

Spying on Americans: NSA “Harvesting” Electronic Address Books and Contact Lists

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The *Washington Post* on Tuesday published new revelations stemming from PowerPoint slides and documents leaked by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden. In an article headlined “NSA collects millions of e-mail address books globally,” the *Post* wrote that

“the National Security Agency is harvesting hundreds of millions of contact lists from personal e-mail and instant messaging accounts around the world, many of them belonging to Americans.”

The new information reported by the *Washington Post* further confirms what has become apparent since the first Snowden leaks emerged last June: the NSA data collection programs are virtually unlimited. The NSA and other state agencies are in possession of a wealth of private and personal information on every individual who uses the Internet or a telephone, both in the US and around the world. All of this is carried out in violation of the US Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

According to the *Post*, “The collection program, which has not been disclosed before, intercepts e-mail address books and ‘buddy lists’ from instant messaging services as they move across global data links. Online services often transmit those contacts when a user logs on, composes a message, or synchronizes a computer or mobile device with information stored on remote servers.”

The PowerPoint slides outline the sprawling dimensions of the NSA’s contact list collection efforts. As reported in the *Post*, the slides show that the NSA’s Special Source Operations acquired “444,743 e-mail address books from Yahoo, 105,068 from Hotmail, 82,857 from Facebook, 33,697 from Gmail and 22,881 from unspecified other providers” *in the course of a single day* in 2012.

The slides describe intrusive and aggressive practices by the agency. One slide, with the heading “Data is stored multiple times,” cites three different programs—MARINA, MAINWAY and PINWALE—that sort through Internet metadata, telephone metadata and contact chaining, and written content, respectively.

Another slide presents a case study of a Yahoo account, belonging to a member of the Iranian Quds Force, that was hacked by the NSA in September of 2011. A mass of spam messages subsequently sent from the account led to the accidental collection of huge quantities of data as a result of all the “false connections” generated by the spamming.

Slide four reads: “Buddy Lists, Inboxes: Unlike address books, frequently contain content data—Offline messages, buddy icon updates, other data included—Webmail inboxes

increasingly include email content—Most collection is due to the presence of a target on a buddy list where the communication is not to, from, or about that target.”

Slide four further states: “NSA collects, on a representative day, ~500,000 buddy lists and inboxes—More than 90 percent collected because tasked selectors identified only as contacts.”

Collection of the address lists is carried out, the *Post* reported, on the basis of “secret arrangements with foreign telecommunications companies or allied intelligence services in control of facilities that direct traffic along the Internet’s main data routes.”

The address lists provide the NSA with enormous amounts of data. The *Post* described the lists as “far richer sources of data than call records alone,” noting that “Address books commonly include not only names and e-mail addresses, but also telephone numbers, street addresses, and business and family information.”

The address books are reportedly collected overseas, allowing the NSA to skirt nominal restrictions on the collection of data produced by US citizens. As the *Post* reported, “In practice, data from Americans is collected in large volumes—in part because they live and work overseas, but also because data crosses international boundaries even when its American owners stay at home.”

The newspaper continued: “The NSA has not been authorized by Congress or the special intelligence court that oversees foreign intelligence to collect contact lists in bulk, and senior intelligence officials said it would be illegal to do so from facilities in the United States...”

“The agency avoids the restrictions in the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act by intercepting contact lists from access points ‘all over the world,’ one official said.”

Reports of address book collection are only the latest in a torrent of revelations that have emerged over the past four months regarding illegal surveillance programs carried out by the NSA and other state agencies. These include:

- * Telephone metadata collection, including historical location data produced by cell phones
- * PRISM, a global electronic surveillance and data-mining operation
- * The Drug Enforcement Agency’s Hemisphere Project, a partnership involving DEA agents and AT&T employees from 2007, which collects vast quantities of telephone data
- * The XKeyscore program, which enables the NSA to monitor practically all internet traffic produced globally through a variety of spying activities, including dragnet surveillance of web data and reading of email content
- * Boundless Informant, a data analysis system used by the NSA to summarize the results of global data-mining for surveillance managers
- * NSA penetration of the European Union computer network and its bugging of EU headquarters and offices in Washington, DC and New York City

- * Extensive collaboration between the NSA and Microsoft, with the latter making available for snooping all documents and messages produced by users
- * Treasury Department plans to transfer data on Americans' financial records to the military and intelligence agencies.

These programs have the full support of the political and media establishment, including the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

In an opinion piece published in Monday's *Wall Street Journal*, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, defended the unconstitutional NSA programs with the standard claim that they are necessary to protect the US from terrorism.

Ignoring the voluminous evidence that the programs are used to spy on millions of ordinary Americans who are not remotely linked to terrorist groups, as well as foreign governments, organizations and individuals allied with the United States, Feinstein wrote:

"The US must remain vigilant against terrorist attacks against the homeland... The NSA call-records program is working and contributing to our safety... If we end this vital program, we only make our nation more vulnerable to another devastating terror attack."

This is nothing less than a blanket justification for shredding all democratic rights and instituting a police state. Moreover, it ignores the well established fact that the US is supporting groups in Syria, Libya, and other countries that are allied with Al Qaeda, the supposed target of the surveillance programs.

The real target of the surveillance apparatus is not foreign terrorist groups, but the American people. The ruling class is fearful of the emergence of broad social opposition to its reactionary policies and is building up the means for carrying out political repression on a mass scale.

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