

Comms: Blackberry tells India "no way" for data

RIM (Research in Motion), the company that makes Blackberry, the device that allegedly threatened US security when the service went down and the US Secret Service discovered it was so reliant on it that internal comms ground to a halt is back in the news for security related issues. This time it's the Indian government.

In 2007, the French government banned its officers from using Blackberry devices, citing the fact that all Blackberry data is held on servers in the USA and therefore the US government has, in practice, unrestricted access to it as a result of the multiple layers of legislation and executive orders that allow government agencies access to pretty much anything, anywhere, anytime if they mention the T word (terrorism).

When Blackberry's servers had a crisis last year, the US Secret Service (which isn't particularly secret at all) admitted that it had effectively been off the air for a while. Of course, at the time, no one except the Secret Service noticed.

Now the Indian government has sought access to Blackberry data saying that it wants help to decrypt messages that its agencies consider suspicious. They say that the systems messaging service is too secure and that criminals and terrorists (the T word) can use it to pass messages beyond the sight of law enforcement. Unencrypted SMS is far more to the liking of the agencies.

Blackberry has told the Indians that it's not going to happen. But India is not alone in demanding assistance. There are only just over 100,000 Blackberry users in India but companies such as Vodafone expect that to increase significantly in the gadget-toting world of Indian business where flash is as important as cash.

Blackberry says that its encryption software is designed so that neither RIM nor anyone else to read messages not intended for them. So it can't help even if it wants to.

In October, Blackberry entered the Chinese market. There HTC has already made massive inroads into the corporate email on the move market with devices that are cheaper and use services that cost less than Blackberry.

RIM has been making steady profits growth since fighting off most of the patent actions brought against it by companies that saw its potential and wanted a slice of the action, although it settled on action out of court. It was in that action that the extent of the US government's dependence on Blackberry first came to public knowledge. A government department filed a brief saying that, if Blackberry were to be suspended, that US government operations, including security, would be compromised due to widespread use of the devices particularly for communicating with agents in the field.

In April RIM announced that its profits had doubled.

For the next year, in the US and the UK in particular, the big question is "who owns the Blackberry?" If it's a corporate tool, then it will have to be handed back when jobs evaporate in the jobs recession that is already biting, and service use will fall. The last "must have" device was the Filofax and when the economy collapsed, so did the company's fortunes. Under fresh management it has revived but its products are no longer ubiquitous or indispensable. Will unemployed bankers want a Blackberry to show around in meetings? Or will they make do with an "ordinary" smart phone or, even, wait until they get home to check their email?

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