented access to foreigners' private lives, since users often post sensitive details — from their political beliefs to their sexuality — on social media pages." Other groups oppose the proposal as affronts to privacy and freedom of speech. All of these criticisms are, of course, correct, but none of them pinpoint the fundamental problem with the proposal.

The DHS proposal is little more than another symbolic security measure aimed at tamping down public security concerns that will have little to no impact on our actual security.

After all, does anyone really believe that a terrorist trying to enter the country will volunteer his or her social media accounts if those accounts contain pro-jihadi sentiments? Similarly, is it realistic to believe that a terrorist trying to enter America won't scrub or delete his or her social media accounts knowing DHS will ask or look at those accounts? Either way, the proposal will do little more than inconvenience millions of travelers without increasing our security. Terrorist groups aren't stupid. They have systematically monitored how America and European countries operate and adjusted their operations to evade detection. The increased use of encrypted technology is just one example of that evolution.

Does anyone really believe that a terrorist trying to enter the country will volunteer his or her social media accounts if those accounts contain pro-jihadi sentiments?

If the federal government wants to increase our security, it should [launch the national commission on terrorists' use of technology](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/National-commission-on-terrorists-use-of-technology-is-needed.pdf) (https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/National-commission-on-terrorists-use-of-technology-is-needed.pdf). This recommendation was put forth by both myself and [House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul \(R-Texas\) and Senator Mark Warner \(D-Va.\)](http://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/264318-lawmakers-push-congress-to-convene-encryption-commission) (http://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/264318-lawmakers-push-congress-to-convene-encryption-commission) eight months ago, as the commission could gather the best and brightest to develop proposals that would actually make us more secure. Instead of pushing out symbolic security proposals that won't make us safer, the Obama administration needs to make a full-throated effort in support of the national commission that leverages the expertise of technology companies.

The reality is that any serious program that aims to detect potential terrorists trying to enter America won't appear in the Federal Register for public comment; rather, it will arise in the classified world and detect terrorists before they are on an airplane over the Atlantic or standing at a custom's desk at a US

airport.

Learn more: [National terrorism commission could have wrapped up vital work today](http://www.aei.org/publication/congress-national-terrorism-commission-could-have-wrapped-up-work/)
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