

American Leaks Details of Secret Government Programs

Hi, there—nice to have you with us on As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. Today, we are talking about a 29-year-old American who leaked details of top-secret government programs.

Edward Snowden has been the subject of much debate this week in the United States and in many other places. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, says Mr. Snowden has betrayed his country.

“He’s a traitor. The disclosure of this information puts Americans at risk. It shows our adversaries what our capabilities are, and it’s a giant violation of the law.”

Other Americans, like Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked government secrets in 1971, believe Mr. Snowden is more like a hero.

“I think that he gives me hope that we may actually regain our Bill of Rights.”

Mario Ritter explains exactly what secret programs he made public.

This month, Edward Snowden told *The Guardian* newspaper that the American government has been secretly collecting millions of telephone records. The program gathers only limited data about phone calls, such as where a call is made, to what number, and how long it lasts. National security officials and President Obama have stated that the government does not have information about what the callers are saying.

“Nobody is listening to your telephone calls. That’s not what this program is about.”

Later, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* reported that the government is also gathering a huge amount of online information. The newspapers said the government can examine Internet users’ private emails, photographs and computer files. Reporters say at least nine major companies are taking part in the government program. They include Facebook, Google, Skype, YouTube, Hotmail, and Apple.

The program is called Prism. President Obama says Prism is directed mainly at people living outside the United States. If the government wants information about an American citizen or someone in the United States, officials must have permission from a special national security court.

But even foreign Internet data flows through the United States because its computer servers can carry information quickly and at low cost. Intelligence officers watch this communication to look for connections to known or suspected terrorists. They also look for data patterns that might show something about planned attacks.

President Obama says the intelligence-gathering programs have helped prevent terrorism. And, both programs are legal. They are protected under a measure Congress passed after the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. The law is called the Patriotic Act. It was designed to discover threats and prevent terrorist attacks.

In 2006, Congress re-confirmed parts of the law, including the telephone and Internet surveillance programs. Both have been used for over five years, and many lawmakers have known about them.

I'm Mario Ritter.

The surveillance programs may have been legal, but they were top-secret. Their existence was known mainly to lawmakers and officials in the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

But Edward Snowden is not a lawmaker or government employee. He was a computer technician for private companies. The companies did contract work for the National Security Agency, and Mr. Snowden worked with the agency's computers. It is not clear how he learned about the surveillance programs. But, he had permission to see top-secret information.

Mr. Snowden told *The Guardian* that he made public secret documents to protect "basic liberties for people around the world."

“Over time, the awareness of wrongdoing sort of builds up and you feel compelled to talk about it, and the more you talk about it the more you are ignored, the more you are told it’s not a problem, until eventually you realize that these things need to be determined by the public, not by somebody who was simply hired by the government.”

Shortly before telling the media about the programs, Mr. Snowden left his home in Hawaii and went to Hong Kong. The American has said he hopes Hong Kong will not send him back to the United States for trial.

A spokesman for President Obama says publicizing the programs has made it harder for the United States to fight terrorism.

“Leaks of sensitive classified information—they cause harm to our national security interests are a problem, a serious problem. And they are classified for a reason.”

Some lawmakers want to charge Mr. Snowden with spying. His employer has already dismissed him from his position.

But Mr. Snowden has plenty of supporters. They say the information-gathering programs violate people’s privacy -- and the public needs to know about them.

Emma Carr is with the British campaign group Big Brother Watch.

“A mass communications data being piled into one place and being fished through just in case somebody’s been committing a crime, or retrospectively they can look through if someone’s committed a crime. That’s not okay and that’s not what democratic societies have been based on.”

And, a blogger in Beijing named Michael Anti says news about the American programs could help China.

“The government will say, we told you, every government did the same thing about Internet control, and all the criticism you once made to us about Internet freedom, basically is very hypocritical.”

In the United States, most people appear not to share Edward Snowden’s concerns. A recent survey found that 62% of Americans said it was more important for the government to look for possible terrorist threats than to protect personal privacy.

And that’s As It Is.

What do you think the right balance is between security and privacy? Send an email to learningenglish@voanews.com. Or go to our website at learningenglish.voanews.com and click on “Contact Us.”

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