



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on August 2, 2013

Backpacks, Pressure Cookers, and the Truth

When Michele Catalano blogged yesterday using the title “pressure cookers, backpacks and quinoa, oh my!” it didn’t gain purchase until it was picked up by [The Guardian](#). From there the story jumped to *The Atlantic Wire* which, 24 hours later, had more than a third of a million views.

Catalano used to be the music editor for *Forbes* but now mostly freelances at *The Magazine*, *Maura Magazine*, and *Boing*. Her husband, Todd Pinnell, used to work as a product manager at Speco Technologies but at present seems to spend most of his days at home.



And so when three black SUVs from the Suffolk County (New York) Police Department showed up in front of their home on Wednesday with six plain clothes detectives aboard at 9 a.m., Pinnell was there to greet them. Forty-five minutes later Pinnell called his wife, who then riffed on what happened:

It was a confluence of magnificent proportions that led six agents from the joint terrorism task force to knock on my door Wednesday morning. Little did we know our seemingly innocent, if curious to a fault, Googling of certain things was creating a perfect storm of terrorism profiling. Because somewhere out there, someone was watching. Someone whose job it is to piece together the things people do on the internet raised the red flag when they saw our search history.

There were enough errors and false assumptions buried in just this opening paragraph that it took a massive effort [at The Atlantic Wire](#) to make sense of it all. Catalano’s basic assumption was that the surveillance state is watching everything, recording everything, and storing everything. Revelations just in the past week have revealed that many of her assumptions were correct. But just not in this particular instance. For example, there was no “confluence of magnificent proportions,” there was no “joint terrorism task force” involved, it had little to do with Google providing the cops with the lead, but she was correct when she said that “somewhere out there, someone was watching.” What she didn’t know, at the time, was just who was doing the watching. Wrote Catalano:

I had researched pressure cookers. My husband was looking for a backpack. And maybe in another time those two things together would have seemed innocuous, but we are in “these times” now.

And in these times, when things like the Boston bombing happen, you spend a lot of time on the internet reading about it and, if you are my exceedingly curious news junkie of a twenty-year-old son, you click a lot of links when you read the myriad of stories. You might just read a CNN piece about how bomb making instructions are readily available on the internet and you will in all probability, if you are that kid, click the link provided....

My son’s reading habits combined with my search for a pressure cooker and my husband’s search for a backpack set off an alarm of sorts at the joint terrorism task force headquarters.

The only problem is that, in this case at least, the people watching resided at her husband’s previous



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place of employment. After Pinnell left Speco, a routine cleaning of his office computer uncovered searches for backpacks and pressure cookers, and someone there called the police. It's unclear if this was some form of retribution or genuine concern that their previously loyal employee was actually a budding terrorist. Only the Suffolk County PD were involved. Not the Nassau County PD or the FBI or its Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). They could have been. Under different circumstances, they might have been. But not on Wednesday, July 31, at Catalano's home.

This is how the Suffolk County PD responded when pressed for details:

Suffolk County Criminal Intelligence Detectives received a tip from a Bay Shore based computer company regarding suspicious computer searches conducted by a recently released employee. The former employee's computer searches took place on this employee's workplace computer. On that computer, the employee searched the terms "pressure cooker bombs" and "backpacks."

After interviewing the company representatives, Suffolk County Police Detectives visited the subject's home to ask about the suspicious internet searches. The incident was investigated by Suffolk County Police Department's Criminal Intelligence Detectives and was determined to be non-criminal in nature.

Catalano described that investigation:

Six gentlemen in casual clothes emerged from the vehicles and spread out as they walked toward the house, two toward the backyard on one side, two on the other side, two toward the front door.

A million things went through my husband's head. None of which were right. He walked outside and the men greeted him by flashing badges. He could see they all had guns holstered in their waistbands.

"Are you [Todd Pinnell]?" one asked while glancing at a clipboard. He affirmed that was indeed him, and was asked if they could come in.

Sure, he said.

They asked if they could search the house, though it turned out to be just a cursory search. They walked around the living room, studied the books on the shelf (nope, no bomb making books, no Anarchist Cookbook), looked at all our pictures, glanced into our bedroom, pet our dogs. They asked if they could go in my son's bedroom but when my husband said my son was sleeping in there, they let it be.

Meanwhile, they were peppering my husband with questions. Where is he from? Where are his parents from? They asked about me, where was I, where do I work, where do my parents live. Do you have any bombs, they asked. Do you own a pressure cooker? My husband said no, but we have a rice cooker. Can you make a bomb with that? My husband said no, my wife uses it to make quinoa. What the hell is quinoa, they asked.

After 45 minutes, finding nothing suspicious, the "six gentlemen" left, Pinnell called his wife, her genuine concerns about the surveillance state kicked in, and the rest is history.

In validating and exploring the background of Catalano's blog, the writers from *The Atlantic Wire* confirmed what she feared about the declining state of privacy in the country:

Local and state authorities work jointly with federal officials on terror investigations similar to the one Catalano describes. Both Suffolk and Nassau County's police departments are members of the



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FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF)....

Suffolk County is also home to a "fusion center," a regionally located locus for terror investigations associated with the Department of Homeland Security....

The task force deputizes local authorities as federal marshals, including some in Suffolk and Nassau, who can then act on its behalf.

Lessons learned? The surveillance net over the country is unnervingly omnipresent. Local law enforcement officers can be deputized and thus granted federal powers. And they will make house calls, where appropriate.

On the other hand, Pinnell was only too willing to let the officers into his home without question. He failed to ask why. He failed to ask if they had a search warrant, signed by a judge, specifically noting the items to be searched, as guaranteed by the Fourth Amendment. He failed to exercise his right to remain silent. He failed to refuse to answer questions without his attorney being present. By letting them into his home, all Fourth Amendment rights he has disappeared and the officials were free to roam at will.

And roam they did: bedrooms, living room, kitchen, back yard, and garage. That they found nothing was a blessing for Catalano and Pinnell. But they might have, and that evidence could have been used against them, even without a search warrant.

Despite Catalano's concerns about the loss of privacy, there is one other massive roadblock to the surveillance state: a human being — out there, somewhere — has to sort through the nearly unimaginable amount of data being hoovered by PRISM and other surveillance technologies in order to put the pieces together and build a case for an in-person investigation by local authorities deputized with federal powers.

In the Catalano/Pinnell/backpack/pressure cooker case, however, the lead was handed to them on a silver platter.

A graduate of Cornell University and a former investment advisor, Bob is a regular contributor to The New American magazine and blogs frequently at www.LightFromTheRight.com, primarily on economics and politics. He can be reached at badelman@thenewamerican.com.



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