SKYPE expands cooperation with Gov't snooping

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Skype, the online phone service long favored by political dissidents, criminals and others eager to communicate beyond the reach of governments, has expanded its cooperation with law enforcement authorities to make online chats and other user information available to police, said industry and government officials familiar with the changes.

Surveillance of the audio and video feeds remains impractical — even when courts issue warrants, say industry officials with direct knowledge of the matter. But that barrier could eventually vanish as Skype becomes one of the world's most popular forms of telecommunication.

The changes to online chats, which are written messages conveyed almost instantaneously between users, result in part from technical upgrades to Skype that were instituted to address outages and other stability issues since Microsoft bought the company last year. Officials of the United States and other countries have long pushed to expand their access to newer forms of communications to resolve an issue that the FBI calls the "going dark" problem.

Microsoft has approached the issue with "tremendous sensitivity and a canny awareness of what the issues would be," said an industry official familiar with Microsoft's plans, who like several people interviewed for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the issue publicly. The company has "a long track record of working successfully with law enforcement here and internationally," he added.

The changes, which give the authorities access to addresses and credit card numbers, have drawn quiet applause in law enforcement circles but hostility from many activists and analysts.