

War on Encryption (Or When Pundits Miss the Point)

Written by Marco Attard
11 December 2015

"Fiendishly-complex online encryption" actually helps terrorists, the speechwriter of UK prime minister David Cameron writes in The Telegraph. But is it actually the case? You surely know the answer, dear readers.



It is no, obviously.

Written in the wake of the horrific attacks in Paris, the editorial by Clare Foges insists the standard encryption implemented by the likes of Google, Apple and Facebook-- not to mention the refusal to add backdoors-- makes the job of security services "infinitely harder." Another supposed tool for dastardly terrorists comes in the shape of Telegram, an end-to-end encrypted messaging app offering a secret chat service with self-destructing messages.

There's also a reference to ISIS/ISIL/Daesh supposedly having "24-hour tech helpdesk," an idea that never stops being amusing.

Foges continues to say the reason behind encryption is profit, not privacy-- Silicon Valley is actually inflaming user fears of privacy violations, and if they really wanted they could find a way to "simultaneously keep the good guys' data secure and keep the bad guys in plain sight." But, as we know, the complicated business of encryption does not exactly work that way...

Actually Foges shoots herself in the foot by quoting Apple CEO Tim Cook, who famously argues "if you put a key under the mat for the cops, a burglar can find it, too." This is exactly the case with security. What if the actual bad guys get hold of the "secure golden keys" and backdoors behind services used by your customers? What about oppressive regimes demanding access to

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such backdoors? Hell, should Western governments be trusted with such power to begin with? After all, what Edward Snowden revealed in his leaks was worrying, to put it mildly.

The moral of the story is obvious-- pundits such as Foges should stick to writing speeches, and leave the business of security to those with at least a spoonful of knowledge on the matter. Thankfully the internet quickly got busy to tear down the editorial. Writer Nick Harkaway provides a helpfully colour-coded guide as to how wrong Foges is, and TechCrunch has a useful summary of the reaction on Twitter. But, ultimately, we must do our part to better the debate surrounding security.

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