

Federal agents seek to loosen rules on hacking computers

By Chris Strohm, Bloomberg

The top U.S. law-enforcement agency wants to give investigators greater leeway to secretly access suspected criminals' computers in bunches, not simply one at a time.

The Justice Department says the proposal, made public last week, is an attempt to keep up with technology that lets people hide identities online. Privacy advocates contend the more aggressive hacking powers may violate rights of the innocent.

The proposal arrives at a precipitous time for a government still managing backlash to electronic-spying practices by the National Security Agency that were exposed last year by former contractor Edward Snowden.

"I don't think many Americans would be comfortable with the government sending code onto their computers without their knowledge or consent," Nathan Freed Wessler, a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union, said in a telephone interview. "The power they're seeking is certainly a broad one."

A committee of judges that sets national policy governing criminal investigations will have to sort it out, taking rules written for searching property and modernizing them for the Internet age.

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