Beat: Business

NSA contractor identifies himself as source behind U.S. surveillance revelations

-, 10.06.2013, 15:00 Time

USPA News - A 29-year-old American who works as a contract employee at the National Security Agency (NSA) came forward Sunday as the source behind newspaper articles that revealed previously unknown details about the U.S. government`s secret surveillance programs. Edward Snowden revealed his identity during an interview with the British newspaper The Guardian.

He said he currently works for defense contractor Booz Allen Hamilton as an infrastructure analyst for the NSA in Hawaii, although he previously held a number of other positions in the intelligence community. Snowden, speaking from a hotel room in Hong Kong, said he came forward publicly to authenticate his recent disclosures and because his concerns about `abuses` in the intelligence community agencies had not been taken seriously. "The more you talk about the (wrongdoing), the more you`re ignored," he said. The contract employee said he is not against the U.S. government but wants the public to be able to decide whether the intelligence agencies should have the authority to carry out controversial and secretive surveillance programs. "This is something that`s not our place to decide, the public needs to decide whether these programs and policies are right or wrong," he said. According to recent disclosures by The Guardian and the Washington Post, U.S. intelligence agencies have direct access to the servers of nine Internet companies for a wide range of digital data. A slideshow, marked "TOP SECRET", identifies current data providers as Microsoft, Google, Yahoo!, Facebook, PalTalk, YouTube, Skype, AOL and Apple. The slideshow explains that much of the world`s communications flow through the United States, and that the communications of foreign targets could easily flow through the U.S. It says the nine current providers supply information on a massive scale, including e-mails, chats, videos, photos, stored data, voice communications (VoIP), file transfers, video conferences, online social networking details and details about when accounts are accessed. Snowden, during Sunday`s interview, said the intelligence community originally focused on foreign targets but is now increasingly targeting all communications in the U.S. "It ingests them by default. It collects them in its system and it filters them and it analyses them and it measures them and it stores them for periods of time simply because that`s the easiest, most efficient, and most valuable way to achieve these ends," he said. The contractor said analysts with proper clearance could target anyone at will, ranging from ordinary citizens to federal judges and up to President Barack Obama if they have his personal contact details. He said the public should be concerned because citizens are being "watched and recorded," whether they did something wrong or not. "You simply have to eventually fall under suspicion from somebody even by a wrong call. And then they can use this system to go back in time and scrutinize every decision you`ve ever made, every friend you`ve ever discussed something with," he said. "And [they`ll] attack you on that basis to sort of derive suspicion from an innocent life and paint anyone in the context of a wrongdoer." Snowden, who lives with his girlfriend in Hawaii, flew to Hong Kong last month after telling his NSA supervisor that he needed several weeks off to receive treatment for epilepsy. His whereabouts are currently unknown after Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) reported that Snowden checked out of the Mira hotel in Tsimshatsui on Monday morning. Following the publication of Sunday`s interview, Booz Allen confirmed Snowden had been an employee at its firm and assigned to a team in Hawaii for less than three months. "News reports that this individual has claimed to have leaked classified information are shocking, and if accurate, this action represents a grave violation of the code of conduct and core values of our firm," a statement said, adding that it will work closely with authorities to assist in their investigation. Shawn Turner, a spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said the matter had been referred to the Justice Department for investigation. "The Intelligence Community is currently reviewing the damage that has been done by these recent disclosures," he said. "Any person who has a security clearance knows that he or she has an obligation to protect classified information and abide by the law." Justice Department spokeswoman Nanda Chitre confirmed the department is in the initial stages of an investigation into the unauthorized disclosure of classified information by an individual with authorized access. "Consistent with long standing Department policy and procedure and in order to protect the integrity of the investigation, we must decline further comment," she said. Snowden said he came to Hong Kong because it has a strong tradition of free speech and because he believes the Hong Kong government is more likely to resist the dictates of the U.S. government. But under an extradition treaty that came into force in 1998, the U.S. government is able to request Hong Kong to detain a U.S. citizen for up to two months while it prepares an extradition request.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1086/nsa-contractor-identifies-himself-as-source-behind-us-surveillance-revelations.html

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