

CIA Chief Raises More Smart Grid Privacy Concerns

March 19, 2012 - It has been more than two years now since ACCESS started warning readers about the dangers of the electric "smart grid" that is being pushed by the federal government. The smart grid is being sold as a means for consumers to have more control over their electricity costs and to provide us all more convenience in our day to day lives. But being connected to the smart grid will also mean that virtually every appliance you use will be connected to the internet. And now, CIA Director David Petraeus is publically stating that the information obtained through those appliances will be used by the government to monitor anyone they are interested in.

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Petraeus was speaking at a summit for In-Q-Tel; the CIA's venture capital firm. In-Q-Tel provides investment capital to hi-tech firms that develop new technologies that the CIA has an interest in. He clearly suggested that American's love for hi-tech, internet connected gadgets is resulting in an unintended effect. Americans are effectively bugging their own homes.

Petraeus said, "Items of interest", meaning people, will be located, identified, monitored, and remotely controlled through technologies such as radio-frequency identification, sensor networks, tiny embedded servers, and energy harvesters "all connected to the next-generation internet using abundant, low-cost, and high-power computing,â€•

You may not think that anyone can gather much information about you from your oven or dishwasher. But that would be wrong.

Appliances connected to the smart grid will each be individually identifiable. That means that anyone looking at the data from your house will be able to put a fairly complete picture of your life together in a very short time. They will be able to figure out when you leave for work and when you get home. They will be able to find out if you go to bed at a particular time each night, and what you watch on TV.

The idea that the government can monitor all of this activity is troubling at best, and Orwellian at worst. But government monitoring is not the only consideration here.

The information that is gathered from appliances will be stored somewhere. Initially, it is likely to be used for marketing purposes by manufacturers. But all stored data vulnerable to hacking, and devices such as this could also leave their owners subject to forms of fraud.

Probable scenarios include the ability of criminals who gain access to data to case your home without ever having to drive by. A stocker who gets access to this information would be able to know when his victim is actually home. Private investigators could potentially use this information to confirm travel schedules and an individual's whereabouts in divorce or other types of civil suits. And then, of course, how about the ability of unscrupulous repairmen who might set devices up to send their owners notifications that certain repairs are needed when they actually are not?

All of this information could also potentially be used by the government in criminal cases. All of the data gathered through smart grid appliances would be available to law enforcement with a simple subpoena. No search warrant required.

But perhaps the most troubling aspect of this story is the simple fact that David Petraeus seems to be broadcasting that the government will use this data to investigate US citizens. It is very clear that the country's privacy laws are not capable of protecting us from this type of invasion of privacy. So, that means that if you don't think that everything you do should be broadcast to the entire world, you may want to avoid buying a dishwasher that is connected to the internet.

by Jim Malmberg

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