

# NSA revelations: A timeline of what's come out since Snowden leaks began

Since Edward Snowden's first published leak about National Security Agency surveillance techniques appeared in The Guardian on June 5, new revelations have been steadily trickling out. Here's a look at what we've learned since June, broken down by 16 key dates.

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## June 5-8, 2013



The NSA Data Center in Bluffdale, Utah, one of the National Security Agency's largest data storage centers.

(Rick Bowmer/ AP Photo/ File )

On June 5, Glenn Greenwald publishes an article in the Guardian revealing that the National Security Agency has been collecting the telephone records of millions of US Verizon customers in bulk.

The next day, The Washington Post publishes the details of an Internet surveillance program called PRISM, which shows the NSA obtained direct access to the systems of nine Internet companies, including Google, Facebook, and Apple.

Then on June 8, information about “Boundless Informant,” an NSA tool that helps the organization collect and arrange data according to where it was collected, and how.

**Why is this important?** With the first revelation, we learn the government can collect the numbers of both parties on a call, as well as information about the duration and the location of parties involved in the conversation. From these unique identifiers – known as a call’s “metadata” – the government can effectively track down the caller, though President Obama denies the government is actually listening in on the content of the calls.

The second revelation – about PRISM – puts major Internet players in a compromising position: according to early PRISM reports, the companies cooperated with government demands to access user data.

Boundless Informant served as an uncomfortable infographic that showed how much data the NSA had been collecting from around the globe.

## June 9, 2013



Edward Snowden speaks during a presentation ceremony for the Sam Adams Award in Moscow, Russia, on Oct. 11.  
(AP)

Mr. Snowden is revealed to be the anonymous NSA contractor behind the document leaks to the press. In a video interview first published on The Guardian’s website, Snowden said he thought the public had a right to know more about secret government surveillance programs. At the time he revealed himself, Snowden was in Hong Kong, but later fled to Moscow on June 23. He lived in Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport for several weeks before he was granted asylum in Russia on Aug. 1.

**Why is this important?** Not only did Edward Snowden’s flight from Hong Kong to Russia put a strain on both Sino-US, and Russian-US relations, the idea that a

relatively low-ranking employee could wreak such havoc on the US security apparatus greatly alarmed US officials.

## June 16, 2013



Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff spoke about National Security Agency spying on Brazil at the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, on Sept. 9. (Eraldo Peres/AP/File)

The Guardian reports that the British intelligence agency, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), intercepted foreign politicians' communications at the G20 Summit in 2009. As more revelations appeared about the symbiotic relationship between the GCHQ and the NSA, it became increasingly apparent that the two organizations had conducted extensive surveillance on foreign countries and their leaders. According to an article published by The Guardian on Aug. 1, the United States had also funded certain programs in the GCHQ.

An article that appeared on Sept. 11 also showed that the NSA shares raw intelligence, including American data, with Israel.

***Why is this important?*** In the realm of foreign relations, news of the United States' elaborate overseas surveillance programs was not very well received. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff were particularly displeased with President Obama, and both publically admonished him for the NSA programs. Interestingly, Edward Snowden said in an interview with *der Spiegel* in July that the NSA "is in bed together with the Germans."

## July 31, 2013



A photo of the the US Courthouse in Washington where the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court resides.  
(Cliff Owen/AP/File)

The Guardian details "XKeyscore," a wide-reaching program that allows analysts to search through expansive databases of user data. Snowden hinted at XKeyscore in his first interview, and said it was so powerful that he could have wiretapped "anyone, from you or your accountant, to a federal judge, or even the president, if I had a personal email."

***Why is this important?*** The secretive nature of the program, which was authorized in secret proceedings by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC), drew attention to the massive volume of information at the NSA's disposal.

**Aug. 8, 2013**



The Lavabit logo. The company's site was taken down because its owner and operator, Ladar Levison, did not want to "become complicit" with federal investigations.  
(Lavabit logo, screenshot)

It appears that two small encrypted communications companies, Lavabit and Silent Circle, tried to protect their users' data from the US government, based on statements from company owners. (Lavabit was Snowden's e-mail provider.) On Sept. 2, the New York Times reported that Lavabit's owner was pressured by the FBI to hand over more information about its clients.

***Why is this important?*** Government critics question whether any US-based computer servers would be protected from government surveillance – in this instance, in connection with the government's Snowden investigation.

**Aug. 15, 2013**

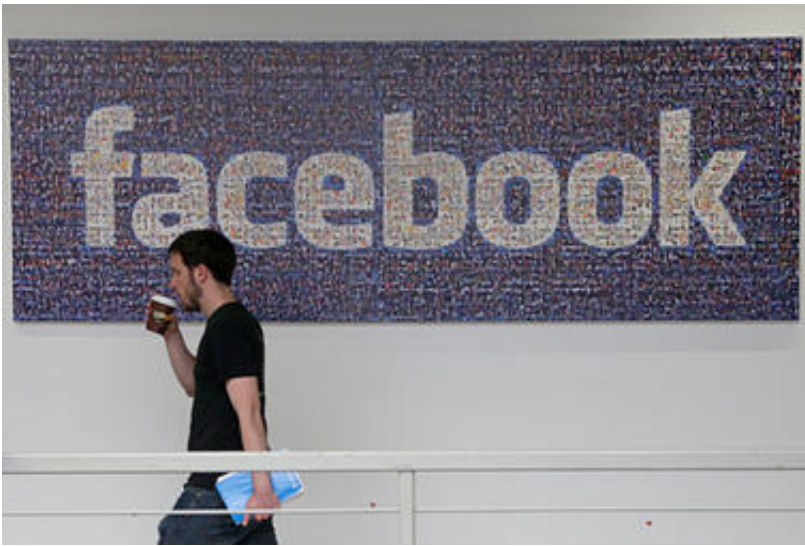


National Security Agency Director Gen. Keith Alexander testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington on Oct. 2.  
(Evan Vucci/AP/File)

The Washington Post revealed NSA internal audit showing thousands of privacy violations. According to the report, the agency broke its own internal regulations 2,776 times between March 2011 and March 2012. In a followup article that appeared on Aug. 23, The Wall Street Journal reported that government officials would spy on love interests. These kinds of violations "constitute most episodes of willful misconduct by NSA employees," the Journal reported.

***Why is this important?*** The lack of managerial oversight in how, and for what purposes, NSA employees used the vast amount of data at their disposal raised concerns among privacy advocates.

**Sept. 28, 2013**

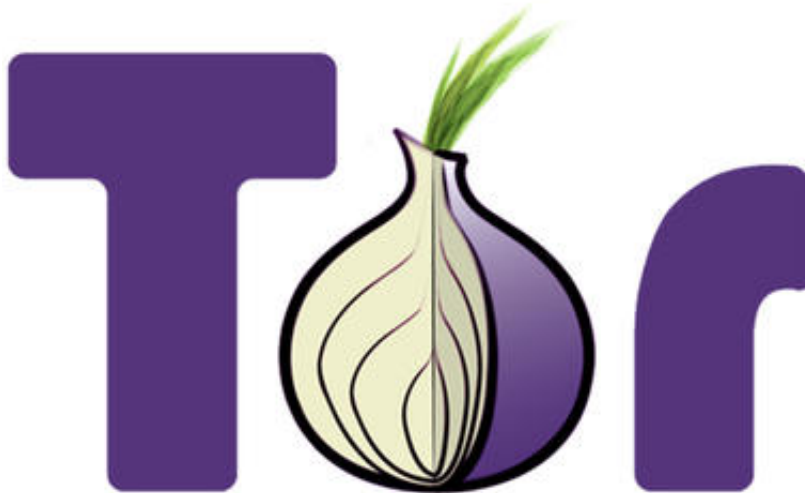


A Facebook employee walks past a sign at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif.  
(Jeff Chiu/AP/File)

The New York Times reports that the NSA has been using public social media data to figure out who associates with whom (both in person and digitally) and where social media users are located. This surveillance began in November 2010 after the NSA began allowing the analysis of phone calls and email logins, according to the report. On Oct. 14, The Washington Post broke the story that the NSA has also been gathering users' e-mail and chat address books to help fill in information about social networks.

***Why is this important?*** The NSA says the information gathering has "foreign intelligence purposes" and is only conducted outside US borders. However, some critics see this as a mere technicality.

**Oct. 4, 2013**



The Tor browser's symbol is an onion. The Tor system uses "onion-routing," or layers of encryption, to insure that information is kept private.



(Tor image, screenshot)

The Guardian revealed the NSA has targeted the Tor network, a web browser that anonymizes user activity. While the core security of the network has remained in place, according to The Guardian, the NSA has made it a priority to get through the network's encryption, which afford users their privacy.

**Why is this important?** It might seem logical that the US government would be frustrated by a web browser like Tor, but for the NSA to have a PowerPoint presentation entitled "Tor Stinks" (the browser's symbol is an onion) that purports the idea of cracking the site's security shows the government's disregard for the users' privacy, critics say.

## Oct. 10, 2013



NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, an analyst with a U.S. defence contractor, is seen in this still image taken from video during an interview by The Guardian in his hotel room in Hong Kong June 2013.

(Glenn Greenwald/Laura Poitras/Courtesy of The Guardian/Reuters )

Two senior American officials told The New York Times that Snowden's supervisor at the CIA had in 2009 put a note in Snowden's file alleging that Snowden might be attempting to hack into classified computer files. Those suspicions were not communicated to the NSA, to which Snowden soon transferred. He later fled from the NSA with a trove of top secret files in hand.

**Why is this important?** The revelation rung alarm bells about gaps or inconsistencies in the government's granting of top security clearances, and Congress launched a formal investigation into how high-level background checks are conducted. One company, USIS, to which the government outsources some of its background checks, fell under particular suspicion. Two of the people it has vetted are Snowden and Aaron Alexis, the murderer of 12 people at the Washington Navy Yard this fall.

**Oct. 15, 2013**



Glenn Greenwald, the journalist who broke the first stories about the National Security Agency's global spy program, speaks via teleconference from Brazil at the 69th General Assembly of the Inter American Press Association in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in Oct. 2013  
(Gustavo Miranda/O Globo/AP)

Glenn Greenwald, the lawyer and journalist who broke the NSA revelations in The Guardian, announced that he would leave the paper to found his own news outlet, BuzzFeed first reported. Reuters later said that eBay founder Pierre Omidyar would provide the financial backing for the new venture.

***Why is this important?*** Mr. Greenwald billed the new venture as explicitly for the purposes of publishing the rest of the NSA documents, which he had not passed in full to The Guardian. Greenwald's announcement was an assurance that the NSA leaks are far from over and was the latest threat to the US government's effort to quell burgeoning worldwide outrage over its agency's activities.

**Oct. 22, 2013**





President Barack Obama walks with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel toward a group photo outside of the Konstantin Palace in St. Petersburg in September 2013.

(Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP)

The NSA had wiretapped the offices of the French mission to the United Nations and the French Embassy in Washington, the French newspaper *Le Monde* first reported. The report was based on NSA documents from September 2010, provided by Snowden, showing that the NSA had tapped French diplomats' communications. Just one day later, the German chancellor called President Obama for assurance that her cellphone had not been a target of NSA surveillance operations from 2002 to 2007, as documents provided by Snowden to German news magazine *Der Spiegel* appeared to show.

***Why is this important?*** The revelations added Germany and France to a long list of close US allies demanding apologies and explanations for the NSA's aggressive spying on them during the past decade. In addition adding a chill to the US relationships with its most valuable allies, the documents tarnished the internal relationship between the NSA and the White House. White House officials first said that they had been unaware of the NSA's spying on top officials of allies, but the NSA was outraged over the White House's apparent attempt to dodge responsibility. Later, the White House changed its position to say that it was aware of the spying, a statement that came too late to quell criticism of the White House's apparent lack of oversight or control of the NSA.

**Oct. 30, 2013**



The NSA has allegedly tapped into the main communications links that connect Yahoo and Google data centers around the world.  
(Google/AP)

The Washington Post first reported that the NSA and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) had tapped into internal communications connecting Yahoo and Google's overseas servers, according to documents leaked by Snowden. The two agencies had been copying e-mails and other information passing between the big data centers, the documents said. Both tech giants said that they had suspected that the agencies might be snooping but had not consented to the agencies' secret oversight.

***Why is this important?*** The incident highlighted the vast reach of the NSA and its British counterpart, suggesting that the agencies could spy on even tech powerhouses with formidable defenses in place. In the days after the news, Yahoo and Google, as well as other major data collectors such as Facebook and Twitter, expressed outrage at the revelations and said they would create stronger bulwarks against prying government eyes.

**Nov. 1, 2013**

...duty to act. As a result of reporting these  
 concerns, I have faced a severe and sustained campaign of  
 persecution that forced me from my family and home. I am  
 currently living in exile under a grant of temporary asylum in  
 the Russian Federation in accordance with international law.

I am heartened by the response to my act of political expression,  
 in both the United States and beyond. Citizens around the world  
 as well as high officials - including in the United States - have  
 judged the revelation of an unaccountable system of pervasive  
 surveillance to be a public service. These spying revelations  
 have resulted in the proposal of many new laws and policies to  
 address formerly concealed abuses of the public trust. The  
 benefits to society of this growing knowledge are becoming  
 increasingly clear at the same time claimed risks are being shown  
 to have been mitigated.

Though the outcome of my efforts has been demonstrably positive,  
 my government continues to treat dissent as defection, and seeks  
 to criminalize political speech with felony charges that provide  
 no defense. However, speaking the truth is not a crime. I am  
 confident that with the support of the international community,  
 the government of the United States will abandon this harmful  
 behavior. I hope that when the difficulties of this humanitarian  
 situation have been resolved, I will be able to cooperate in the  
 responsible finding of fact regarding reports in the media,  
 particularly in regard to the truth and authenticity of  
 documents, as appropriate and in accordance with the law.

I look forward to speaking with you in your country  
 situation is resolved, and thank you for your country's  
 upholding the international law.

Opposition Greens lawmaker Hans-Christian Stroebele shows a copy of a letter to the media that he claims he received from Edward Snowden, prior to a press conference.

(Michael Sohn/AP)

In his "Manifesto for the Truth," published in the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* and passed to German officials via a liberal German lawmaker, Edward Snowden outlined his case for clemency in the US. Mr. Snowden, who has been charged with two violations of the 1917 Espionage Act, as well as with theft, made the case that he has furnished a meaningful and long overdue debate in the US and abroad about the ethics of federal spying. In the letter, Snowden also expressed his willingness to assist German officials in investigating blooming allegations of NSA spying on their activities. White House officials told the *New York Times* that they were unmoved by Mr. Snowden's appeal for forgiveness.

**Why is this important?** Even as Snowden's disclosures have spurred ever more high-octane debate about the ethics of the NSA's spying, the US government has remained unapologetic, saying that most of the NSA's activities are well within its rights. The government's un-yielding maintenance that Snowden committed a crime in revealing the NSA's activities has burnished its claim that its agency's spying was not illegal, as well aimed toward establishing a deterring precedent for would-be whistleblowers.

**Dec. 16-18, 2013**



Did the NSA act unconstitutionally in its vast collection of US phone metadata?  
(Patrick Semansky/AP)

On Dec. 16, Judge Richard Leon of the US District Court in Washington, D.C., ruled that the NSA's vast program to collect Americans' phone records was possibly unconstitutional and, at a minimum, "almost-Orwellian." In his 68-page ruling, the judge also noted that he was unaware of any instance in which the collected phone records had been in useful in undercutting an attack. Then, on Dec.18, a presidential panel encouraged President Obama to massively curtail the activities of the NSA, including making major revisions to how the agency handles US phone data. The recommendations for overhauling the phone program included putting the collected data in the hands of private telecommunications companies and making it necessary for the government to procure a court order to access an individual's information. As it is now, the collected data, called metadata, are available to a group of agency officials who can also authorize access for other parties.

***Why is this important?*** The court's ruling and the presidential panel's recommendations were both high-level blows to the US government's staunch commitment to maintaining the NSA's phone-data collection activities, even as public anger mounted as the extent of the surveillance became more apparent. Both events also came as similar cases against the NSA's program, including one by the American Civil Liberties Union, were wending their way through the courts.

**Dec. 25, 2013**



Edward Snowden delivered a Christmas message that was anything but Christmas cheerful, warning that modern surveillance had surpassed that seen in the novel "1984."

(Glenn Greenwald/Laura Poitras/The Guardian/AP)

In a Christmas Day message broadcast on British television's Channel 4, Snowden alleged that NSA surveillance had surpassed the intrusive activities of the Big Brother, dystopian state in George Orwell's "1984." The message came just two days after The Washington Post's published a story after a 14-hour interview with Snowden, who remained in Russia on temporary asylum. In that interview, Snowden told the Post he had "already won" against the NSA and its British parallel since journalists were telling, and would continue to tell, the stories he had hoped would be told when he turned over NSA documents to them.

***Why is this important?*** The two-minute, Dec. 25 message and the Post interview both confirmed Snowden's continued celebrity and his central position to the scandal that has unfolded around the revelations he had handed to the Guardian. The parallels that Snowden drew between the US and British governments and Big Brother were also embarrassing to both nations and were a rebuttal to the countries' insistence that the NSA and the British equivalent had committed no wrongdoing.

**Dec. 27, 2013**





Is the NSA's phone data collection program legal? Two judges disagree.  
(Connie Zhou/Google/AP)

Federal judge William Pauley, in New York, ruled that the NSA program to collect US phone records was both legal and exceedingly valuable to American safety, arguing that the program, had it existed before 2001, could have helped prevent 9/11.

***Why is this important?*** The ruling came less than two weeks after another federal judge had ruled in a different but similar case that the program was bordering on unconstitutional and was almost certainly both unethical and unproductive. The main difference between the two rulings was in their interpretation of the 1979 US Supreme Court decision in the *Smith v. Maryland* case, *The New York Times* reported. In that decision, the Supreme Court justices had concluded that people have no reasonable expectation of privacy when they voluntarily turn over information to third parties, such as private phone companies. Judge Pauley's ruling upheld and relied on this 1979 decision, while the other judge argued that its premise was outdated and invalid in an age where private companies are flush with digital information.

The two parallel cases appear to be headed next to appeals courts in New York and Washington. If the rulings continue to diverge, the Supreme Court could weigh in.

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