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NSA offering 'billions' for Skype eavesdrop solution

Business model for P2P firm at last?

By [Lewis Page](#)

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Counter Terror Expo News of a possible viable business model for P2P VoIP network Skype emerged today, at the Counter Terror Expo in London. An industry source disclosed that America's supersecret National Security Agency (NSA) is offering "billions" to any firm which can offer reliable eavesdropping on Skype IM and voice traffic.

The spybiz exec, who preferred to remain anonymous, confirmed that Skype continues to be a major problem for government listening agencies, spooks and police. This was already thought to be the case, following requests from German authorities for special intercept/bugging powers to help them deal with Skype-loving malefactors. Britain's GCHQ has also stated that it has severe problems intercepting VoIP and internet communication in general.

Skype in particular is a serious problem for spooks and cops. Being P2P, the network can't be accessed by the company providing it and the authorities can't gain access by that route. The company won't disclose details of its encryption, either, and isn't required to as it is Europe based. This lack of openness prompts many security pros to rubbish Skype on "security through obscurity" grounds: but nonetheless it remains a popular choice with those who think they might find themselves under surveillance. Rumour suggests that America's NSA may be able to break Skype encryption - assuming they have access to a given call or message - but nobody else.

The NSA may be able to do that: but it seems that if so, this uses up too much of the agency's resources at present.

"They are saying to the industry, you get us into Skype and we will make you a very rich company," said the industry source, adding that the obscure encryption used by the P2Pware is believed to change frequently as part of software updates.

The spyware kingpin suggested that Skype is deliberately seeking to frustrate national listening agencies, which seems an odd thing to do - Skype has difficulties enough getting revenues out of its vast user base at any time, and a paid secure-voice system for subversives doesn't seem like a money-spinner.

But corporate parent eBay, having had to write down \$1.4bn already following its \$2.6bn purchase of Skype back in the bubble-2.0 days of 2005, might see an opportunity here. A billion or two from the NSA for a backdoor into Skype might make the acquisition seem like a sensible idea.

We asked the NSA for comment, particularly on the idea of simply buying a way into Skype, but hadn't yet received a response as of publication. ®

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