

Secret NSA program gains “bulk access” to Google, Yahoo data centers

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The National Security Agency (NSA) is spying on hundreds of millions of users of Google and Yahoo services, according to a report yesterday in the *Washington Post* based on internal documents provided by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

The NSA has broken into the main communication links connecting Yahoo and Google data servers worldwide. In a program codenamed “MUSCULAR,” operated jointly with Britain’s Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the agencies collect and monitor all communications—involving US and non-US citizens alike—between these servers.

Because the data culling is indiscriminate, the NSA refers to it as “full take,” “bulk access” and “high-volume.” After the communications are collected, they are searched based on undisclosed criteria, with much of it sent on to permanent locations run by the NSA.

The report shatters claims by the Obama administration and American legislators that US agencies respect privacy rights and operate under strict legal oversight. Testimony by spy agency chiefs before the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee on Wednesday, aimed at defusing the diplomatic crisis over the exposure of US spying on German Chancellor Angela Merkel and hundreds of millions of phone and SMS communications in Europe, consisted of disinformation and lies.

A top secret NSA document shows that in the one-month period ending January 9, 2013 the MUSCULAR program sent back more than 181 million new records for storage at NSA headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland. These records include both “metadata” information—such as the identity or location of the sender and receiver of messages—and the content of text, audio and video communications.

Google and Yahoo operate massive data centers

around the world, backing up user information in multiple continents in order to prevent accidental data loss or system shutdowns. They also send backups of entire archives—containing years of e-mails and attachments—between various servers, which the NSA collects in bulk. NSA documents state that this allows the agency not only to intercept communications in real time, but also to take “a retrospective look at target activity.”

Google engineers speaking anonymously to the *Post* “exploded into profanity” when journalists showed them NSA diagrams of “Google Cloud Exploitation,” revealing how the NSA has broken Google’s encryption schemes.

“The very clear objective of the NSA is not just to collect all this, but to keep it for as long as they can,” journalist Glenn Greenwald told the Spanish daily *El Mundo*. “So they can at any time target a particular citizen of Spain or anywhere else and learn what they’ve been doing, in terms of who they have been communicating with.”

NSA officials contacted by the *Post* and by *Politico* refused to deny the *Post* report or explain the specifics of the MUSCULAR program. An NSA spokeswoman told *Politico*, “NSA is a foreign intelligence agency. And we’re focused on discovering and developing intelligence about valid foreign intelligence targets only.”

The claims of the NSA have no credibility, however. Foreign Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) Court documents show that US spy agencies have already collected massive amounts of US citizens’ data and lied about it in court. (See: “FISA records document “daily violations” by government spy agencies”).

Google and Yahoo officials, who already hand over user data to the US government under the NSA’s

PRISM program, said they were unaware of this further NSA infiltration of their data centers. Google released a statement declaring that it was “troubled by allegations of government intercepting traffic between our data centers, and we are not aware of this activity.”

This report is yet another indication of how the US military-intelligence complex has developed through criminal means the surveillance infrastructure of a global police state.

The vast scope of the operations and their targeting of European heads of state have exposed as lies the claims that these programs are designed to fight Al Qaeda as part of a “war on terror.” They target anyone seen as a potential threat to the strategic interests of the American ruling class, including not only European governments, but, above all, the populations of the United States, Europe and the world.

This activity has been carried out for years in brazen violation of US law, as even the FISA court, a secret court operating with no public accountability or oversight, has ruled. In 2011, when it discovered that similar methods were being used on a smaller scale to spy on data streams inside the US, FISA Court Judge John D. Bates ruled that the program was “inconsistent” with the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution.

The US government’s attempts to reassure the public about the programs have consisted of staged disinformation sessions. Wednesday’s hearing featured a carefully worded Joint Statement for the Record issued by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, NSA chief Gen. Keith Alexander and Deputy Attorney General James Cole.

The statement insisted that media reports about intelligence collection under Section 215 of the USA Patriot Act and Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act were “inaccurate.” In the spying carried out under Section 215, they insisted, the spy agencies “do not collect the content of any telephone calls or any information identifying the callers, nor do we collect cell phone locational information.” The Section 702 spying, it explained “targets only non-US persons overseas.”

None of these claims refute reports that Washington is engaged in massive spying against US and overseas targets. Assuming that these statements were not bald-faced lies, they would simply mean that the spies use

other pseudo-legal justifications for recording telephone calls and spying on US citizens.

In the case of the bulk seizure of Google and Yahoo data, the NSA has exploited the fact that the computer centers in question are located outside of the United States, with regulations falling not under FISA, but under an executive order. The data in question, however, is the same as that located in the companies’ US centers.

“Such large-scale collection of Internet content would be illegal in the United States,” the *Post* writes, “but the operations take place overseas, where the NSA is allowed to presume that anyone using a foreign data link is a foreigner.”

Despite the obvious evasions and lies of the intelligence officials, the congressmen fawned on the spy chiefs on Wednesday. Democratic Representative Dutch Ruppersberger said he wanted to “thank the people of the intelligence community” and added: “NSA does not target Americans in the US and does not target Americans *anywhere* else, without a court order.”

As the *Post* revelations make clear, Ruppersberger’s claims are false and the entire hearing was a sham designed to mislead the public.



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