

AT&T Rejects Bid to Curb Phone Data

By Tim O'Brien

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American Telephone and Telegraph Co. yesterday said it will continue to disclose records of reporters' phone calls to government agencies with valid subpoenas.

The company said it is required by law to "submit such records to government agencies upon valid subpoena or on demand pursuant to lawful processes."

AT&T was responding to a letter sent to board chairman John DeButts last week by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and representatives of 10 news organizations. The letter demanded a stop to the practice of disclosing records of reporters' phone calls, charging that such records might compromise confidential sources.

The group had threatened legal action if the company did not voluntarily stop disclosing the records.

AT&T also refused to promise news organizations advance notice that the government had issued subpoenas for their telephone records, arguing that such a practice would "inject the telephone company into controversies between government authorities and private citizens."

"We believe that we should not assume the role of arbitrating such controversies," the company said in a press release left to the judicial and legislative branches of government.

The group of news organizations—including the Columbia Broadcasting System, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune, and the Chicago Sun-Times—had also asked AT&T to turn over a list of all instances in which the company gave records of their phone calls to government agencies.

According to the letter from the protesting news organizations, AT&T has told the Federal Communications Commission that company policy does not require a formal subpoena before turning over the telephone records. Instead, the letter said, AT&T discloses the records upon receiving a written request from prosecutors or responsible law enforcement officers.

In its statement, AT&T said the duty of notifying its customers that subpoenas have been issued should rest with the government and not the company.