

German foreign intelligence service plans real-time surveillance of social networks

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The German foreign intelligence service (BND) is planning the surveillance of social network sites in real-time, according to documents obtained by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. By 2020, €300 million is to be invested in new technology for the intelligence service.

The newspaper reported that the real-time analysis of “streaming data” is part of a larger operation, the so-called “strategic technical initiative” (SIT).

The BND’s declared aim is to have similar capabilities to those of the American NSA and British GCHQ. As Edward Snowden’s revelations have shown, both of these intelligence agencies have access to the most advanced technology for spying on the world’s population. If investment in new technology was not increased, the German intelligence agency faced the threat of falling back to the level of the Spanish and Italian agencies, the BND stated.

The real-time evaluation of online services such as Facebook, Twitter, forums and blogs is to begin this year. This is all the more remarkable since the plans only concern proposals from the BND which still have to be voted on by parliament. However, leading security officials in the grand coalition government have made clear that they will not stand in the way of the mass surveillance of the world’s population by the German foreign intelligence service.

As Christian Flisek, who sits on the NSA parliamentary investigative committee for the Social Democrats (SPD), told *Deutschlandfunk*, “We need reconnaissance on the general situation abroad, and that includes the ability to monitor public communications on networks like Facebook and Twitter.”

Christian Democratic Union (CDU) deputy Roderich Kiesewetter declared that “global terrorist threats are being dealt with which cannot be exposed or prevented by reading the newspapers. Therefore we need a foreign intelligence service that is on an equal footing with other

partners’ services.”

In reality, the surveillance of social networks in real-time is not a response to a terrorist threat, but intended instead to crack down on social and political opposition. The ruling elite is conscious that years of austerity policies and aggression abroad will not simply be accepted without resistance by the population.

During the Egyptian revolution in 2011, social networks played a major role in mobilizing broad layers of the population. During the youth riots in Britain in the summer of the same year, it became clear how extensively the police and intelligence services used the internet to take action against the initiators of social opposition. The homes of young people were searched by British special units because they had called for public gatherings.

Last year a young man from Darmstadt made an appeal on Facebook for a walk to be held to a NSA complex. Just a few days later police appeared at his door to question him.

But the live surveillance of social networks is only part of the BND’s new initiative. Around half of the investment is to be spent on “Sigint” (signals intelligence). Here the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes of a “total change in philosophy” by the BND.

While previously, there was mass surveillance of emails, telephone calls and faxes, now the intelligence agency intends to focus on the analysis of so-called metadata. This means the recording of details on the sender, receiver, subject line, and date and time of millions of messages, without reading their content.

As the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported, BND representatives are apparently cynically attempting to present this to parliamentary deputies as the strengthening of citizens’ rights and freedoms in order to sell the proposal to the public.

In fact, the analysis of metadata makes it possible to identify details about a target person’s contacts. The BND

is to be put in a position to know who is communicating with whom, when, and by what means. As is already known, the US sometimes conducts its lethal and illegal drone attacks purely on the basis of metadata.

A further goal of the BND is the detection and deliberate exploitation of previously unknown security flaws in common software. For example, computers could be infected by trojans and viruses to gain access to their contents.

The BND also plans to invest in the area of biometrics. With the assistance of fingerprints and iris scans, the identification and observation of targeted persons is to be made possible. In order to circumvent the biometric security systems of other states, the BDN plans to purchase software to manipulate images. Agents who travel to other countries under different names would crop up during checks on biometric characteristics, something that the BND wishes to avoid in the future.

The unifying goal of all of these plans is the surveillance of the world's population in close cooperation with American and British intelligence. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* made this point noting that the BND had “concluded a series of strictly secret agreements with the NSA, based on a simple calculation: Whoever receives a lot also has to give a lot. The focus is on exchange on an equal footing.”

Although foreign intelligence agencies like the BND are officially not permitted to spy on the citizens of their own country, they avoid this restriction by exchanging their results with each other internationally.

Non-German citizens are practically denied any legal protection of their data under the plan. Even constitutional lawyers in the NSA investigative committee have criticized this over the past week. Matthias Bäcker, a law professor from Mannheim University, warned that the BND's practice of interception takes place “to a considerable degree in a law-free zone.” This was “not a very desirable state of affairs in a constitutional state.”

As *Die Zeit Online* reported several days ago, the German army was reviewing how it could spy on opponents of German militarism in the future. “Through the monitoring of tweets, Facebook likes and postings, information is to be obtained which is important for defending against threats,” the web site wrote with reference to German government documents.

The goal is the “obtaining of intelligence from open sources.” To this end, the defence ministry initiated a research project in May this year with the Fraunhofer Institute and IT firm IBM. At a cost of €1.35 million, the

options for surveillance of social networks are to be reviewed over the next two years. The system will use IBM's content analytics software, which has previously enabled numerous firms to sort unstructured data and differentiate between important and unimportant information.

At the same time, the information gained will be compared against databanks that are already accessible in order to make predictions about future behaviour, *Die Zeit Online* wrote. If the project is successful, it is to be transferred to the German army's main information system, according to the documents.

The plans of the BND and German army expose the anger expressed by a number of German politicians over Edward Snowden's revelations of the surveillance practices of the British and American intelligence services as utter hypocrisy. The plans explain why neither parliament nor the German government or judiciary have any interest in getting to the bottom of the NSA's illegal practices, and firmly oppose granting asylum to Snowden. They do not want to stop the surveillance practices, but rather expand them.

Only last week, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported on the basis of internal documents that general state prosecutor Harald Range would not open an investigation into the mass spying on the German population or the interception of Angela Merkel's mobile telephone communications by the NSA—even though he is obligated to do so in his post.

After this revelation provoked strong protest, Range opened a formal investigation into the tapping of Merkel's phone, although from the documents leaked to the media it seems quite clear that the investigation will be rapidly abandoned. At the same time Range has made clear he will not conduct any proper investigation into the mass surveillance of the German population.



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