

RON WYDEN  
OREGON

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FINANCE

221 DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510  
(202) 224-5244

United States Senate  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3703

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September 22, 2021

Clare Martorana  
Federal Chief Information Officer  
Office of Management and Budget  
725 17th St NW  
Washington, DC 20506

Dear Ms. Martorana:

I write to urge the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to protect federal networks from foreign spies and criminals who misuse online advertising for hacking and surveillance, by setting clear new rules for agencies in its forthcoming “zero trust” cybersecurity policy.

I have pushed successive administrations to respond more appropriately to surveillance threats, including from foreign governments and criminals exploiting online advertising to hack federal systems. This includes seemingly innocuous online advertisements, which can be used to deliver malware to phones and computers—often without requiring users to click anything. This malware can steal, modify or wipe sensitive government data, or record conversations by remotely enabling a computer’s built-in microphone.

The companies that deliver online advertisements also collect vast amounts of sensitive information about users, their movements, web browsing and other online activities, which is then offered for sale to anyone with a credit card. Indeed, I recently led a bipartisan Senate investigation into this unregulated market, which discovered that major advertising companies are providing Americans’ data to firms in China, Russia and other high-risk foreign countries. It would surprise nobody if foreign intelligence services were eager to acquire that data and put it to use in hacking, blackmail and influence campaigns.

The National Security Agency (NSA) issued public guidance in June 2018 recommending that organizations block potentially malicious, internet-based advertisements to address the threat posed by malware-laden online advertising. The NSA issued additional guidance two years later on the threats posed by the collection and sale of location data from mobile devices, which specifically recommended turning on privacy settings that limit ad tracking. In January 2021, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) published similar public guidance to federal agencies, recommending the use of ad blocking software both to protect against malicious advertisements and data collection by third parties.

911 NE 11TH AVENUE  
SUITE 630  
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(541) 431-0229

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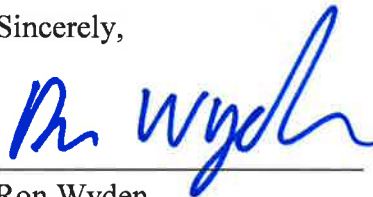
Currently, federal agencies are not required to implement this NSA and CISA guidance. Even so, the Intelligence Community Chief Information Officer recently informed my office that it had done so:

“The IC has considered all recommendations from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the National Security Agency and has implemented enterprise-wide policy and technology controls consistent with government recommendations and industry best practices for ad-blocking. The IC has implemented network-based ad-blocking technologies and uses information from several layers, including Domain Name System information, to block unwanted and malicious advertising content.”

While the intelligence community has acted to protect its personnel and computers from malvertising based threats, many other federal agencies have not, and are unlikely to until they are required to do so. To that end, as OMB finalizes its recently released draft Federal Zero Trust Strategy, detailing the specific actions that OMB is requiring federal agencies to take to secure their systems from hackers, I urge OMB to also require agencies to implement the CISA and NSA guidance to block ads.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. If you have any questions about this request, please contact Chris Soghoian in my office.

Sincerely,



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Ron Wyden  
United States Senator