

KEITH ALEXANDER'S PIZZA PROBLEM

We're having a fundraiser this week. If you can help out, please do!

Shane Harris has a great piece of a bunch of people hanging Keith Alexander out to dry. It shows how Alexander has always grabbed for more data – at times not considering the legal basis for doing so – for ambitious, half-finished products that don't yield results.

I'm particularly interested in this one:

When he ran INSCOM and was horning in on the NSA's turf, Alexander was fond of building charts that showed how a suspected terrorist was connected to a much broader network of people via his communications or the contacts in his phone or email account.

"He had all these diagrams showing how this guy was connected to that guy and to that guy," says a former NSA official who heard Alexander give briefings on the floor of the Information Dominance Center. "Some of my colleagues and I were skeptical. Later, we had a chance to review the information. It turns out that all [that] those guys were connected to were pizza shops."

As I noted last month, the NSA's primary order for the Section 215 program allows for technical personnel to access the data, in unaudited form, before the analysts get to it. They do so to identify "high volume identifiers" (and other "unwanted BR metadata"). As I said, I suspect they're stripping the dataset of numbers that would otherwise distort contact chaining.

I suspect a lot of what these technical personnel are doing is stripping numbers – probably things like telemarketer

numbers – that would otherwise distort the contact chaining. Unless terrorists' American friends put themselves on the Do Not Call List, then telemarketers might connect them to every other American not on the list, thereby suggesting a bunch of harassed grannies in Dubuque are 2 degrees from Osama bin Laden.

I used telemarketers, but Alexander himself has used the example of the pizza joint in testimony.

In other words, it appears Alexander learned from his mistake at INSCOM that pizza joints do not actually represent a meaningful connection. His use of the example seems to suggest that NSA now strips pizza joints from their dataset.

But what if terrorists' ties to a pizza joint are the most meaningful ones?

One of the defenses NSA offered in Harris' piece is that Alexander only does all this to prevent another terrorist attack.

"He is well aware that he will be criticized if there's another attack," the staffer says. "He has said many times, 'My job is to protect the American people. And I have to be perfect.'"

This staffer seems to forget that there was another attack – on Boston, in April. And while I actually do think they might not have been able to prevent the attack, I also note that no one has criticized Alexander for missing the multiple suspicious calls and searches that Tamerlan Tsarnaev or his mother conducted online (though I all but guarantee you that Alexander secretly made a bid to collect more domestic data in response anyway).

But I also suspect there may be one gaping hole in the NSA's data relating to the Tsarnaevs: any

calls and connections through Gerry's Italian Kitchen.

Gerry's was, if you recall, the pizza joint involved in the 2011 murder in Waltham: the three men were killed sometime between ordering a pizza and its delivery 45 minutes later. I've been told both Tsarnaevs had delivered pizza for that restaurant before then and Tamerlan may still have been.

But Gerry's is also where the brothers disposed of some of their explosives the night of the manhunt, and it may well have been what brought them to Watertown.

So a connection to the brothers going back years when they worked there, a connection to the 2011 murder, and a connection (however tangential) to the manhunt. Yet (I'm guessing here) any ties the brothers had through that pizza joint would not show up in the dragnet collected precisely for that purpose, because such data is purged because normally pizza joints don't reflect a meaningful relationship.

Sometimes a pizza joint is just a pizza joint. But sometimes (particularly for immigrants who might work at the transient jobs offered there), it can be a meaningful tie.

But when collecting a dragnet, it's not clear you can distinguish between the two and still make it meaningful. That is, precisely because this was a dragnet, rather than a collection of the brothers' calls, this pizza connection may have been hidden entirely in the data.