

Canadian Spy Program “LEVITATION” Illustrates “Giant X-Ray Machine Over All Our Digital Lives”

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Rapidshare was one of three file-sharing websites targeted in the spy agency’s surveillance. (Photo: Evan Mitsui/CBC)

Newly released documents contained in the archive of materials leaked to journalists by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden reveals that Canada’s spy agency, the Communications Security Establishment, has been operating a covert, mass surveillance program designed to monitor the downloads of millions of Internet users around the world.

Reported jointly by [The Intercept](#) and the [CBC](#) on Wednesday, the revelations center on a slide presentation detailing a CSE program called LEVITATION which secretly “taps into Internet cables and analyzes records of up to 15 million downloads daily from popular websites commonly used to share videos, photographs, music, and other files.”

[According](#) to the *CBC*:

The presentation provides a rare glimpse into Canada’s cyber-sleuthing capabilities and its use of its spy partners’ immense databases to track the online traffic of millions of people around the world, including Canadians.

That glimpse may be of even greater interest now that the Harper government plans to introduce new legislation [increasing the powers of Canada’s security agencies](#).

Though Canada’s always been described as a junior partner in the Five Eyes spying partnership, which includes the U.S., Britain, New Zealand and Australia, this document shows it led the way in developing this new extremist-tracking tool.

Asked for his assessment of the surveillance program by *The Intercept*’s Ryan Gallagher and Glenn Greenwald, Ron Deibert, director of University of Toronto-based Internet security think tank [Citizen Lab](#), said LEVITATION illustrates just how powerful the world’s intelligence agencies have become and described their myriad spy tools as a “giant X-ray machine over all our digital lives.”

After reviewing the details of the program, Deibert said, “Every single thing that you do – in this case uploading/downloading files to these sites – that act is being archived, collected and analyzed.”

CBC’s reporting describes how the CSE was able to use their technology “to access data

from 102 free file upload sites, though only three file-host companies are named: Sendspace, Rapidshare and the now-defunct Megaupload.”

[According](#) to *The Intercept*:

The ostensible aim of the surveillance is to sift through vast amounts of data to identify people uploading or downloading content that could be connected to terrorism – such as bomb-making guides and hostage videos.

In the process, however, CSE combs through huge volumes of data showing uploads and downloads initiated by Internet users not suspected of any wrongdoing.

In [a top-secret PowerPoint presentation](#), dated from mid-2012, an analyst from the agency jokes about how, while hunting for extremists, the LEVITATION system gets clogged with information on innocuous downloads of the musical TV series [Glee](#).

CSE finds some 350 “interesting” downloads each month, the presentation notes, a number that amounts to less than 0.0001 per cent of the total collected data.

Commenting within CBC’s reporting, Greenwald said an important thing to note about this latest revelation, especially for Canadians, is that “it’s really the first time that a story has been reported that involves [CSE] as the lead agency in a program of pure mass surveillance.”

Begging further questions, Tamir Israel, a lawyer with the University of Ottawa’s Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic, speculated about what the LEVITATION program says about other CSE operations which remain in the dark. “The specific uses that they talk about in this context may not be the problem,” he told the CBC, “but it’s what else they can do.”

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