

NSA collects facial images of hundreds of millions of people

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In the latest exposure of the US National Security Agency based on documents leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, the *New York Times* reported Sunday that the agency collects images of hundreds of millions of people by intercepting global telecommunications and Internet traffic.

This data is used as part of an enormous program using facial recognition technology to identify individuals of interest to the US intelligence services. The images captured by the NSA include those embedded in e-mails, text messages, videoconferences and other forms of Internet messaging and telecommunications.

According to documents supplied by Snowden, the NSA intercepts “millions of images per day,” including about 55,000 every day that are of “facial recognition quality,” a resource that the agency characterized as having “tremendous untapped potential.”

One document from Snowden, dated 2010, declares, “It’s not just the traditional communications we’re after: It’s taking a full-arsenal approach that digitally exploits the clues a target leaves behind in their regular activities on the net to compile biographic and biometric information...”

The term “full-arsenal approach” is not just a figure of speech. The same document notes that obtaining such information can help “implement precision targeting”—that is, the extermination of individuals through strikes by drone-fired missiles.

The *Times* article observes that while facial recognition technology has greatly advanced in the past decade, it is still far from precise. This makes a targeting process based on such information recklessly inaccurate, as well as criminal in character.

One 2011 NSA slide supplied by Snowden recounted an attempt to match a photograph of Osama bin Laden

that returned photos of “four other bearded men with only slight resemblances to Bin Laden.”

Under the guidelines laid down by the Obama administration Justice Department, all four men could have been deliberately incinerated by US drone-fired missiles, along with anyone in their vicinity at the time of the explosions. All the ensuing deaths, both of those targeted and the bystanders, would be written off as “collateral damage” in the never-ending US “war on terror.”

The *Times* cites a statement from the official spokeswoman for the NSA, claiming that the agency does not have access to photographs in driver’s license databases maintained by the 50 states, or to passport photos of American citizens, held by the State Department. There is no reason, however, to accept that statement as truthful.

US intelligence agencies routinely lie about their capabilities and the scope of their data collection. Most notorious, at least in recent history, is the flat-out perjury last year by James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, when asked at a Senate committee hearing, “Does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?” Clapper responded, “No, sir,” adding that any information collected on Americans was not done “wittingly.”

The State Department photo database is particularly valuable, with the *Times* describing it as “what several outside experts say could be the largest facial imagery database in the federal government, storing hundreds of millions of photographs of American passport holders and foreign visa applicants.”

The NSA spokeswoman would not say “whether the agency had access to the State Department database of photos of foreign visa applicants. She also declined to

say whether the NSA collected facial imagery of Americans from Facebook and other social media through means other than communications intercepts.” That non-denial suggests that the agency is engaged in such data collection on both foreigners and Americans.

NSA documents leaked by Snowden indicate that the agency collects national identity card databases from foreign countries, some of them presumably collaborating with the US intelligence apparatus, while others, like Iran, would be the target of cyberwarfare attacks or physical break-ins at overseas facilities to gain access to such data.

Other biometric data is collected and combined with facial imagery, including iris scans. According to the *Times*, “In addition, the agency was working with the CIA and the State Department on a program called Pisces, collecting biometric data on border crossings from a wide range of countries.”

The *Times* article was co-written by Laura Poitras and James Risen. Poitras, an independent documentary filmmaker, is one of the journalists who worked most closely with Edward Snowden. She was the first to gain access to his archive of NSA documents.

Risen has been the target of federal prosecutors seeking to compel him to reveal sources for previous articles on national security issues, and co-wrote one of the first exposures of NSA spying in 2004, only to see it held suppressed by the *Times* editors for more than a year because of government pressure.



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