

RANKING MEMBER JACKIE SPEIER (D-CA) OPENING STATEMENT

DHS Monitoring of Social Networking and Media: Enhancing Intelligence Gathering and Ensuring Privacy

Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Committee on Homeland Security

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The explosion in the use of social media has changed communication as we know it.

With just the touch of a button, millions of people can post and receive information through Twitter, Facebook, blogs and text messaging in an instant.

In just the short time we have been sitting in this hearing room, over three million comments have been posted to Facebook and over half a million tweets have been sent.

Over the past year, we have seen the impact of using social media first hand.

Last year the Arab Spring was driven by protestors who organized and communicated largely via social media.

We have also seen the power of social media here in the United States over the past few months as protestors organized via Twitter and Facebook for the Occupy Wall Street movements throughout the country.

We have seen bills before Congress stopped in their tracks by the power of social media.

This growing universe of social networking presents great challenges and opportunities to the mission of the Department of Homeland Security as it works to keep our nation safe.

Through this hearing we hope to learn how the Department of Homeland Security is harnessing the power of social media.

Is it possible that DHS could use social media to communicate emergency recovery and response information so that the general public can have information they need quickly? How would such technology have improved the response to a disaster like Hurricane Katrina?

What about in the case of a man made disaster or a mass evacuation like we saw last year in the nuclear meltdown in Japan? Could twitter and instant messaging be used to let people know where to evacuate and what areas to avoid?

The vast amounts of publicly available data also presents a potentially great resource for open source information collection.

In 2010, we saw alert citizens report suspicious activities in Times Square that led to the arrest of Faizal Shazad.

Could similar public reporting be done using social media?

How can DHS fully exploit the benefits and opportunities of social media without impeding on the civil rights and civil liberties of those who choose to use social media?

Can DHS actively and effectively monitor social media in an open and above board way without being accused of spying on lawful activities?

Last month the press reported widely on a case where a couple from England was prevented from entering the US because of a tweet. Was this an over-reaction? Could or should a mere tweet or posting prevent a person from boarding a plane or entering the United States?

I am looking forward to learning from the witnesses exactly how DHS uses social media, and what DHS is doing to make sure that in its use of social media it is not being perceived as being a "big brother".

I want to learn from the witnesses what privacy protections are in place with regard to DHS' using social media and how the individual components are being trained on these protections.

Further, I am very interested to find out today how the Department can even handle the sheer volume of open source postings that may be found on any of the various social networking websites.

Further, if the Department begins to use social media as open source tools, as the Office of Intelligence and Analysis Undersecretary has indicated, how will its analysts be trained to continue to respect the civil liberties of those that choose to use social media?

Social media could possibly be an integral tool in recognizing and preventing emerging threats; however, there has to be some specific systems in place that can manage this information while continuing to respect civil rights and civil liberties.

I look forward to hearing what steps are being taken in this arena.