

For Immediate Release

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Public Interest and Privacy Groups Call on Congress to Investigate the Use of New Technology which Discloses Private and Personal Internet Activity without Notice to Consumers

Washington – 15 of the nation’s leading privacy and public interest groups today released a letter urging Congress to hold hearings on the growing practice of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) targeting ads to subscribers based on their personal Web activities.

The letter, sent to House Telecommunications Subcommittee Chairman Ed Markey (D-MA) and Ranking Member Joe Barton (R-TX), urges the congressmen to investigate the Charter Communications’ plan to capture all of the messages and activities of their Internet subscribers and share that data with NebuAd, a third party firm who plans to use it to target those consumers with specific ads. Representatives Markey and Barton have previously raised questions regarding the legality Charter Communications’ plan.

“The eavesdropping and targeting of consumers online by their cable and phone ISPs creates a major new privacy threat,” said Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy. “Congress must swiftly act to protect the public—including families—from this unwarranted invasion of their privacy.”

The 15 groups are urging Congress to hold public hearings to looking into the practice of sharing data on private activities, noting that other Internet Service Providers are also signing similar deals with third party firms.

“Congress needs to bring this practice under closer scrutiny,” said Ari Schwartz, vice president of the Center for Democracy & Technology. “Tragically, there is little oversight or accountability of these activities and Congress needs to weigh in now before the practice becomes standard operating procedure for the ISPs.”

This privacy invasion is enabled by a technology called, “Deep Packet Inspection,” which allows an ISP to grab all the information coming out of a user’s computer *before* it hits the Internet. This private and personal information is then turned over to the ISP’s business partner, usually a third party firm, which then logs the subscriber information, categories it, and delivers ads to the consumer based on a customized profile, gleaned from the information snared by the ISP.

Technology that collects and uses this level of personal and private data without any opportunity for the consumer to opt out unacceptable. Consumers must be made aware of the practice and allowed to choose for themselves whether releasing personal information is an acceptable trade-off for receiving targeted advertising.

List of Groups Signed On:

Center for Democracy and Technology

Center for Digital Democracy

Consumer Action

Consumer Federation of America

Consumers Union

Electronic Frontier Foundation

Electronic Privacy Information Center

Free Press

Media Access Project

Privacy Activism

Privacy Rights Clearinghouse

Public Knowledge

US Public Interest Research Group

World Privacy Forum

Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic