



NSA revelations bolstering demands for congressional action

Latest report about contact list collection raises more ire

By Antone Gonsalves
October 15, 2013

Jaw-dropping revelations on the extent of Internet spying by the National Security Agency is having a huge political impact in the U.S., as Americans demand that lawmakers curb the agency's craving for personal data, experts say.

The latest media report to raise public anger came Monday from The Washington Post, [which reported that the NSA was collecting contact lists](#) from personal email and instant messaging accounts worldwide at a rate of more 250 million a year, including millions from Americans. Such revelations, which seem to appear weekly, is bolstering critics' arguments that curbs are needed to protect Americans' privacy.

"The NSA spying story has already had a huge political impact and will likely have more," Jim Harper, director of Information Policy Studies at The Cato Institute, said.

"Congress has switched from giving the NSA a blank check and free pass to asking hard questions, and that will continue for years."

Among the lawmakers pushing for reform in NSA surveillance programs is U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who introduced a bipartisan package of proposals last month.

"There's been support from the left and the right on this issue, which is especially heartening, considering how politically divided Congress is these days," Rainey Reitman, activism director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said.

Wyden, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, supports requiring spy agencies to get a court warrant to gather communications of Americans overseas. Current laws limit that protection only to Americans in the U.S.

Critics claim laws currently on the books are not enough to protect Americans. The NSA acknowledges "incidentally" collecting the contact lists of Americans, The Post reported. While

not targeted, the address books were inadvertently collected as part of the massive harvesting of data through secret arrangements with foreign telecommunications companies or friendly intelligence services.

The lists were taken from major service providers, such as Yahoo, Microsoft, Facebook and Google, according to the newspaper. The Post based its reporting on interviews with senior intelligence officials and on top-secret documents provided by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, who has been charged with espionage, but has been granted temporary asylum in Russia.

The NSA has said it needs to collect huge amounts of data in order to identify terrorist networks that span the U.S. and foreign countries. The agency has also argued that media leaks make it more difficult to catch people planning attacks on the U.S.

However, Harper contends that reporting from the Snowden documents by The Post, The New York Times and other media organizations "has been careful not to do anything that puts the country at risk."

"The one chance the NSA has had to push back against its critics is to suggest that the leaks undercut the country's security," Harper said.

"Their case is weak, but the care shown by journalists and members of Congress has protected against making that argument stronger."

Signs that Americans are rallying against NSA surveillance include an [Oct. 26 protest scheduled for Washington, D.C.](#) Thousands of protesters are expected to participate in the gathering to mark the 12th anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Patriot Act, which governs how the NSA operates today.

Besides the impact in the U.S., NSA spying is having repercussions overseas.

"I believe that the impact of these revelations outside of the United States is huge," Peter Ludlow, a critic of U.S. government surveillance and a professor at Northwestern University, said.

"I'm currently in Brazil, and it is all anyone wants to talk about."

Brazil President Dilma Rousseff postponed attending a state dinner in her honor in Washington, D.C., this month, because of revelations of NSA spying on herself, the state-owned oil company and Brazilians.

Media reports on NSA surveillance overseas are expected to have an impact on negotiations over the free trade agreement between the U.S. and the European Union. Members of the European parliament are pushing for privacy rights for its citizens.

"The recent US surveillance program scandal has revealed how important it is to agree upon a solid and strengthened piece of EU legislation on data protection," Antigoni Papadopoulou, a member of the parliament's civil rights, justice and home affairs committee, [said last month](#).

"In any case, the EU has a legal and moral obligation to protect its citizens from espionage practices and abuse of their personal data."

In the U.S., the privacy debate stemming from the NSA's work is expected to bleed over to other discussions in Congress. Talks that could be affected include those on proposals to require sharing of cyber-attack information between government and the private sector to bolster the security of financial institutions and the nation's critical infrastructure.

"It creates a political climate where it's very unlikely that they can move forward with cyber-security bills they've been talking about previously, such as CISPA," Reitman said, referring to the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act.