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Surveillance questions snowball: 5 stories you may have missed

From a new spy tool to heckling hackers

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Gen. Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency, addressed the Black Hat hacker convention in Las Vegas last week. (Steve Marcus/Reuters)

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As former U.S. security contractor Edward Snowden settles into a new, albeit temporary, home in Russia, he's left a storm of questions about mass surveillance in his wake.

Part of the famous fugitive's deal with Moscow is that he's not allowed to release information harmful to the United States during his one-year reprieve in the country, Russian President Vladimir Putin has said.

But before Snowden left the transit zone in Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport for a more hospitable location in Russia, he released a torrent of documents about the United States' use of mass surveillance — further stirring up a surveillance controversy he ignited in early June.

In the past week, media outlets published shocking new details based on the documents from Snowden, while U.S. officials continued to struggle with the fallout by publishing documents of their own.

Here's a look at the top five mass surveillance stories from the past few days.

U.S. doles out money to U.K. spy agency

How close is too close? The Guardian revealed on Thursday that in the

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past three years, the U.S. National Security Agency paid at least £100 million — about \$157 million Canadian — to its United Kingdom counterpart.

The payments raise fears about the grip that Washington may hold on the U.K. intelligence agency, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Documents suggest the NSA felt that the GCHQ "remains short of the full NSA ask" and the GCHQ worried that "it must pull its weight."

In the documents, the U.K. intelligence agency also brags that it supplied "unique contributions" to the U.S. investigation into an American who attempted a car bomb attack in New York City's Times Square in 2010.

Surveillance tool collects 'nearly everything'

In June, Snowden made a bold statement to the Guardian. He said that while sitting at his desk, he could "wiretap anyone, from you or your accountant, to a federal judge or even the president, if I had a personal email."

Now, the Guardian says they have the documents that triggered Snowden's statement. On Wednesday, they released leaked files from Snowden that reveal the existence of a top-secret NSA program called XKeyscore.

The program gives analysts the ability to sift through vast databases that contain emails, online chats and browsing histories of millions of people. Users don't appear to require a warrant or authorization to use the program. Snowden said he used it during his time as a Booz Allen contract working at the NSA.

Documents tout it as the "widest reaching" system for deriving intelligence from computer networks, and say it covers "nearly everything a typical user does on the internet" from content of emails and websites visited to searches. A 2008 document brags that intelligence captured by XKeyscore had helped capture 300 terrorists.

The Guardian describes the quantity of communications accessible via XKeyscore and other such programs as "staggeringly large," with one 2007 NSA report estimating about up to two billion records are added every day to NSA databases that already contain more than one trillion records.

Some telecommunications experts compared the program to efforts by private companies to collect "big data" to better understand customer habits. But the news also spurred renewed calls for transparency about how much personal information is being collected and by whom.

- [Leaked NSA documents give new insight into searches](#)

NSA director faces heckling hackers

Meanwhile, the U.S. government is still struggling to counter public backlash after the first round of revelations by Snowden in early June.

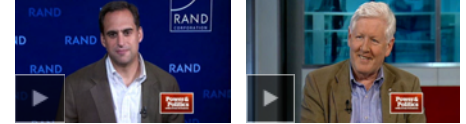
At the Black Hat conference — an annual get-together of hackers and security experts in Las Vegas — NSA director Gen. Keith Alexander used his keynote speech to [defend the government's collection of phone and internet records](#).

Hecklers interrupted the four-star general's speech, calling him a liar and telling him to read the constitution. But Alexander largely held his own and appeared to get a favourable reception in the end after jousting with the hecklers.

The director of the intelligence agency also revealed a few new details during the speech in an attempt to assuage public concern. He said that only 35 analysts at NSA are authorized to query a database of U.S. phone records.

Alexander also said that NSA's collection of phone call metadata and internet records of foreigners has resulted in the disruption of 54 terrorist activities, including 13 in the United States. Of those disrupted activities, 42 — more than three-quarters — were terrorist plots.

Back in Washington, lawmakers were skeptical of the number. Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Democrat who chairs the Senate judiciary committee said, "Not by any stretch can you get 54 terrorist plots."



U.S. embassy closures unusual, analyst says

6:57

RAND analyst Seth Jones discusses possible

Bob Rae on Ring of Fire talks

9:18

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New Brunswick confident Quebec won't stand in the way of West-East pipeline

Aug. 3, 2013 7:42 AM

This week on The House, guest-host Alison Crawford looks at the proposed \$12-billion Energy East pipeline project with New Brunswick Premier David Alward. We speak to a retired police officer about last weekend's shooting in Toronto, and the lessons that should be learned following Sammy Yatim's death. Finally, we ask if the solution to cyber-bullying lies in an updated criminal code?

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said, "Not by any stretch can you get 54 terrorist plots."

- [NSA chief defends surveillance program at hacker conference](#)

NSA counters with its own document dump

New surveillance revelations kept Washington politicians busy during the past week. There was word Thursday that U.S. President Barack Obama convened a meeting with members of Congress. And on Wednesday, a judiciary committee hearing discussed the bulk collection of phone and internet records.

Shortly before the judiciary committee got underway, the Obama administration released three documents about record collection that it had declassified from top secret, part of its effort to placate opposition.

The documents are an April 2013 secret court order and two briefing papers for Congress from 2009 and 2011. Among the findings in them:

- The court order says the government can only access phone records when there is a "reasonable" suspicion that the number is associated with terrorism.
- Phone and internet metadata programs violated court orders in 2009 due to both "technical compliance" and "human implementation" errors. Those issues were later fixed, documents say.
- There's a computer-run program that sifts through phone records using certain approved terms and then dumps that information into a "corporate store."

Civil liberties advocates said the documents reveal a broader collection of records than previously thought.

When bulk records turn into evidence

If document releases from both sides weren't enough, a court case also provided news on the hot topic.

It came out in a terrorism prosecution involving two Pakistan-born brothers living in Florida who are accused of a plot to bomb sites in New York in 2012.

A Miami federal court filing in the case revealed a change of course for the U.S. The justice department acknowledged the need during a terrorism prosecution to tell defendants that bulk record surveillance was used to build the case against them.

That acknowledgement may provide citizens and privacy advocates with the nugget of information they need to challenge NSA surveillance. For years, cases challenging the laws failed because there was no proof an individual had been prosecuted using these mass surveillance techniques.


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Joe Clancy

These organisations like the NSA have made us less safe rather than safer. Every time you build a structure, a weapon, a vault, to keep someone out you create the challenge to overcome the obstacle. It ratchets up the anti each time until it becomes absurd. It has become absurd. Absurd wealth. Absurd power. Absurd greed.

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I would dislike whatever politician is leading this country since it can be said (and most likely proven) all our politicians are corrupt. All we need to do is look into the scandals of the last 30 years. They are all from different parties at different times but it all points to some form of corruption.

Governments are suppose to be accountable to the people - not the other way around.

The issue, as I see it (and again, I may be completely wrong)is that governments want (or expect) the ... » more

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gofiger

The tone of a lot of comments lately make me suspect a lot of people are giving nod to this invasion of privacy by playing up to their new overlords.

1 hour ago 0 Likes

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GoodN1GHT

Those of you trying to blame this on a global conservative conspiracy, you realize that Snowden is on record as supporting Republican candidate Ron Paul in the last presidential primaries?

Admittedly Ron Paul is a fringe Republican, but this should be the tip off that libertarianism (one end of the libertarian/totalitarian axis) is something that social conservatives and social liberals, as well as capitalists and socialists, can all support.

2 hours ago 1 Like

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PhilipsSquare

We once were told that OPP coppers doing traffic stops had computer access to a data base that listed everyone who had written a letter of complaint about the police. Just imagine a data base a million times that powerful.

2 hours ago 2 Likes

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NapoleonBoy

Quite ironic that with all the surveillance techniques the NSA now has at its disposal, they have to close a slew of embassies and elevate threat and scare levels without any other basic details. Couldn't they wait and do more snooping on the bad guys before going public? We're now in alert mode until the next terrorist attack. Looks like a side-show to divert attention from Snowden's revelations and closing foreign offices helps save money. Very disappointed with Obama, he's almost on par with ... » more

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TellTheTruth

It is an cruel irony that while criminals are shedding crocodile tears regarding their exposure, there will be nothing done on behalf of human rights, humanity or justice. Look at where self-proclaimed beacon of democracy got whistle blowers Manning, Assange, Snowden- one expecting lifetime sentence, the other one holed in Bolivian embassy in London, the third one getting political asylum in Putin's Russia. When Russia is a safe haven for champion of freedom, liberties and justice, you know ... » more

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PhilipsSquare

@TellTheTruth

that would be the Ecuadorian embassy in London good post in any event Bolivia and most all of the Latin American countries would have taken him in any case and Snowden said he would like to go there too.

2 hours ago 1 Like

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GoodN1GHT

This issue is neither a right-wing/left-wing nor a progressive/conservatives issue.

This issue is on the libertarian/totalitarian axis.

Yes a conservative right-wing Obama and Bush have done this in the USA.

But consider their chief partners in implementing this was the Labour government in the UK.

Consider also the KGB of communist USSR.

And consider the FSB of re-revolutionized progressive Russia.

Labels can be silly in politics, because politics exists in a universe of an ... » more



GoodN1GHT

Thank god the CBC has started covering the meat of this story !

Canadians deserve to know what is going on and I felt betrayed that the bulk of the press in the English speaking world was focused on Snowden rather than the actual revelations.

The revelations are the real story. Snowden is a hero for the history books, but in my opinion on him, focusing on him is akin to entertainment journalism as opposed to real news journalism.

3 hours ago 1 Like

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TouchWood

And, with perfect timing, the terrorist threat heats up again - just in time to help justify all the data gathering and sway public opinion. Wonder who planned that?

3 hours ago 3 Likes

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