

FBI's Desire to Wiretap Every New Technology Makes Us Less Safe



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Here they go again. Every year or so we end up writing about the FBI's desire for [better wiretapping capabilities](#) for new technologies, such as Skype. Basically, the FBI argues that because "bad guys" might use those tools to communicate in secret, they need backdoors to make sure that they can keep tabs on the bad guys.

But they're forgetting something: the FBI isn't necessarily the only one who will get access to those backdoors. In fact, by requiring backdoors to enable surveillance on all sorts of systems, the FBI is almost guaranteeing that [the bad guys will use those backdoors for their own nefarious purposes](#). It's not security, it's anti-security.

This is why claims by the feds that we need cybersecurity legislation, like CISPA or the Cybersecurity Act ring hollow. If they really wanted more protected networks, they wouldn't keep asking for specific security holes to be explicitly added to those networks.

Two decades ago, the FBI complained it was having trouble tapping the then-latest cellphones and digital telephone switches. After extensive FBI lobbying, Congress passed the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act (CALEA) in 1994, mandating that *all* telephone switches include FBI-approved wiretapping capabilities.

CALEA was justifiably controversial, not least because its requirement for "backdoors" across our communications infrastructure seemed like a security nightmare: How could we keep criminals and foreign spies from exploiting weaknesses in the new wiretapping features? Would we even be able to detect them when they did?

Those fears were soon borne out. In 2004, a mysterious someone — the case was never solved — [hacked the wiretap backdoors of a Greek cellular switch](#) to listen in on senior government officials ... including the prime minister.

Think this could only happen abroad? Some years ago, the U.S. National Security Agency [discovered](#) that every telephone switch for sale to the Department of Defense had security vulnerabilities in their mandated wiretap implementations. Every. Single. One.

Somehow, the FBI always thinks that if there are backdoors, only it will use them. That is extreme wishful thinking.