

BlackLivesMatter Activists: Targets of US Surveillance

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The Obama administration's spy agencies have been keeping track of the movements, communications and activities of the new crop of Black activists. Although not surprising, the recent reports should give rise to "new strategies and tactics to exchange information among groups, and new modalities to circumvent infiltration and, ultimately, government sting operations."

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According to a recent investigation by [The Intercept](#), the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI have launched state-sponsored surveillance against BlackLivesMatter activists as a component of safeguarding the homeland, i.e., the fight against terrorism. State-sponsored surveillance of civil rights activists started with the resistance movement that was prompted by the killing of unarmed Michael Brown. According to this report "the department frequently collects information, including location data, on Black Lives Matter activities from public social media accounts, including on Facebook, Twitter, and Vine, even for events expected to be peaceful." The report verifies that the surveillance community utilized social media as an important tool, specifically in "Ferguson, Baltimore, Washington, DC and New York."

In fact, according to the materials obtained by The Intercept, over the last few years, [small bits of evidence](#) indicate "that other counterterrorism intelligence organizations like the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force and state police intelligence groups have been involved in monitoring and apprehending Black Lives Matter activists."

The 21st century surveillance system, however, is substantially more dangerous than that of the 20th century Counter Intelligence Program, known by the acronym COINTELPRO [1956 to 1971], in which the government manufactured criminal attacks against civil rights and peace activists, such as Dr. Martin Luther Kings, Jr., the Black Panther Party, NAACP, etc. The efficiency and speed of data collection and the effectiveness of government secrecy and terror programs would make the civil rights era surveillance programs seem Paleolithic.

The president and the head of the National Security Agency (NSA) deny government spying on citizens. However, a memo regarding a demonstration in the Chinatown section of Washington, DC (4/29/15) is noted in the Intercept report:

"The 'Watch Desk' of the DHS's National Capital Region, FEMA branch compiled this real-

time information despite the fact that an FBI joint intelligence [bulletin](#) shared among several DHS officials the day before noted that there was 'no information suggesting violent behavior is planned for Washington, DC' and that previous anti-police brutality protests in the wake of Ferguson 'have been peaceful in nature.' The bulletin also said that for unspecified reasons 'we remain concerned that unaffiliated individuals could potentially use this event to commit acts of violence in the Chinatown area.'"

These national security windfalls catch everyday citizens exercising their First Amendment rights. I attended the Washington, DC - Chinatown demonstration, referred to above, along with other BlackLivesMatter activists who have been profiled in BAR.

There are always "official" explanations for rouge government practices such as the Bush Administration justification of its "enhanced interrogation techniques, i.e., waterboarding, extra judicial murders of US citizens and torture of innocent civilians. In the myopic world of the FBI, COINTELPRO's goal was to: "expose, disrupt, misdirect, or otherwise neutralize" groups that the FBI officials believed were "subversive" by instructing FBI field operatives to: create a negative public image for targeted groups (e.g. by surveilling activists, and releasing negative personal information to the public:)

- * break down internal organization
- * create dissension between groups
- * restrict access to public resources
- * restrict the ability to organize protests
- * restrict the ability of individuals to participate in group activities.

In an [article](#), entitled: "How Much Is the US Government Spying on Americans," we learn:

"The government is spying on you through your phone ... and may even [remotely turn on your camera and microphone when your phone is off](#). As one example, the NSA has [inserted its code into Android's operating system ... bugging three-quarters of the world's smartphones](#). Google - or the NSA - can [remotely turn on your phone's camera and recorder](#) at any timeAnd Microsoft has [long worked hand-in-hand with the NSA](#) and FBI so that encryption doesn't block the government's ability to spy on users of Skype, Outlook, Hotmail and other Microsoft services."

Without high-speed computation, 21st century satellite imagery, social media and other technological advances, the FBI and other spy agencies were inefficient and slow. Perhaps, one of the benefits of "old school" organizing was the lack of social media (a tool that has been thoroughly compromised by government and corporate surveillance,) that allowed civil rights leaders to develop strong personal relationships that included levels of accountability rooted in social institutions. Additionally, informal networks were strengthened, among civil rights activists in order to circumvent the intentions of an openly hostile and racist government.

Government surveillance of the BlackLivesMatter movement poses new technological and social terrain challenges. New strategies and tactics are required to exchange information among groups and new modalities are required to circumvent infiltration and, ultimately,

government sting operations. The BlackLivesMatter movement is being taken seriously by those invested in thought control and African political suppression through fear. We are confronted with a government that tracks our whereabouts, our purchasing preferences and our communications. More importantly, the government through its surveillance program seeks to instill fear into the Black resistance movement as it courageously raises the mantle of liberation.

Dr. Marsha Coleman-Adebayo is the author of [No FEAR: A Whistleblowers Triumph over Corruption and Retaliation at the EPA](#). She worked at the EPA for 18 years and blew the whistle on a US multinational corporation that endangered South African vanadium mine workers. Marsha's successful lawsuit led to the introduction and passage of the first civil rights and whistleblower law of the 21st century: the Notification of Federal Employees Anti-discrimination and Retaliation Act of 2002 (No FEAR Act). She is Director of Transparency and Accountability for the Green Shadow Cabinet, serves on the Advisory Board of ExposeFacts.com and coordinates the DC-based Hands-Up Coalition.

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