

FTC Robocall Contests Reddit “Ask Me Anything”

On Monday, June 1, 2015, Patty Hsue from the Bureau of Consumer Protection’s Division of Marketing Practices participated in a reddit “Ask Me Anything” about the FTC’s robocall contests, DetectaRobo and Robocalls: Humanity Strikes Back. Contest judges and our contest partner, Pindrop Security, also participated in the conversation.

Note: The [AMA remains on reddit as long as reddit allows](#), and includes user names of participants (which have been removed from the FTC’s transcript record below and referred to simply as “Commenter.”

AMA Bio/Introduction

PattyHsueFTC: My short bio: I am a staff attorney in the FTC’s Bureau of Consumer Protection and I lead our tech initiatives to stop annoying and illegal robocalls. I’m running our 2015 Robocall Contests – DetectaRobo and Robocalls: Humanity Strikes Back. Detectarobo will take place at National Day of Civic Hacking on June 6. We’re also hosting our Strike Back contest and currently accepting submissions for solutions that block and report robocalls, and the top five submissions will move on the final round at DEF CON 23. Submissions are due June 15 and there’s \$50,000 in total cash prizes!!

I’m joined online by our contest judges David Gibson and Yair Matas on behalf of the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission and Dr. Mustaque Ahamad. We’re hoping our other judges, Matt Blaze and Jonathan Curtis, will be joining us too. Their joint user name is www.reddit.com/user/RobocallJudges and you should check out their bios.

Finally, Aaron Dallas is also answering questions about honeypots on behalf of our contest partner, Pindrop Security. He’s using www.reddit.com/user/pindropsecurity.

Please note, the views expressed here are my own, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Commission or any individual Commissioner.

My Proof: <https://twitter.com/FTC/status/603648603966590976>

Update: Live for 15 more minutes (until 5:30 pm ET)! Keep those questions coming!!

Final update: Headed out now - thanks for all the great questions. Have more? email robocallcontest@ftc.gov. Thanks!!

AMA

Commenter: Are .Net(C#, F#, etc...) languages allowed?

PattyHsueFTC: To ensure the judges can test your submission, the languages for both contests are limited to C++, C, Java, PERL, Ruby, or Python.

Commenter: Any advice for minimising robocalls at home? Does the thing where you play back the phone company's recording for a disconnected number work? Pretending to not speak English? Does anything work?

And is it true that adding your number to the Do Not Call list can increase the robocalls you get, because unethical people harvest numbers from the list?

PattyHsueFTC: We usually tell consumers to just hang up and don't engage with people who blast out robocalls. If you respond or engage in anyway, even by pressing 2 to have your number "removed," you don't know whether your number will be added to a hot list because you're verifying you are a live user. For more tips, please see <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0259-robocalls>.

In terms of adding your number to the dnc, there's no evidence that doing so increases the number of calls that you receive. Remember that the DNC is intended for legitimate telemarketers who are trying to follow the rules.

PattyHsueFTC: Also, if you receive any robocalls, remember to file a complaint with the FTC at <https://donotcall.gov/>. WE really do find that information helpful.

Commenter: Does the FTC have an API to receive complaint data programmatically?

Commenter: I noticed the form says that you need to be registered 31 days before you can submit a report. Is there a way to get this shortened?

PattyHsueFTC: For robocalls, you don't have to be registered on the DNC for the robocall to be illegal. If the robocall is trying to sell you something and the telemarketer didn't get your prior written consent to contact you, it's illegal. So you can go ahead and file those robocall complaints with us!

Commenter: Next time I win a cruise I'll be sure to report it.

Commenter: [Seems legit...](#)

Commenter: Whoa, pressing 2 is supposed to have my number removed?

PattyHsueFTC: [It's a trap!](#)

Commenter: Did you submit this to /r/Defcon?

PattyHsueFTC: Great idea. Thanks for doing that!

Commenter: You should post this in /r/hacking /r/2600 &c.

Commenter: all more or less garbage subs. Probably have better luck at sysadmin or programming

Commenter: Hackathons have been a thing for a while now, but only recently does it seem like they're being taken seriously as a means for promoting innovation by government agencies. What made you decide to put together a hackathon?

PattyHsueFTC: Current technology makes the robocall problem a tough nut to crack, and one of the things we can do is to tap into the ingenuity and technical expertise among the public. We're hosting contests at National Day of Civic Hacking and DEF CON to engage these communities of information security experts and technologists who have applicable expertise and inspire them to apply that knowledge to this issue.

Commenter: Did you get any resistance from more conventional members of the FTC?

PattyHsueFTC: The agency is committed to using all tools in its arsenal to attack this particular problem, including creative and new ways to tap into communities that we are building relationships with. After our successes with our prior challenges, we're confident that crowd-sourcing technical solutions is the best way to further the development of additional protections for consumers.

Commenter: The sample data does not contain call duration. Will the contest data contain any?

PindropSecurity: No, the contest data will not contain call duration. [This FAQ](#) contains a sample data set.

Commenter: Very very exciting, I HATE robocalls.

Is the contest for actual deliverable prototypes or do concept papers count?

one approach: Listen for 5 second carryover pause and If the carryover 'event' happens record to sqlite DB. Using rolling period, Synchronize local users db with updated entries and use their created entries to adjust the database.

2nd idea: using above w/ a forwarding line service that connects both parties to a mutual 3rd line. The 1st party (the caller) is screened for about 3 seconds 1st and is then either blocked or routed to the call recipient.

PattyHsueFTC: Thanks for the interest! Illegal robocalls are a huge problem for consumers, and that's why we're hosting these contests. We're looking for actual deliverables during our Robocalls: Humanity Strikes Back contest. The qualifying phase closes on June 15. Learn more here: www.ftc.gov/strikeback.

Commenter: Q: Will FTC people be at any Hackathon events?

PattyHsueFTC: We will be at DEF CON 23. hope to see you all there!

Commenter: Q: Have you normalized your DetectaRobo grader's dataset to count a call as robocall if "From#" phone number is within the Subscriber number range (Area code + Exchange code/NXX)?

PindropSecurity: Robocalls are not limited to specific NPA/NXXs. Individual NPA/NXXs may contain both robocalls and non-robocalls.

Commenter: "Individual NPA/NXXs may contain both robocalls and non-robocalls"

Then how to you grade the specific call record as robocall or not?

PindropSecurity: The robocalls present in the data set were determined to be such by internal Pindrop algorithms and validated against external data sources.

Commenter: Q: Can we assume the DetectaRobo event's datasets are real (except for the randomized subscriber number/last 4 digits)?

PindropSecurity: Yes, the dataset is real. They are call records from our phone honeypot. As you mention, the numbers have been obfuscated.