

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN™

Permanent Address: <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/2013/06/07/u-s-never-really-ended-creepy-total-information-awareness-program/>

U.S. Never Really Ended Creepy “Total Information Awareness” Program

By John Horgan | June 7, 2013

Yesterday I posted a [column presenting the views of Dave Farber](#), “Grandfather of the Internet,” on cybersecurity. I interviewed Farber on May 26, shortly before a [flood of reports](#) (the first of which was in *The Guardian*, a British newspaper) that the U.S. is monitoring telephone and Internet communications of ordinary citizens.



Farber anticipated these revelations. Although our main topic was cyberattacks by nations and criminals, we also discussed government surveillance. When I asked Farber if U.S. citizens need to worry about the U.S. acting like Big Brother, he replied, “Yeah.”

He noted that average citizens now generate huge amounts of digital information. This “Big Data” can be used in two different ways. First, corporations can analyze the data for commercially beneficial insights. Second, government agencies can examine the data for evidence that you are engaged in suspicious activities. “Once you have the data out there,” he said, “there is a whole set of things you can do with it, some of them justifiable and some not justifiable.”

Farber recalled that shortly after 9/11, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency initiated “Total Information Awareness,” a surveillance program that called for recording and analyzing all digital information generated by all U.S. citizens. (See [Wikipedia for a history of the program](#).) After news reports provoked criticism of the Darpa program, it was officially discontinued. But Farber suspected that new surveillance programs represent a continuation of Total Information Awareness. “I can’t get anyone to deny that there’s a common thread there,” he said.

In fact, this week’s news reports that the U.S. has been carrying out what is in effect a Total Information Awareness program should not have come as a huge surprise. Last year, long-time spy-watcher [James Bamford revealed in WIRED](#) that the National Security Agency is building a vast, \$2 billion facility in Utah “to intercept, decipher, analyze, and store vast swaths of the world’s communications as they zap down from satellites and zip through the underground and undersea cables of international, foreign, and domestic networks.”

Bamford asserted that the facility, called the Utah Data Center, “is, in some measure, the realization of the ‘total information awareness’ program created during the first term of the Bush administration—an effort that was killed by Congress in 2003 after it caused an outcry over its potential for invading Americans’ privacy.”

Must ordinary Americans accept this degree of surveillance? How can we ensure that the government won’t abuse its enormous power to spy on us? Can we counter it, perhaps by [spying on the spies](#)?

Image: http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/press_room/2013/computing_center.shtml

ADVERTISEMENT




About the Author: Every week, hockey-playing science writer John Horgan takes a puckish, provocative look at breaking science. A teacher at Stevens Institute of Technology, Horgan is the author of four books, including *The End of Science* (Addison Wesley, 1996) and *The End of War* (McSweeney’s, 2012). Follow on Twitter [@Horganism](#).

The views expressed are those of the author and are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

TRY A RISK-FREE ISSUE

YES! Send me a free issue of Scientific American with no obligation to continue the subscription. If I like it, I will be billed for the one-year subscription.



Email Address

Name

Continue

Scientific American is a trademark of Scientific American, Inc., used with permission

© 2013 Scientific American, a Division of Nature America, Inc.

All Rights Reserved.

Advertise

Special Ad Sections

Science Jobs

Partner Network

International Editions

Travel

About Scientific American

Press Room

Site Map

Terms of Use

Privacy Policy

Use of Cookies

Subscribe

Renew Your Subscription

Buy Back Issues

Products & Services

Subscriber Customer Service

Contact Us