US government scanning, storing billions of pieces of mail per year

Thomas Gaist
5 July 2013

The US government is monitoring and permanently storing information on regular mail, in a vast and previously secret program known as the Mail Isolation Control and Tracking (MICT) program.

According to an article in the *New York Times* on Thursday, images captured from over 160 billion pieces of mail per year are fed into a massive database, from which the government can construct in depth profiles of individuals, tracking their personal and political connections.

The MICT program parallels the National Security Agency spy programs revealed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. While these programs store phone records and collect email and other Internet activity, the MICT gathers this information on all mail senders, without any individualized suspicion of criminal activity. While a warrant is technically necessary to inspect the actual contents of the mail, in 2007 President George Bush authorized law enforcement to open mail without a warrant in exceptional cases.

In previous decades, under the "mail cover surveillance" program, the Postal Service granted law enforcement agencies access to mail items for 30 days based on individual requests relating to suspected criminal activity. Since 2001, this program has evolved into the MICT, which collects information indiscriminately on every piece of mail.

"In the past, mail covers were used when you had a reason to suspect someone of a crime," Mark Rasch, who has worked on computer crimes for the Justice Department, told the *Times.* "Now it seems to be, 'Let's record everyone's mail so in the future we might go back and see who you were communicating with.' Essentially you've added mail covers on millions of Americans"

Bruce Schneier, a computer and security expert, added, "They are doing the same thing as the other programs, collecting the information on the outside of your mail, the metadata, if you will, of names, addresses, return addresses and postmark locations, which gives the government a pretty good map of your contacts, even if they aren't reading the content," he said.

Former FBI agent James Wedick told the *Times* that the mail snooping yields "a treasure trove of information," and that "looking at just the outside of letters and other mail, I can see who you bank with, who you communicate with—all kinds of useful information that gives investigators leads that they can then follow up on with a subpoena."

Wedick affirmed, "It can be easily abused because it's so easy to use, and you don't have to go through a judge to get the information. You just fill out a form." The Postal Service has power to authorize law enforcement agencies to surveil mail, without judicial review, and the *Times* reported that these requests are rarely denied.

The *Times* reported that the program is used by numerous government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Internal Revenue Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services.

The MICT program was instituted and had been operating secretly for over a decade, since it was implemented after the 2001 anthrax attacks. The FBI quietly revealed its existence in a June 7 criminal complaint related to alleged ricin attacks directed at President Barack Obama.

The revelation of the MICT program adds to a long list of the information that is being systematically gathered by government agencies—from the NSA phone record and Internet data programs, to the accumulation of vast databases of photographs to be used for facial

recognition. All of this is being done in violation of basic democratic rights and behind the backs of the American people.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact