Brandon Steup

ENG 111

Professor Hunt

Is Big Brother Reading Your Snapchat Posts?

 Imagine this, everything you have ever said, yes including that supposedly self-deleting snapchat selfie you sent, is being kept and stored by someone you don’t even know, it would anger you right, a complete violation of your privacy. Now imagine that person is not just Joe Shmoe from down the street or some hacker in China, but is the government that promises to protect you from attacks and to uphold a constitution that is meant to protect your rights. Government spying is old news, but only recently it has turned to its own citizens. I believe that the government has no right to our private data without due process of a warrant. They need one for our house, so why not our digital lives as well.

 Given the series nature of this accusation, it’s no small wonder that most people have not even heard of this being done until recently. In an article done by BBC in 2014, a man names Edward Snowden, a former NSA (National Security Agency) data analysist leaked a massive amount of information about a program called PRISM. This set off a firestorm of controversy because this program was designed to collect data from ISPs and other internet companies on US citizens. Now the NSA had been doing this kind of work since 9/11 when President Bush signed the patriot act into law, but it had been much smaller, and didn’t hold as much data or for as long. This new operation, however, went way beyond that original goal and operation, and set up a procedure to collect, tag, and store mass amounts of data specific to US citizens. This included phone records, emails, text messages, GPS data, and web searches. This was, according to the government, a action done to protect the US from international terrorism. Since then people have become a lot more wise, and have started to take note of the NSA’s actions, which are condemnable on a couple points. First, the not only the collection of data, but the indefinite storage of said data. Second, the complete lack of any due process to obtain said information on any citizen, and finally, the use of companies whom do not disclose to their customers that their data is being stored and their online activities monitored.

 Earlier this year, the NSA started construction of a mysterious building the size of several football fields in Saratoga Springs. According to Wired, this center is being used for the mass collection and storage of US citizen’s data. The way it works is the government gathers your information from varies companies and ISP’s from around the country. This information is then collected in this data center and is cataloged not only with your name, but time, location, application, and all of your basic legal information. This information is stored for “indefinite storage” and can be used by the government agency at any time. This information was leaked pretty recently, and has stirred such a massive amount of controversy that the city of Saratoga Springs has threatened to cut off the water supply to the center, not only making it uninhabitable, but also cutting off the water used to cool their servers. This would force them to either find a different water source, or abandon the facility. Here we see such a massive amount of pressure that it is affecting the cities decision making in almost real time. This is clearly something that the citizens of the US do not want, and the government is still going right along with it. Not only that, but why in a relatively uninhabited and quiet state, far away from DC. This, in my mind and the minds of many others, was to keep it quiet and off of the media’s radar. AS well as this, they are claiming that this system is for the defense of the United States, but is spying on its own citizens and not those in areas such as the Middle East. Granted this could be somewhat helpful and stopping a terrorist attack at home, but from the program’s inception up until today has not been successful in preventing a single terrorist attack, with its only claim to fame being the catching of said terror suspects after they have committed their crimes. However in this case the system is again redundant due to the police easily being able to get a warrant through the courts. So here we have a system that is able to track your entire digital footprint, is being touted as a way to prevent terrorist attacks, but is entirely redundant for the purpose that is claimed to exist for. This point alone, the lack of due process, is another principle reason why this program is invasive and in violation of our rights.

The Leak of Prism

Even given these facts, it seems to be a relatively harmless program with the right process put into place. They go and get a warrant on the mark, and then they begin their investigation process. This is how all search warrants for anything physical goes. When it comes to our digital lives however, they require no such order. In fact, you don’t even need to be the mark for them to snag everything on you from the internet. According to The Verge, they need to have a 51 percent certainty to begin surveillance on someone, however when they begin to collect information about that suspect, they pull the same amount of information from everyone who knows that person. So you could simply have sent an e-mail to that person, and this gives the NSA full license to treat you the same way that they treat a terror suspect. This, in my mind is not simply negligence on the part of the court system to regulate them. This is a purposeful loophole to allow them to collect any data they want simply on a hunch. Not only that, but according to the same article they are able to keep any information that is encrypted indefinably. This means that anything you send through a secure site that uses encryption is fair game. Sites like Facebook, Gmail, amazon, and any app on your smartphone, including your real-time GPS location data. This can all be done without as much as a warrant from a judge. This means that even down to the individual analyst can pull anyone’s entire digital life and that of those around them, based on a simple hunch.

 This demonstrates the complete lack of oversight on such projects, as well as the lack of transparency. They had no plans to alert the public that this was occurring, and if it wasn’t for a very dedicated data analyst, who goes by the name of Edward Snowden, We would still have no idea about any of this. According to an interview with Snowden, done by Wired Magazine, he states that “I even left a digital bread crumb trail of sorts to tell them which documents I actually took, and which I simply touched.” This he said, would give them time to shore up the leaks and to do damage control. He simply wanted toe American public to know that their government, the ones that they elected into office, was doing this to them. With this revelation, another one also came to the surface. According to Snowden himself, he didn’t leak all of the documents that made their way into the media’s hands. Only some of them. This means that there is still one or several people in the NSA whom is still leaking data, in a way a scary prospect for an agency whom is supposed to have all of this data on the American people. If this ever came to light, it would mean a political death stroke for those in charge of the program. What we get at the end of this is not a pretty picture. We have a government that is not only conducting warrantless searches on the American populous, but also lost track of, according to wired magazine, almost 1.2 million documents, and have no idea which ones were simply looked at, and which ones were copied, by a data analyst whom leaked said documents, then escaped to Russia. Again this shows a complete lack of transparency when is comes to the governments activities, and also a major security breach in one of the highest up parts of the US Intelligence community. This not only proves the lack of truth, but also exposes an agency that we cannot trust with this mass amount of information, even if they were transparent and open with their activities. This even extends to the companies whom are supplying this information, whom so often claim to have no knowledge of the NSA’s activities.

Social Media, the Governments Data Collection Service

 The government might be collecting our data en masse, but it’s their method for during so that might be the scariest part of this whole operation. He NSA has long standing deals with companies like Facebook and Microsoft, and many others, to access the data of those that are using their services. According to BBC, the government has wiretaps and full access into the databases of 9 major internet companies, Facebook, Google, Yahoo, and 6 others to gather data as they see fit. These companies have then turned around and claimed to the public to be unknowing in this. They claim to have no knowledge of this mass data collection, and claim that their users privacy to be a major focus. According to Daily Mail, these companies have sold out more than 40,000 accounts in a 1 year period. This operation has been going on since the Patriot Act in 2001. That is an absolutely massive amount of information to be just given to an agency whom has been shown to not be able to protect their own documents, let alone ours. According to the same article, this practice has not even released accurate figures on all of the information that was leaked to the government. This means that the 40,000 might have only been the tip of the ice berg. Think about it, one of that 40,000 could be you, meaning the government now has everything you have ever posted, messaged, or otherwise accessed on Facebook stored in a data center in Utah for indefinite storage and analysis. This could also mean that they can pull the records of your family, your children, your friends, and anyone that you hold a close relationship. And Facebook allows this to happen, without any disclosure to their users about this massive breach of our digital privacy. Not only is this directly against the Fourth Amendment, it is also a potential breach of the first amendment if the government sees communication that they deem to be a threat, they can simply silence it and no one is the wiser. It is for this reason that whistleblowers like Edward Snowden have to flee to places like Russia, in fear of their own government for leaking a secret project that breaks several of our basic rights as citizens. Now there are several points of this program that are, in a sense for the greater good, but require much more oversight then what amounted to a blank check to search through the lives of every citizen in the US.

 The main point being that this program helps to protect against terrorism. This is one of the reasons that the major groundwork of this project was laid in the wake of 9/11, to protect the US from attacks like that, and to catch terrorists before then have the chance to strike. According to the NSA’s own official government website, one of their main goals is to “Advance the rights, goals, and values of the nation”. By spying on its own citizens, it violates every one of this claimed goals. Our Fourth amendment, our values of individuality and right to our privacy, and the idea of WE the People, by keeping it secret from us. Another often cited argument is that the government only collects information regarding possible threats. This is only partially true. According to Daily Mail, the government is not only seeking information on the backgrounds on those whom it deems a target, but also their GPS location and billing information. If the idea that it only pulls information on those people that are a threat is true, then why request billing information and GPS location. These are all things that a search warrant would give them access to, and without a warrant the GPS location is near useless anyway. This has even been touched on by the Presiding judge on the case in Supreme Court, named Richard Leon, whom has called the operation unconstitutional, and is pending a full halt on said operation. This in my mind is the greatest piece of evidence that the government should not have this much power and free rein, and needs to be reined in and the espionage into the lives of their own population put to an end.

 In conclusion, this use and abuse of the government’s ability to peer into the digital lives of anyone, anytime needs to come to an end. The people are now aware, due to the leaks of people like Snowden and have spoken. Companies like Facebook and Google need to be open and transparent in what they disclose, and stop lying to the public about their activities, and finally the storage of this massive amount of information needs to be put to a stop. Considering that this paper will probably end up on said servers, there is only one thing need be said, is the mass breach of our privacy and loss of said privacy really worth it?