

Date: 6/5/2011

Name of Source: The Spy Factory (TV program, 3/2/2009)

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RyoeOM22WCc&feature=related>

Theme: Social Science

Summary:

This is an eye-opening documentary on the National Security Agency (NSA), based on a best-selling 2008 book, The Shadow Factory, which exposes the ultra-secret intelligence agency's role in the failure to stop the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent eavesdropping program that listens in without warrant on millions of American citizens. The program chronicles the NSA's role in eavesdropping both before and after 9/11. Drawing on dozens of interviews with former NSA, CIA, and FBI analysts and officials and probing publicly available sources as well as transcripts of terrorist trials and an FBI chronology of the terrorists' movements, it also assembles a detailed picture of events leading up to the 9/11 attacks. At the end of the video, the program brought out a question: "are we any safer now that we were before?"

Response:

Before I watched the video, I have thought that those intelligence agencies are rooms full of monitors and people wearing headphones, monitoring the world by switching channels just like watching TV. Yet, the actual way they worked are much harder than I thought.

However, though I appreciate the hard work done by NSA's linguists, mathematicians, and technologists, I do not agree with the monitoring action done by it. The video follows the trail of just one typical e-mail sent from Asia to the U.S. Streaming

as pulses of light into a fiber-optic cable, it travels across the Pacific Ocean, coming ashore in California, and finally reaching an AT&T facility in San Francisco, where the cable is split and the data sent to a secret NSA monitoring room on the floor below. This enables the NSA to intercept not only most Asian e-mail messages but also the entire U.S. internal Internet traffic.

I understand the importance of monitoring on people regarding the safety of a nation, especially those suspicious criminals, but how effective is this monumental monitoring effort in countering security threats? The NSA is faced with an enormous and ever-expanding archive of phone calls and e-mail messages. Many experts in data mining and analysis are skeptical about the value of collecting so much information without the ability to understand it, as it may lead to critical clues being lost in the static.

The video also discovered that had major pieces of the puzzle on the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks but never put them together or disclosed their entire body of knowledge to the CIA and FBI. Traditionally, the NSA didn't share its raw data with those other agencies, an institutionalized reluctance that played a critical role in the failure to stop the 9/11 plotters.

As for the question of whether America citizens are any safer now than they were before, they should have been safe the way it was. NSA had all the information that it needed to stop the hijackers, and it already had laws that allowed it to track them. So now, with NSA's new rules, with all the money it's spent, with all the data it collects, is NSA doing a better job or is its job that much harder because it's just being flooded with data? How much information is enough, and won't too much information end up making the world more dangerous?