

Federal Court Rules Users of TOR Have No Expectation of Privacy

February 26, 2016 – It is has been a while since we have done a story on TOR, but this one caught us by surprise. TOR is an online tool meant to anonymize web browsing. It does this by rerouting the user's traffic through various computers – called –œnodes– all over the internet. It is clearly intended as a tool to maintain the privacy of its users. But federal judge Richard Jones, in Washington, DC has now ruled that TOR users have no expectation of privacy. As odd as this might sound, the judge has a point that's quite interesting.

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var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];
s.type = 'text/javascript';
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);
})();
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var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;
po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';
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})();
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The ruling, which was issued on Tuesday, was handed down in the case of Brian Farrell. Farrell worked for a website called Silk Road, which was an online marketplace for illicit activity such as drug purchases.

During the Justice Department's investigation of Silk Road, Farrell's internet IP address was among data that was subpoenaed from Carnegie Mellon University's computer lab, which had been working to discover TOR vulnerabilities.

After studying the way that TOR works, Judge Jones two determinations that were key to his ruling. First, he determined that anyone using TOR was willingly providing his IP address to the network to establish communications. Second, he determined that users of TOR had been warned that the network had vulnerabilities that could expose their identity. Based on these two findings, he determined that use of TOR provided no reasonable expectation of privacy.

The vulnerabilities discovered by Carnegie Mellon have since been patched but the ruling should serve as a warning to anyone using a service to maintain their anonymity: Whatever you are looking at on the internet may not be as private as you think.

by Jim Malmberg

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