

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

**TWITTER, INC.,**  
Plaintiff,  
v.  
**ERIC H. HOLDER, ET AL.,**  
Defendants.

Case No. 14-cv-04480-YGR

**ORDER GRANTING IN PART AND DENYING  
IN PART MOTION TO DISMISS AMENDED  
COMPLAINT**

Re: Dkt. No. 94

On November 13, 2015, Plaintiff Twitter, Inc. filed its Amended Complaint (Dkt. No. 88, “AC”) following this Court’s Order of October 14, 2015, directing that Twitter amend the complaint in light of the enactment of the USA FREEDOM Act of 2015. (Dkt. No. 85.) Defendants Loretta Lynch, *et al.* (“the Government”) again move to dismiss the amended complaint pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) and 12(b)(6), and for prudential reasons.

The Amended Complaint alleges that the Government has precluded Twitter from publishing a “Transparency Report” containing certain data about aggregate numbers of legal process it has received, if any, including requests pursuant to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (“FISA”) and National Security Letters (“NSLs”). Twitter alleges that the non-disclosure provisions in the FISA are unconstitutional on its face because precluding disclosure indefinitely violates the First Amendment. Twitter further alleges that, to the extent the Government is basing its prohibition on publication of Twitter’s draft Transparency Report on FISA’s non-disclosure provisions, and would seek to prosecute Twitter under the Espionage Act for publication of the Transparency Report, those statutes violate the First Amendment as applied to Twitter.

In its motion to dismiss the Amended Complaint (Dkt. No. 94), the Government seeks dismissal of Twitter’s claims on the grounds that: (1) the First Amendment claims should be dismissed in the interests of comity in favor of the FISA court taking jurisdiction over such claims; (2) Twitter has no standing to bring the Espionage Act claim; and (3) all three claims fail to allege a cognizable theory because they are based upon a prohibition on publishing information

1 that Twitter acknowledges is classified and Twitter has not challenged that classification decision.

2 Having carefully considered the papers submitted and the pleadings in this action,<sup>1</sup> and for  
 3 the reasons set forth below, the Court hereby **GRANTS IN PART AND DENIES IN PART** the  
 4 Government’s Partial Motion to Dismiss the Amended Complaint. The motion to dismiss on  
 5 grounds of comity in favor of jurisdiction with the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court  
 6 (“FISC”) and to dismiss for lack of standing on the Espionage Act claim is **DENIED**. The motion  
 7 to dismiss Twitter’s as-applied and facial First Amendment challenges concerning limits on  
 8 disclosure of classified aggregate data is **GRANTED** because Twitter has failed to allege a  
 9 challenge to the underlying classification decisions themselves.

10 **I. BACKGROUND**

11 On April 1, 2014, Twitter submitted to the Government a draft transparency report  
 12 containing information and discussion about the aggregate numbers of NSLs and FISA orders, if  
 13 any, it received in the second half of 2013. Twitter requested “a determination as to exactly  
 14 which, if any, parts of its Transparency Report are classified or, in the [government’s] view, may  
 15 not lawfully be published online.” (AC ¶ 4.) Five months later, on September 9, 2014, the  
 16 Government, in a letter from James A. Baker, General Counsel of the Federal Bureau of  
 17 Investigation, notified Twitter that “information contained in the report is classified and cannot be  
 18 publicly released” because it does not comply with the government’s approved framework for  
 19 reporting data about FISA orders and NSLs. (AC ¶ 5.)<sup>2</sup>

20 **II. APPLICABLE STANDARD**

21 **A. Motion Under Rule 12(b)(1)**

22 Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(1) requires dismissal when the plaintiff fails to meet  
 23 its burden of establishing subject-matter jurisdiction. *St. Clair v. City of Chico*, 880 F.2d 199, 201  
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25 <sup>1</sup> The Court has also considered two amicus briefs filed in connection with this motion.  
 26 (See Dkt. Nos. 96, 101.)

27 <sup>2</sup> Six weeks after Twitter filed this lawsuit, on November 17, 2014, the Government  
 28 prepared a redacted version of the draft transparency report that it agreed could be released  
 publicly by Twitter. (Dkt. No. 21.)

1 (9th Cir. 1989). Rule 12(b)(1) dismissal is proper when the plaintiff fails to establish the elements  
 2 of standing. *Oregon v. Legal Servs. Corp.*, 552 F.3d 965, 969 (9th Cir. 2009). “The plaintiff bears  
 3 the burden of proof to establish standing ‘with the manner and degree of evidence required at the  
 4 successive stages of the litigation.’” *Oregon v. Legal Servs. Corp.*, 552 F.3d 965, 969-70 (9th Cir.  
 5 2009) (quoting *Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife*, 504 U.S. 555, 561 (1992)). At the pleading stage,  
 6 “general factual allegations of injury resulting from the defendant’s conduct may suffice,” because  
 7 we “‘presume that general allegations embrace those specific facts that are necessary to support  
 8 the claim.’” *Lujan*, 497 U.S. at 561.

9 The “constitutional minimum” requirements for standing set forth in *Lujan* require first  
 10 that the plaintiff show it has suffered an “injury in fact,” that is “an invasion of a legally protected  
 11 interest which is (a) concrete and particularized,” and “(b) ‘actual or imminent, not ‘conjectural’ or  
 12 ‘hypothetical.’” *Lujan*, 497 U.S. at 560 (internal citations omitted). Second, *Lujan* requires that  
 13 the plaintiff show a causal connection between alleged injury and alleged conduct, *i.e.* that the  
 14 injury is “fairly traceable” to the challenged action. *Id.* Third, the plaintiff must show that it is  
 15 “likely,” not merely “speculative,” that the injury will be “redressed by a favorable decision.” *Id.*  
 16 at 561. The “fairly traceable” and “redressability” requirements overlap and are “two facets of a  
 17 single causation requirement.” *Washington Env’tl. Council v. Bellon*, 732 F.3d 1131, 1146 (9th  
 18 Cir. 2013) (quoting *Allen v. Wright*, 468 U.S. 737, 753 n. 19 (1984)). The two are distinct insofar  
 19 as causality examines the connection between the alleged misconduct and injury, whereas  
 20 redressability analyzes the connection between the alleged injury and requested judicial relief. *Id.*  
 21 Redressability does not require certainty, but only a substantial likelihood that the injury will be  
 22 redressed by a favorable judicial decision. *Wolfson v. Brammer*, 616 F.3d 1045, 1056 (9th Cir.  
 23 2010).

24 **B. Motion Under Rule 12(b)(6)**

25 Pursuant to Rule 12(b)(6), a complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim upon  
 26 which relief may be granted against that defendant. Dismissal may be based on either “the lack  
 27 of a cognizable legal theory or the absence of sufficient facts alleged under a cognizable legal  
 28 theory.” *Balistreri v. Pacifica Police Dep’t*, 901 F.2d 696, 699 (9th Cir. 1988) (citing *Robertson*

1 v. *Dean Witter Reynolds, Inc.*, 749 F.2d 530, 533-34 (9th Cir. 1984)). To avoid dismissal under  
 2 Rule 12(b)(6), a complaint must plead “enough facts to state a claim [for] relief that is plausible  
 3 on its face.” *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007). A claim is plausible on  
 4 its face “when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable  
 5 inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S.  
 6 662, 678 (2009). All allegations of material fact are taken as true and construed in the light most  
 7 favorable to the plaintiff. *Johnson v. Lucent Techs., Inc.*, 653 F.3d 1000, 1010 (9th Cir. 2011).  
 8 If the facts alleged do not support a reasonable inference of liability, stronger than a mere  
 9 possibility, the claim must be dismissed. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678-79; *see also In re Gilead Scis.*  
 10 *Sec. Litig.*, 536 F.3d 1049, 1055 (9th Cir. 2008) (the court is not required to accept as true  
 11 “allegations that are merely conclusory, unwarranted deductions of fact, or unreasonable  
 12 inferences”).

### 13 C. Prudential Considerations Warranting Dismissal

14 In addition, claims under the Declaratory Judgment Act may be dismissed based on  
 15 prudential considerations such as the principle of comity in relation to other courts. *See* 28 U.S.C.  
 16 § 2201(a); *accord Wilton v. Seven Falls Co.*, 515 U.S. 277, 288 (1995) (recognizing discretionary  
 17 nature of declaratory relief); *NRDC v. EPA*, 966 F.2d 1292, 1299 (9th Cir. 1992) (same). That is  
 18 because “[i]n the declaratory judgment context, the normal principle that federal courts should  
 19 adjudicate claims within their jurisdiction yields to considerations of practicality and wise judicial  
 20 administration.” *Wilton*, 515 U.S. at 288. The Ninth Circuit has held that “as a matter of comity  
 21 and of the orderly administration of justice...[a] court should refuse to exercise its jurisdiction to  
 22 interfere with the operation of a decree of another federal court.” *Lapin v. Shulton, Inc.*, 333 F.2d  
 23 169, 172 (9th Cir. 1964).

## 24 III. DISCUSSION

### 25 A. General Statutory Background

#### 26 I. FISA Orders and Directives

27 Various provisions of the FISA allow the Government to obtain information from  
 28 electronic communication service providers, either directly or by way of an order from the FISC,

1 subject to nondisclosure obligations. FISA requires that FISC orders, upon the request of the  
2 applicant or a finding of supporting facts by the court, “shall direct” recipients to provide the  
3 government with “all information, facilities, or technical assistance necessary to accomplish the  
4 electronic surveillance in such a manner as will protect its secrecy” and that the provider  
5 “maintain under security procedures approved by the Attorney General and the Director of  
6 National Intelligence any records concerning the surveillance or the aid furnished that such person  
7 wishes to retain.” 50 U.S.C. § 1805(c)(2)(B), (C). FISA also permits the Attorney General and  
8 Director of National Intelligence (“DNI”) to obtain approval from the FISC for authority to target  
9 “persons reasonably believed to be located outside the United States to acquire foreign intelligence  
10 information.” 50 U.S.C § 1881a(h)(1)(A). Once that FISC approval is obtained, the Attorney  
11 General and DNI have the power to issue a directive for acquisition of information requiring an  
12 electronic communication service provider to “provide the Government with all information,  
13 facilities, or assistance necessary to accomplish the acquisition in a manner that will protect the  
14 secrecy of the acquisition” and to “maintain under security procedures approved by the Attorney  
15 General and the Director of National Intelligence any records concerning the acquisition.” 50  
16 U.S.C. § 1881a(h)(1)(A), (B). Other FISA search and surveillance provisions similarly mandate  
17 that any orders or directives include provisions requiring secrecy about the request itself, as well  
18 as the fruits of the request.<sup>3</sup>

19 FISA provides procedures whereby challenges to its orders may be brought by recipients  
20 of requests. For instance, a party receiving a production order under Title V’s business records

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21  
22 <sup>3</sup> See 50 U.S.C. § 1824(c)(2)(B)-(C) (Title III orders “shall direct” the recipient to (a)  
23 assist in the physical search “in such a manner as will protect its secrecy” and (a) that the recipient  
24 retains be maintained under appropriate security procedures “any records concerning the search or  
25 the aid furnished”); 50 U.S.C. § 1842(d)(2)(B) (Title IV orders “shall direct” that recipients  
26 “furnish any information, facilities, or technical assistance necessary to accomplish the installation  
27 and operation of the pen register or trap and trace device in such a manner as will protect its  
28 secrecy,” “shall not disclose the existence of the investigation,” and shall maintain “any records  
concerning the pen register or trap and trace device or the aid furnished” under appropriate  
security procedures); 50 U.S.C. § 1861(d)(1) (providing that “[n]o person shall disclose to any  
other person that the [FBI] has sought or obtained tangible things pursuant to an order under” Title  
V of FISA).

1 provision “may challenge the legality of that order by filing a petition with” the FISC. 50 U.S.C.  
 2 § 1861(f)(2)(A)(i). FISA further provides that the FISC has “inherent authority...to determine or  
 3 enforce compliance with” the orders, rules, or procedures of the FISC. 50 U.S.C. § 1803(h).

4 **B. Motion to Dismiss on Comity Grounds**

5 The Government argues that the Court should exercise its discretion to decline jurisdiction  
 6 over Counts I and II in the Amended Complaint based upon prudential considerations of comity.  
 7 “In the declaratory judgment context, the normal principle that federal courts should adjudicate  
 8 claims within their jurisdiction yields to considerations of practicality and wise judicial  
 9 administration.” *Wilton v. Seven Falls Co.*, 515 U.S. 277, 288 (1995). Thus, a district court has  
 10 discretion to decline to exercise jurisdiction over Declaratory Judgment Act claims based on  
 11 prudential considerations. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 2201(a). In exercise of this discretion, the Court may  
 12 take into account concerns of judicial administration, comity, and fairness to the litigants.  
 13 *Principal Life Ins. Co. v. Robinson*, 394 F.3d 665, 672 (9th Cir. 2005).

14 The Government contends that the nondisclosure obligations incurred by recipients of  
 15 FISA process are imposed through orders of the FISC, directives made after a FISC-approved  
 16 certification, or as part of a legal process that the FISC oversees. The Government argues that  
 17 Twitter’s challenge is, in actuality, a challenge to decisions of the FISC. Consequently, it urges  
 18 that this Court should yield jurisdiction over Twitter’s FISA-related claims to the FISC.

19 The Government does not identify any order of the FISC addressing, as a general matter,  
 20 publication of aggregate data about receipt of legal process, the crux of the matter before the Court  
 21 here. Likewise, Twitter’s Amended Complaint does not challenge any prohibition on disclosure in  
 22 any individual FISC order, FISA directive, or NSL. Rather, Twitter contends that the  
 23 Government’s reliance on the FISA non-disclosure provisions as a basis for prohibiting disclosure  
 24 of *aggregate data* about legal process directed to Twitter violates the First Amendment. Nothing  
 25 in the Amended Complaint would require the Court to interpret, review, or grant relief from any  
 26 particular FISC order or directive. Thus, the Government’s reliance on *Lapin*, 333 F.2d at 172,  
 27 and *Treadaway v. Acad. of Motion Picture Arts & Sci.*, 783 F.2d 1418, 1422 (9th Cir. 1986), is  
 28 unavailing. The motion on these grounds is **DENIED**.

1           **C.       Motion To Dismiss Espionage Act Claim**

2           The Government next moves to dismiss Twitter’s claim challenging application of the  
3       Espionage Act. Twitter alleges that, to the extent the Government has notified it that publication  
4       of its Transparency Report could result in a violation of the Espionage Act, application of the Act  
5       would violate the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Government contends that Twitter’s  
6       allegations do not establish standing. The Government argues that, here, any alleged injury to  
7       Twitter is merely speculative, rather than the “actual or imminent” injury that Article III of the  
8       United States Constitution requires.

9           “The judicial power of the United States...is not an unconditioned authority to determine  
10       the [validity] of legislative or executive acts,” but is limited by Article III of the Constitution “to  
11       the resolution of ‘cases’ and ‘controversies.’” *Valley Forge Christian Coll. v. Ams. United for*  
12       *Separation of Church & State., Inc.*, 454 U.S. 464, 471 (1982). To establish standing for a pre-  
13       enforcement challenge, as here, the Court must consider: “whether the plaintiff articulates a  
14       concrete plan to violate the law;” “whether the government has communicated a specific warning  
15       or threat to initiate proceedings under the statute;” “the history of past prosecution under the  
16       statute” and whether “the government’s active enforcement of a statute...render[s] the plaintiff’s  
17       fear of injury reasonable.” *Protectmarriage.com-Yes on 8 v. Bowen*, 752 F.3d 827, 839 (9th Cir.  
18       2014), *cert. denied sub nom ProtectMarriage.com-Yes on 8 v. Padilla*, 135 S.Ct. 1523 (2015).

19           The Court finds that the allegations here—that Twitter presented the draft Transparency  
20       Report it planned to publish to the Government and that the Government informed Twitter that it  
21       could not publish the information because it is classified—are sufficient to show an “imminent”  
22       injury to establish Twitter’s standing here. The Government’s contention that the threat of  
23       prosecution is low because there are other avenues of recourse for Twitter to challenge individual  
24       nondisclosure orders simply does not address the issue here, reporting of *aggregate* data. The  
25       motion to dismiss the Espionage Act claim on these grounds is **DENIED**.

26           **D.       Sufficiency of Allegations on Constitutional Challenges (Counts I and II)**

27           Finally, the Government argues that Twitter has failed to allege facts sufficient to state a  
28       First Amendment challenge because, as Twitter has conceded, the reason the aggregate data

1 cannot be published is that it has been classified by the Government. Under Executive Order  
2 13526, information may be classified by the “original classification authority determines that the  
3 unauthorized disclosure of the information reasonably could be expected to result in damage to the  
4 national security, which includes defense against transnational terrorism, and the original  
5 classification authority is able to identify or describe the damage.” Exec. Order 13526 § 1.1(a)(4).  
6 The Executive Order sets forth various classification levels, who holds original classification  
7 authority, and to whom such authority may be delegated. *Id.* at §§ 1.2, 1.3(a), (c). All  
8 classification determinations are of limited duration and classification decisions are required to  
9 contain a “declassify on” date. *See* Exec. Order No. 13526 § 1.5(a) (Dec. 29, 2009) (“At the time  
10 of original classification, the original classification authority shall establish a specific date or event  
11 for declassification based on the duration of the national security sensitivity of the information.  
12 Upon reaching the date or event, the information shall be automatically declassified.”).

13 The First Amendment does not permit a person subject to secrecy obligations to disclose  
14 classified national security information. *See Snepp v. United States*, 444 U.S. 507, 509 n.3 (1980)  
15 (per curiam); *Wilson v. C.I.A.*, 586 F.3d 171, 183 (2d Cir. 2009); *see also Stillman v. CIA*, 319  
16 F.3d 546, 548–49 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (describing procedures for challenge to classification decision).  
17 The Court agrees with the Government that Twitter has not alleged that the information is not  
18 properly classified by the Government. Count I challenges the FISA non-disclosure provisions as  
19 being prior restraints of indefinite duration, but the claim does not take into account the fact that a  
20 classification decision is necessarily limited in duration by its nature, as the Government asserts.  
21 Along those same lines, Count II’s as-applied challenge contends that the FISA nondisclosure  
22 provisions are unconstitutional, but does not account for the fact that the Government has refused  
23 to permit disclosure of the aggregate numbers on the grounds that the information is classified  
24 pursuant to the Executive Order (not because of any FISA order or provision).

25 Again, Twitter has conceded that the aggregate data is classified. In the absence of a  
26 challenge to the decisions classifying that information, Twitter’s Constitutional challenges simply  
27 do not allege viable claims.  
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**IV. CONCLUSION**

Accordingly, the Motion to Dismiss the Amended Complaint is **GRANTED IN PART AND DENIED IN PART**. Twitter is given leave to amend to allege a challenge to the classification decisions at issue, as well as any other cognizable challenge consistent with that classification challenge. Twitter shall file its amended complaint no later than **May 24, 2016**. The Government shall have 21 days thereafter to respond.

This terminates Docket No. 94.

**IT IS SO ORDERED.**

Dated: May 2, 2016

  
YVONNE GONZALEZ ROGERS  
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

United States District Court  
Northern District of California