



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on February 6, 2015

## Almost Two-thirds of Journalists Think Government Spies on Them

Almost two-thirds of investigative journalists (64 percent) polled in a recent survey said they believe that the U.S. government has probably collected data about their phone calls, e-mails, or online communications. Furthermore, 80 percent of those surveyed believe that being a journalist increases the likelihood that their data will be collected.



The survey of members of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) was conducted between December 3 and 28 by the Pew Research Center in association with Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism. IRE is a nonprofit member organization for journalists.

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Journalists who report on national security, foreign affairs, or the federal government were even more likely to believe that the government has collected data about their electronic communications than the rest of the reporters surveyed, with 71 percent replying in the affirmative.

These beliefs have caused many journalists to change their research methods, with 49 percent responding they have at least somewhat changed the way they store or share sensitive documents, and 29 percent changing the way they communicate with other reporters, editors, or producers.

In a report on the Pew survey, *The Hill* newspaper noted: "Fears that the U.S. government has spied on journalists have been highlighted in recent years, as the Obama administration has moved to stop leaks of national security information." The article pointed to the recent testimony of author and former *CBS News* correspondent Sharyl Attkisson before the Senate Judiciary Committee during the confirmation hearings of President Obama's nominee for attorney general, Loretta Lynch. Judiciary Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) had asked Attkisson to give her own personal account of her problems with the Justice Department.

During her testimony, Attkisson spoke of the federal government's harassment she has endured under the Obama administration, especially from the Department of Justice, as retaliation for her investigative reports unfavorable to the administration. She asserted:

The job of getting at the truth has never been more difficult. Facets of federal government have isolated themselves from the public they serve. They covet and withhold public information that we as citizens own. They bully and threaten access of journalists who do their jobs, news organizations that publish stories they don't like and whistleblowers who dare to tell the truth.

As a specific example, Attkisson cited her reporting about the ATF's notorious Fast and Furious operation. *The New American's* Alex Newman has described the operation:



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The federal scheme provided thousands of high-powered weapons to Mexican drug cartels at taxpayer expense under the guise of “investigating” drug smugglers, though the two primary supposed targets of the investigation were later exposed as “untouchable” FBI assets. Official e-mails later revealed that the Department of Justice was using the fallout to push for more infringements on the right to keep and bear arms.

ATF whistleblowers exposed the scandal ... when Fast and Furious guns were recovered at the murder scene of U.S. Border Patrol agent Brian Terry [in 2010].

As a result of a dispute over the release of Justice Department documents related to the scandal, Attorney General Eric Holder, whom Obama wants to replace with Lynch, became the first sitting Cabinet member to be held in contempt of Congress on June 28, 2012.

Attkisson continued:

When I reported on factual contradictions in the Administration’s accounts regarding Fast and Furious, pushback included a frenzied campaign with White House officials trying to chill the reporting by calling and emailing my superiors and colleagues, using surrogate bloggers to advance false claims. One White House official got so mad he angrily cussed me out. The Justice Department used its authority with building security to handpick report[er]s allowed to attend a Fast and Furious briefing, refusing to clear me into the public Justice Department building.

More relevant to the belief among journalists that the federal government is spying on them was Attkisson’s statement at the hearings that she discovered the government was doing exactly that. Attkisson said she ordered three independent forensic examinations that indicated the DOJ was conducting remote surveillance on her by monitoring her keystrokes, capturing her passwords, and even listening to her conversations.

“If you cross this administration with perfectly accurate reporting they don’t like, you will be attacked and punished,” said the journalist. “You and your sources may be subjected to the kind of a surveillance devised for enemies of the state.”

*The Hill* reported that under Holder, the Department of Justice secretly seized phone records of Associated Press employees and initially moved to prosecute reporter James Risen from the *New York Times*. As *The New American* noted in a recent report, whistleblower Jeffrey Sterling provided details of the CIA’s Operation Merlin, as the scheme was called, to Risen, who included them in his 2006 book, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration*. Sterling was indicted in 2010 under the Espionage Act of 1917, and he is one of the few people in U.S. history whose alleged contact with a journalist resulted in being charged under espionage law.

A report in *The Hill* on January 31 referred to the previous night’s *Real Time* program on HBO, during which host Bill Maher discussed the media coverage of the government’s secret spy programs with documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, who was a key figure, along with Glenn Greenwald (a *Guardian* columnist at the time), in bringing Eric Snowden’s exposure of the NSA’s warrantless surveillance program to the public’s attention. During that program, Maher described Obama as “perhaps the worst president we’ve had on clamping down on the press.” He added, “He’s used the Espionage Act [against journalists] more than any other president, right?”

The journalists surveyed by Pew have good reason to believe that the government is spying on them, and even better reason to fear that the government will take action against them — up to and including being charged under the Espionage Act — if they remain true to their journalistic calling to bring the



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truth to light.

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