

Why Amazon's Collaboration with the CIA Is So Ominous — and Vulnerable

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As the world's biggest online retailer, Amazon wants a benevolent image to encourage trust from customers. Obtaining vast quantities of their personal information has been central to the firm's business model. But Amazon is diversifying — and a few months ago the company signed a \$600 million contract with the Central Intelligence Agency to provide "cloud computing" services.

Amazon now has the means, motive and opportunity to provide huge amounts of customer information to its new business partner. An official statement from Amazon headquarters last fall declared:

"We look forward to a successful relationship with the CIA."

The Central Intelligence Agency has plenty of money to throw around. Thanks to [documents](#) provided by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, we know that the CIA's annual budget is \$14.7 billion; the NSA's is \$10.8 billion.

The founder and CEO of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, is [bullish](#) on the company's prospects for building on its initial contract with the CIA. As you might expect from a gung-ho capitalist with about \$25 billion in personal wealth, Bezos figures he's just getting started.

Bezos publicly savors the fact that Amazon has proven its digital prowess — aggregating, safeguarding and analyzing many billions of factoids about human beings — to the satisfaction of the CIA.

The company's Amazon Web Services division is "the leader in infrastructure cloud computing," Bezos boasted at a September 2013 meeting with journalists at the Washington Post (shortly after he bought the newspaper). He lauded the high "rate of invention" of Amazon's technical web team, adding: "Their product offering is far ahead of anyone else."

Apparently the CIA agrees. The agency gave Amazon the contract for \$600 million even though it wasn't the lowest bid.

Amazon's trajectory into the CIA's spooky arms may be a bit more than just corporate eagerness to land a lucrative contract. In late 2010 — amid intense public interest in documents that WikiLeaks was posting to illuminate U.S. actions overseas — Amazon took a notable step. As the Guardian [reported](#) at the time, Amazon "pulled the plug on hosting the whistleblowing website in reaction to heavy political pressure."

It didn't take much for Amazon to cave. "The company announced it was cutting WikiLeaks off ... only 24 hours after being contacted by the staff of Joe Lieberman, chairman of the Senate's committee on homeland security," the Guardian noted.

In view of Amazon's eagerness to dump the WikiLeaks site at the behest of U.S. government officials, what else might the Amazon hierarchy be willing to do? Amazon maintains a humongous trove of detailed information about hundreds of millions of people. Are we to believe that the CIA and other intelligence agencies have no interest in Amazon's data?

Even at face value, Amazon's "Privacy Notice" has loopholes big enough to fly a drone through. It says: "We release account and other personal information when we believe release is appropriate to comply with the law; enforce or apply our Conditions of Use and other agreements; or protect the rights, property, or safety of Amazon.com, our users, or others."

Amazon now averages 162 million unique visitors to its sites every month. Meanwhile, the CIA depends on gathering and analyzing data to serve U.S. military interventions overseas. During the last dozen years, the CIA has conducted ongoing drone strikes and covert lethal missions in many countries. At the same time, U.S. agencies like the CIA and NSA have flattened many previous obstacles to Big Brother behavior.

And now, Amazon is hosting a huge computing cloud for the CIA's secrets — a digital place where data for mass surveillance and perpetual war are converging.

Amazon is, potentially, much more vulnerable to public outrage and leverage than the typical firms that make a killing from contracts with the NSA or the CIA or the Pentagon. Few people have direct contact with outfits like Booz Allen Hamilton or Lockheed Martin. But every day, Amazon is depending on millions of customers to go online and buy products from its sites. As more people learn about its CIA ties, Amazon could — and should — suffer the consequences.

This is an opportunity to directly challenge Amazon's collaboration with the CIA. Movement in that direction began with the Feb. 20 launch of a [petition](#) addressed to Amazon CEO Bezos:

"We urge you to make a legally binding commitment to customers that Amazon will not provide customer data to the Central Intelligence Agency."

After working with colleagues at RootsAction.org to start the petition, I've been glad to read initial comments that signers have posted. Many are voicing the kind of responses that should worry Amazon execs.

"It's never wise for a business to take steps that create distrust by their customers," wrote a signer from Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin. Another woman, who lives in Amazon's home state of Washington, told the company: "Don't share my data with the CIA. If this is your price, I'm afraid you're not worth it." And a signer in Cincinnati wrote: "If Amazon chooses to sell out their customers to the CIA, I will never visit their site again. Betrayal shouldn't be the price of convenience."

The people who run Amazon figured they could rake in big profits from the CIA without

serious public blowback. We have an opportunity to prove them wrong.

Norman Solomon is co-founder of RootsAction.org and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." Information about the documentary based on the book is at www.WarMadeEasyTheMovie.org.

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