

Britain's Surveillance State: The Secret Ops of the "Government Communications Headquarters" (GCHQ)

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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"The innocent have everything to fear, mostly from the guilty, but in the longer term even more from those who say things like 'The innocent have nothing to fear.'" *Terry Pratchett (British author), in Snuff (Doubleday, 2011).*

For many people, personal privacy vs widespread surveillance has been a major issue for decades. However, some thought it might have been happening but chose to downplay it. Others didn't want to know and just didn't care. Edward Snowden's recent revelations indicate it is happening and that we should all care.

Former National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden has now turned his attention to the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the British equivalent of the NSA. On Friday, Snowden released documents to The Guardian newspaper in the UK to back up his claims that GCHQ has secretly accessed fibre optic cables carrying huge amounts of internet and communications data. According to The Guardian, the agency is able to tap into, analyse and store data. Snowden told the newspaper that the NSA has a more prolific British ally in GCHQ. (GCHQ is one of three UK intelligence agencies, alongside MI5 and MI6.)

"It's not just a US problem. The UK has a huge dog in this fight... They (GCHQ) are worse than the US." Edward Snowden

Although it is physically impossible for the intelligence agencies to read everyone's emails, for instance, GCHQ can apparently record phone calls, read email and Facebook postings and review website traffic if they so wish. It can also access entire web use histories on individuals. Although GCHQ can only store certain data for 30 days, the Guardian says the practice is subject to little scrutiny. GCHQ operation can tap cables that carry global communications with the potential to carry 600 million daily 'telephone events'.

"If GCHQ have been intercepting huge numbers of innocent people's communications as part of a massive sweeping exercise, then I struggle to see how that squares with a process that requires a warrant for each individual intercept." Nick Pickles, Big Brother Watch director, as reported in The Guardian, 22 June.

This massive interception effort operates under two programmes: Mastering the Internet and Global Telecoms Exploitation. GCHQ is tapping 200 internet links, each with a data rate of 10Gbps, and the agency has the technical capacity to concurrently analyze 46 of these 200 streams of data at a time.

The revelations come alongside reports of the NSA snooping on US and international citizens via the metadata held on them by telecommunication companies, and secret data-sharing agreements between the NSA and consumer-web giants, such as Facebook, Google, Apple and others under the PRISM scheme.

GCHQ is able to capitalize on the UK's position at the edge of Western Europe, by tapping into the vast quantity of data flowing through cables around the UK and abroad. Over 300 GCHQ and 250 NSA analysts sift through the data, which they use to identify communications relating to security, terror, organized crime, and economic well-being.

Britain and the US are the founding members of the Five-Eyes intelligence sharing agreement. The Five-Eyes are members of a special club of former British colonies that gather and intelligence with each other. Australia, Canada and New Zealand are the three other members.

According to The Guardian, Britain's ability to tap these fibre-optic cables makes it the web eavesdropping powerhouse of the Five-Eyes, with the documents provided by Snowden saying that of the five, Britain has "the biggest Internet access."

The Guardian reports that British personnel on the team of 300 GCHQ and 250 NSA analysts sifting through the data have "a light oversight regime compared to the US"

The newspaper reports that 850,000 NSA and employees and private American contractors have been able to access to the information gathered by CGHQ. One of the documents quotes NSA boss Gen. Keith Alexander as urging British spies to collect everything they could.

"Why can't we collect at the signals, all the time? Sounds like a good summer homework project for Menwith," is written at the top of a slide shown by the Guardian that supposedly quotes Alexander during a 2008 visit to the UK. The slide is titled, "Collect-it-all."

Menwith refers to RAF Menwith Hill, a secret signals intelligence gathering facility in the Yorkshire countryside run by the US.

GCHQ operatives tapped the fibre-optic cables over the last five years at the point where the transatlantic cables reach British shores - these cables move Internet and telephone data from North America to Western Europe. All of this was done with agreements with the communications companies, described by the document as "intercept partners."

Last week, Deputy U.S. Attorney General Robert Cole defended bulk collection of cellphone data and other business records to US lawmakers:

"If you're looking for a needle in a haystack, you've got to get the haystack first," said Cole during a June 18 House intelligence committee hearing on the matter. "That's why we have the ability under the [FISA] court order, to acquire . . . all of that data, we don't get to use all of that data, necessarily." As reported by John Reed in Foreign Policy on 21 June.

Britain and the US are rapidly perfecting the system to allow them to capture and analyse a large quantity of international traffic consisting of emails, texts, phone calls, internet searches, chat, photographs, blogposts, videos and the many uses of Google.

Writing in The Guardian on Friday 21 June, Henry Porter states:

“Mastering the Internet treats the rights of billions of foreign web users, the possible menace to the privacy of British and American citizens and the duties of their legislators with equal contempt. After Iraq and the banking crash, the world may come to see MTI as further evidence of a heedless delinquency in two of the world’s oldest democracies.”

Porter talks about the lack of meaningful oversight in both countries, the use of commercial companies in the surveillance process and the wholesale disregard for the fundamentals of both countries’ democratic principles. Shami Chakrabarti, director of civil rights organisation Liberty, says that GCHQ are exploiting the fact that the internet is so international in nature and that what’s holding them back from going further is technological capability, certainly not ethics (1).

Why it matters, really matters

For too long, the majority in Britain has been led to believe that governments in major western liberal democracies operate with benign intentions, that the government acts on our behalf and in our interests and that only those with something to hide have anything to fear. The belief is forwarded that the loss of liberty and intrusions into our personal privacy are small prices to pay for ensuring our safety in a barbaric world that wants to attack and inflict terror on us.

It’s all part of the dominant narrative. It’s all part of a dominant narrative that seeks to mislead and to mask the real essence of power and the true nature of intent behind notions of patriotism, nationalism, bowing down to the flag, militarism and that ‘we’, ‘the nation’ are in united in cause and belief.

What Snowden’s revelations illustrate is the unaccountable face of power. And this should concern us because it’s not the greater good of humankind, queen, flag or country that this power serves. It ultimately serves capital and the extremely wealthy, whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of ordinary people across the world (2).

Look no further to see who funds the major political parties or individual politicians to do their bidding. Look no further than the backgrounds of many of these politicians. But, most important, look no further to see who owns the major corporations and banks and who sits on the bodies that hammer out major policies (3)(4)(5). It is the powerful foundations and think tanks headed or funded by private corporations that drive US and British policies, whether at home or abroad, and that includes the Project for a New American Century (6) and the resultant ongoing war of terror waged on countries across the world.

Western liberal democracy has been quite successful in making many at home blind to the chains that bind and which make them immune to the falsehoods that underpin the system. However, with the economic meltdown, ‘austerity’, increasing public awareness of corporate crimes, disillusionment with mainstream politics and the ramping up of wars, paranoia and the stripping away of civil liberties, social control is no longer able to operate on the relatively benign level that it once did. The collapse of the economic system and its propping up has laid bare just who that system is set up to benefit. State violence and mass surveillance is now part of the changing agenda of liberal democracy that is no longer able to hide behind the pretence of being liberal or democratic. The mask has slipped and we are right to be concerned.

"The world has evidence of the totally monitored future that GCHQ and NSA plan for us and that political establishments turn a blind eye to.... fear still trumps everything. On Tuesday, the head of NSA, General Keith B Alexander, and the director of the FBI, Robert Mueller, insisted that many terror plots had been stopped by surveillance. In Britain, the foreign secretary, William Hague... was joined by three former home secretaries, Jack Straw, Lord (John) Reid and Alan Johnson, to reassure us that mass surveillance was indeed necessary to make interdictions and... that further powers were needed... The point about these latest revelations is that they show there are more than adequate powers for interception on both sides of the Atlantic and that the terror agenda and, to a lesser degree, the fear of paedophilia, may well have been used to elaborate a huge system of espionage and domestic surveillance." - Henry Porter, The Guardian 21 June.

Notes

- 1) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23012910>
- 2) <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2005/07/live-j01.html>
- 3) <http://landdestroyer.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/tipping-balance-of-power.html>
- 4) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-four-horsemen-behind-america-s-oil-wars/24507>
- 5) <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bruceupbin/2011/10/22/the-147-companies-that-control-everything/>

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Articles by: [Colin Todhunter](#)

About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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