Blackberry's Encryption System

ISSUE: Should BlackBerry have provided countries access to its encryption system?

In 2010, the government of the United Arab Emirates imposed a ban on the BlackBerry smartphone, causing many eastern countries such as India, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia to similarly begin looking at the BlackBerry as a national security threat. These raised security concerns led to many eastern countries giving Research in Motion (RIM), the maker of BlackBerry, two options. The first option was to provide access to the BlackBerry's encryption system or two, to discontinue business within the concerned countries. After months of negotiating, RIM conceded and made individual contracts with the countries to allow access to the BlackBerry's encryption system.[4]

The first smartphone created was the BlackBerry. It was launched in 2002, but stayed in the US, UK, and Canada until entering the global market in 2005.[1] Although the BlackBerry began the era of checking e-mail and browsing the web, its biggest selling point was the built-in encryption system. Scott Totzke, Senior Vice President of BlackBerry Security, explained the power of the encryption system publicly to France:

> "Every message that is sent via a BlackBerry is broken up into 2Kb 'packets of information,' each of which is given a 256-bit key by the BlackBerry server…That means to release the contents of a 10KB e-mail, a person would have to crack 5 separate keys, and each one would take about as long as it would for the sun to burn out – billions of years." [3]

However, this strong encryption system is what began the downfall of the BlackBerry. Many eastern countries became troubled after terrorist attacks occurred, in which all communication had taken place over BlackBerry smartphones. Governments were unable to decrypt messages sent over the devices and, in turn, prevent such attacks. Other countries had less concern over terrorists, but were more focused on cultural differences and the inability to block certain sites, such as pornography. For one reason or another, countries began multiplying against RIM's Blackberry encryption system, and it wasn't long before the company caved to the countries' demands to attempt to save itself from going under.

"The company is in a pretty tricky position now…Part of the BlackBerry's appeal is that it offers high levels of security and that same factor is what's getting it blocked." [2]

– Matthew Reed

Senior Analyst & Editor, Middle East & Africa Wireless Analyst, in 2010

There are two sides to every issue:

1. RIM was RIGHT to give the governments of countries access to their encryption system.
2. RIM was WRONG to give the governments of countries access to their encryption system.

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