

Communications of millions subject to US-UK spying

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Whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed on Friday that the UK intelligence agency GCHQ and the NSA record the content of phone calls, email messages, Facebook posts and browser histories of tens of millions of people. By tapping into fiber-optic cables—the infrastructure through which all Internet traffic must pass—the two agencies have created a systematic procedure for procuring, filtering and storing private communications.

The leak is the latest in a series that have left the US and UK governments scurrying to cover up their deeply antidemocratic maneuvers with scripted lies. It comes one day after the release of secret FISA Court documents showing the NSA has almost complete latitude to monitor the communications of US residents (See, “NSA monitoring US communications without a warrant, documents show”)

Hours after the release of the latest documents, the US government announced that it was filing charges against Snowden under the Espionage Act, which contains a possible penalty of execution.

“Nobody is listening to your telephone calls,” President Obama said in a public speech two weeks ago. UK Foreign Minister William Hague told MPs last week that there is “a strong framework of democratic accountability and oversight” within the national intelligence apparatus.

According to documents leaked to the *Guardian*, and reported by Glenn Greenwald, however, GCHQ and the NSA have set up a complex scheme by which the intelligence agencies collect data and content from the communications of at least tens of millions of people. Officials monitor the data and content of those communications and then store what they deem valuable.

Described by GCHQ with the revealing titles

“Mastering the Internet” and “Global Telecoms Exploitation,” the programs expose the repeated claims of President Obama and his coconspirators as outright lies.

Through the “Tempora” program, the two agencies have been tapping and storing hundreds of petabytes of data from a majority of the fiber-optic cables in the UK over the past 18 months. The NSA has a similar program in the US, as revealed in an Associated Press report last week.

First, GCHQ handles 600 million “telephone events” each day by tapping over 200 fiber-optic cables, including those that connect the UK to the US. According to the *Guardian*, GCHQ is able to collect data at a rate “equivalent to sending all the information in all the books in the British Library 192 times every 24 hours” by processing data from a minimum of 46 fiber-optic cables simultaneously.

The data is then transmitted to a government database and shared with the NSA, which is given top clearance. Lawyers for the GCHQ told their American counterparts that it was “your call” as to what limitations should be in place for data sifting and storage.

According to the leaked documents, these massive databases have been built up over the past several years through widespread corporate collaboration. GCHQ colludes with an array of companies it calls “intercept partners,” and sometimes forces them to hand over huge quantities of data for inspection and storage. The corporate agreements were kept highly guarded under fears that public knowledge of the collusion would lead to “high-level political fallout.”

Once the data is collected, the agencies then filter information through a process known as Massive Volume Reduction (MVR). Through this process,

information is pared down to specific individuals, email addresses, or phone numbers. The NSA identified 31,000 “selector” terms, while GCHQ identified 40,000. The leaked documents reveal that a majority of the information extracted is content, including word-for-word email, text and phone recordings.

Through Tempora, GCHQ and the NSA have set up Internet buffers that allow the agencies to watch data accumulate in real-time and store it for less than a week for content or 30 days for metadata.

“Internet buffers represent an exciting opportunity to get direct access to enormous amounts of GCHQ’s special source data,” agents explained in the leaked documents. Valuable information is presumably removed from this temporary buffer and kept on file in intelligence storage facilities.

This information filtration system is not aimed at eliminating the possibility of storing the data of innocent people. In fact, this is precisely the purpose of the surveillance programs. Rather, unnecessary information is sifted out because the governments do not yet have the ability to store such vast quantities of communications content and metadata.

Despite these technological limitations, the immensity of the Tempora program was best described by GCHQ attorneys who acknowledged that listing the number of people targeted by the program would be impossible because “this would be an infinite list which we couldn’t manage.”

GCHQ officials bragged that its surveillance program “produces larger amounts of metadata than NSA,” and were told by GCHQ attorneys that “[w]e have a light oversight regime compared with the US.” The latter statement is extraordinary given the fact that the FISA Court allows the NSA to operate almost entirely without constraint.

Friday’s revelations highlight the international character of the global surveillance programs. Far from being satisfied by storing the content of the communications of its own residents, the US and UK governments are working together to create an unprecedented database of international intelligence.

The intimacy of the two spy agencies is evidenced by an order given by NSA head Keith Alexander in 2008: “Why can’t we collect all the signals, all the time? Sounds like a good summer homework project for [British and American spy center] Menwith!”

Snowden noted Friday that “it’s not just a US problem. The UK has a huge dog in this fight. They [GCHQ] are worse than the US.”

Just like their American counterparts, the GCHQ attorneys have attempted to place a legal veneer over the facially illegal spying operations of the government.

GCHQ lawyers have invoked paragraph four of section 8 of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (Ripa) to run around the legal requirement that intelligence officials acquire a warrant before performing a wiretap. Since this would have required GCHQ to acquire a warrant for every person in the UK, the attorneys instead have claimed that they can perform indiscriminate data mining operations with a “certificate” from a minister.

In a briefing document released by Snowden, GCHQ attorneys claim that these certificates “cover the entire range of GCHQ’s intelligence production.”

Under Ripa, GCHQ officials may also seek a Sensitive Targeting Authority (STA), which would allow them to spy on any UK citizen “anywhere in the world” or on a foreign person in the UK.

A lawyer for GCHQ also noted in the secret documents that the parliamentary intelligence and security committee, which oversees the intelligence agencies, has “always been exceptionally good at understanding the need to keep our work secret,” and that a tribunal set up to monitor the agencies has “so far always found in our favor.”

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, to which the UK is a signatory, states: “Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence,” and that “[t]here shall be no interference by a public authority with the exercise of this right except such as is in accordance with the law and is necessary in a democratic society...”

In Britain as much as the United States, the ruling class is engaged in activity that is in flagrant violation of these democratic principles.



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