

Panel discussion on NSA surveillance covers for government spy programs

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A panel discussion last week in the downtown Washington, DC headquarters of the *Washington Post* featured journalists who contributed to the *Post*'s coverage of the exposure of National Security Agency spying by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, for which the newspaper recently shared in the Pulitzer Prize gold medal for public service.

The April 23 program, titled "*Behind the Headlines: NSA Surveillance and Ongoing Revelations*," featured *Post* contractor Barton Gellman, one of four journalists—including Glenn Greenwald and Ewan MacAskill, who wrote for the *Guardian* US, and Laura Poitras, who wrote for both newspapers—honored with the Pulitzer. Besides Gellman, the panelists included Ellen Nakashima, Ashkan Soltani, and Craig Timberg, each of whom played a supporting role in reporting the story in the *Post*.

While providing important details about the spying programs, the discussion concealed the real significance of the NSA revelations and highlighted the *Post*'s own closeness to the security apparatus which it purported to be exposing. Martin Baron, the newspaper's executive editor, stated in his introduction that the staff of the newspaper took questions of national security seriously, "communicating regularly" with both the Pentagon and "private enterprises" (i.e., intelligence and military contracting firms).

The revelations of Snowden, detailing the efforts of US authorities and their allies in Europe and elsewhere to illegally tap into the communications of the world's population, have led to a massive public backlash. A majority of the US population considers the young whistleblower to be a hero and the defender of basic democratic rights. Snowden is currently living in exile in Russia, after having to flee from persecution from US authorities after he leaked internal NSA documents

last year.

A major part of the panel discussion concerned a program called "MUSCULAR," run jointly by the NSA and Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). The main task of the program is to break into the communications of major Internet hubs such as Google and Yahoo, gaining access to unprotected information contained in data centers stored across the planet. With this in mind, Gellman asserted that the distinction between the NSA, on one hand, and Yahoo and Google on the other, was "not meaningful." He added, "They get it all," regardless of who is holding the data.

Nakashima stated MUSCULAR operated almost entirely without government oversight, not even requiring a warrant from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court. She also drew attention to the use of bulk data collection by the CIA, which includes trawling information on money transfers. She added that to this day there has been very little revealed on this practice.

Demonstrating the comprehensive picture of an individual's life such techniques can provide, Gellman described his efforts to reconstruct a comprehensive record of a three-month period in the life of one of his coworkers. Using the NSA's technology, this could be done in "an hour," he said.

Soltani, a technology expert, noted that one of the reasons that this has been made possible was because "surveillance has become incredibly cheap due to the number of digital trails" an individual leaves in his or her daily life. Gellman added that due to the massive amount of information obtained by such methods, the officials in charge believed these programs were "not surveillance."

Gellman apparently shares this view that collecting

data on everyone is less dangerous than collecting data on specifically targeted individuals. When asked by this reporter if Obama could be compared to President Richard Nixon, who was forced to resign rather than be impeached for wiretapping the offices of political opponents, he demurred.

“Nixon was impeached for using executive powers to spy on and crush his political opponents; I have seen no evidence of that occurring under the Obama Administration,” he said, adding that “this is not the Stasi” (a reference to the Stalinist police that controlled East Germany).

A number of the panelists expressed their support for government spying on the US and world population, expressing the belief that this was done for purposes of “national security” and that the whistleblowing of Snowden could have a negative effect by undermining genuine “success stories” of the intelligence apparatus.

Gellman himself stated that he had “consulted with government on every story” before running the material on the NSA, at one point asserting that intelligence officials “should withhold” information from the public, adding that he personally was withholding information he had seen in Snowden’s archives.

When asked by a member of the audience how he distinguished the role played by the *Washington Post* and others from that of the WikiLeaks web site, Gellman asserted that unlike the latter he “won’t crowdsource” his material.

When also asked about the death threats leveled at Snowden by unnamed intelligence officials which surfaced on the *Buzzfeed* web site several months earlier, Gellman again took a cavalier attitude, calling these comments “loose talk” and suggesting there was no evidence of such plots actually existing.

Nakashima, quoting the comments of Professor Geoffrey Stone, a member of President Obama’s Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies, stated that the people working in the intelligence community “deserve respect, but not our trust.” This was followed by an uncritical presentation of President Obama’s superficial “reforms” to be administered to the spying programs, such as the plan to end bulk telephone metadata collection.

In fact, the programs revealed by Snowden show a mass surveillance operation, carried out against the general population and up until recently, entirely

behind their backs. The agency officials that employ such tools are not protecting the population from “terrorism.” They are assembling vast databases on the political and social views of much of the world’s population, to facilitate mass repression of political opposition to the capitalist ruling elite in the United States and internationally.

Despite the illusions expressed by Gellman and his colleagues, the surveillance operations under both Bush and Obama far exceed the amateurish efforts of Nixon to attack his political opponents. The CIA has gone so far as to spy on the activities of the Senate Intelligence Committee, its nominal overseer, as the committee staff carried out an investigation into the torture practices of the agency under Bush and Obama.



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