US tracks billions of cell phone location records daily

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New revelations published yesterday in the *Washington Post* based on information leaked by whistleblower Edward Snowden show that the United States government has been tracking and storing the live movements of hundreds of millions of people around the world. The data not only helps the government track the personal lives of innocent people on a minute-by-minute basis, it is also used to monitor, record and analyze the relationships between individuals.

The revelations show that the National Security Agency (NSA) collects roughly 5 billion records *each day* regarding the exact location of cellphone users. The government collects and stores each piece of information in a massive database that is currently comprised of 27 terabytes of data.

As the *Washington Post* notes, this amounts to more than twice the amount of data stored in the Library of Congress. So vast is the government's data trove that a 2012 NSA briefing bragged that the agency is "outpacing [its] ability to ingest, process, and store" data tracking the movement of individuals.

Included in this data is information about the specific location of individuals, their speed of movement, the trajectory of their movement, the people with whom they meet, and the places where they meet.

The staggeringly antidemocratic character of this operation—referred to by the government as CO-TRAVELER—is further evidence of the American ruling class' efforts to lay the foundations for a police state. This program provides the US government with surveillance capacities that far overshadow those used by any other government in history.

The means by which the government trawls the international population for data is almost as chilling as the act of collection itself. Internal NSA documents show that the government collects data from ten signal intelligence activity designators, or "sigads." The only example of a "sigad" provided by the *Washington Post* was a program code-named STORMBREW, whereby the government gathers information through data provided by two unnamed corporations, codenamed ARTIFICE and WOLFPOINT by the NSA.

Although the world's largest wireless telephone corporations have already been implicated in the government's surveillance operations, the most recent revelations indicate an even deeper role played by the government's corporate allies. Internal documents show that the companies are responsible for administering the NSA's information-gathering equipment, and that the "NSA asks nicely for tasking/updates." Corporate carriers also provide the NSA with access to shared databases traditionally used to track "roaming" cell phone customers.

Within each sigad, the government collects data from dozens of telephone links that receive information from local cell towers located across the globe. STORMBREW, for example, receives data from 27 different devices which are normally used to transfer call traffic between carriers. These devices obtain their data from cell towers, which are capable of tracking a phone's precise location and movement.

The Obama administration has responded to the leaks by flatly lying about the extent of the phone-tracking program. Robert Litt, head attorney for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said that "there is no element of the intelligence community that under any authority is intentionally collecting bulk cellphone location information about cellphones in the United States."

Litt has carefully chosen his words. He claims that because the government focuses on information

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gathering abroad, any data collected from a US citizen is merely "incidental," and therefore constitutional. Such a claim is little more than a pseudo-legal justification for a program that is unconstitutional on its face.

The Fourth Amendment to the constitution reads: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated," and explicitly prevents the use of "general warrants" to seize information from anyone upon any basis.

When pressed on how many Americans were tracked by the location-gathering program, however, an anonymous intelligence official told the *Washington Post*: "It's awkward for us to try to provide any specific numbers."

In fact, the government gathers data from US residents on a routine basis. An October 2012 NSA training manual, for example, notes with frustration that it is difficult to track the relationship between and locations of two American customers who use different networks within the United States. The tracking of data from cell phone users will augment data collected from the US government's domestic license plate tracking system. (See: "US government using license plates to track movements of millions").

Though further details of the CO-TRAVELER program will likely emerge in the coming days, the evidence made public through yesterday's revelations lays bare the advanced state of decay of American democracy. The most recent revelations come on the tail of a series of disclosures detailing the depth of the US spying operation.

In recent weeks, documents made public by Edward Snowden have revealed that the US government has:

* Worked with its Australian counterparts to build a network of "listening posts" to spy on the populations and governments of South East Asia;

* Tapped into and syphoned information from massive databases of Google and Yahoo;

* Wiretapped the phone-lines of a series of governments and world leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff;

* Worked with foreign governments to oversee massive spying operations on the populations of Spain, France, Australia, and others.

This list, though far from exhaustive, serves as a damning exposure of the antidemocratic character of the Obama administration, the American ruling class and its allies. And more details of government spying are yet to come. Alan Rusbridger, editor for the *Guardian* newspaper, said Tuesday that the *Guardian* had released only 26 documents out of the more than 58,000 that Edward Snowden has provided the paper so far.

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