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Phone giants store info on caller activity

Data include location when calls made, who you text

By Peter Svensson
The Associated Press

A document obtained by the ACLU shows for the first time how the four largest cellphone companies in the U.S. treat data about their subscribers' calls, text messages, Web surfing and approximate locations.

The one-page document from the Justice Department's cybercrime division shows, for instance, that Verizon Wireless keeps, for a year, information about which cell towers subscriber phones connect to. That data that can be used to figure out where the phone has been, down to the level of a neighborhood. AT&T has kept the same data continuously since July 2008.

The sheet is a guide for law enforcement, which can request data from the carriers through legal channels. A few data points from the sheet were known outside law enforcement circles, but wireless carriers have not been open about policies. They aren't required to keep the data, and they keep the same information for varying lengths of time. Some don't keep data that others store. For instance, it says T-Mobile USA doesn't keep information on Web browsing activity. Verizon keeps some information for up to a year that can be used to ascertain if a particular phone visited a particular website.

According to the sheet, Sprint Nextel's Virgin Mobile brand keeps the text content of text messages for three months. Verizon keeps it for three to five days. None of the other carriers keep texts at all, but they keep records of who texted whom for more than a year.

The document says AT&T keeps up to seven years a record of who texts whom, and when, but not the message content. Virgin Mobile keeps that data for two to three months.

The carriers don't have recordings of calls, but keep information about calls that are made and received for at least a year. The ACLU said it believes people have a right to know how long companies keep records of their activities.

Although the sheet is dated August 2010, Tom Slovenski, a private investigator specializing in cellphone data, said it is still accurate.

Sprint's Jason Gertzen said he couldn't comment on specific figures. Normally, he said, a subpoena, court order, or customer consent form from a law enforcement agency is necessary for data turn-over. However, Sprint responds to emergency requests, as in missing persons cases, if the police can document need, he said.

The Justice Department did not respond to a request for comment.