

CHOMSKY V. GELLMAN ON THE STASI

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Noam Chomsky and Barton Gellman did a panel at an MIT Big Data conference. In the middle of it, they get into a quasi debate about whether the NSA is like the Stasi (this starts after 20:00).

For what it's worth, I think they agree that the Stasi was far more "monstrous" (Chomsky's term) than the US and NSA. Chomsky's point is that Americans are making the same argument in defending the dragnet that many apparatchiks in monstrous regimes also made in complete good faith. Whereas Gellman argues that the scale is so different that such comparisons risk distracting the discussion.

All that said, I wanted to focus on this line from Gellman (at 25:00).

Stasi was knowingly, deliberately, consciously discovering and squashing dissent, blackmailing people, arresting people, preventing the emergence of any kind of opposition force, I don't think that's what we're seeing here at all.

I agree with it generally – the NSA is not squashing all dissent (which is not to say other domestic agencies don't harass dissenters in organized fashion, possibly employing NSA-related data several steps removed).

But I'm not Muslim or Arab, and I'm not sure I'd be as quick to say the same about the effect of the dragnet – and associated actions – on those communities. I noted back on (heh) 9/11 that the government justified the dragnet, in part, because it helps identify people the government can recruit as assets.

It turns out that rationale was built into the (FISC-authorized) program from the start. Only, when the government laid out the case in its

original memorandum in support of the phone dragnet, it specified these targeted people would become **FBI** informants (that is, domestic informants).

The ability to see who communicates with whom may lead to the discovery of other terrorist operatives, may help to identify hubs or common contacts between targets of interest who were previously thought to be unconnected, and may help to discover individuals willing to become FBI assets.

So start with the government's stated intent to use a database of all the phone-based (and, presumably, Internet-based, though I haven't seen this language in the more limited PR/TT documents that have been released) relationships in the US – which shows not just the people who are three degrees of separation from someone who is more likely than not “associated” with a terrorist group, but also things like who is having extramarital affairs they want to continue to hide – to find informants.

Then consider the way the government very sloppily dismisses both the generalized threat to Freedom of Association posed by the dragnet, as well as the possibility that someone more likely than not associated with a terrorist organization might be talking, on first hop, someone in an NGO like CAIR or ACLU. Such consideration very quickly gets you to the point where at least the activities of such “dissident” groups would be chilled – to say nothing of groups like NYC's Arab American Association, a social services group the NYPD targeted for infiltration.

Those actions don't squash dissent for everyone. They just go a long way toward squashing dissent for Muslims and Arabs and South Asians other potentially targeted groups.

It would take expanding this activity two orders of magnitude, at least, to reach the level of

generalized infiltration the Stasi accomplished; Gellman's point about scope is correct. We're not there yet (though if any Administration ever wants to go there, the dragnet has apparently already proven useful in systematizing the selection of potential informants).

But I do recognize I'm not in the position of saying how corrosive this secret program has been on the communities that would be most targeted by it.