



DHS Seeking Contractors to Spy on Journalists; What Happened to a Free Press?

As the surveillance state grows bolder in its endeavors, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has its sights set on keeping track of journalists, bloggers and other “media influencers.” The plan — known as Media Monitoring Services — is designed to give a contractor company “24/7 access to a password protected, media influencer database, including journalists, editors, correspondents, social media influencers, bloggers etc.”



The insatiable desire of surveillance hawks to vacuum up more and more data about average citizens has — especially since the Snowden revelations — drawn the attention of many in the media. It is not surprising that Big Brother would want to more closely watch those who watch the watchers.

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The “[Media Monitoring Services](#)” plan was advertised on April 3 at FedBizOps.gov for contractors to apply. The listing says the deadline for contractor applicants is April 13. The listing also says that only those companies “capable of performing the requirements of the attached Statement of Work (SOW) will be considered. The [SOW](#) states:

1.1 Background

NPPD’s mission is to lead the national effort to protect and enhance the resilience of the nation’s physical and cyber infrastructure. NPPD includes the Office of the Under Secretary (OUS) and five sub-components: the Office of Cybersecurity and Communications (CS&C), the Office of infrastructure Protection (IP), the Federal Protective Service (FPS), the Office of Biometric Identity Management (OBIM) and the Office of Cyber and Infrastructure Analysis (OCIA), which are headquartered with the National Capital Region (NCR). Along with NPPD/OUS, Public Affairs is responsible for media communication.

But the “Media Monitoring Services” plan is not about “media communication”; it is about media monitoring. The SOW goes on to say:

1.2 SCOPE

The contractor shall provide NPPD/OUS with traditional and social media monitoring and communications solutions.

OBJECTIVE

Services shall enable NPPD/OUS to monitor traditional news sources as well as social media, identify any and all media coverage related to the Department of Homeland Security or a particular event. Services shall provide media comparison tools, design and rebranding tools, communication tools, and the ability to identify top media influencers.



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NPPD/OUS has a critical need to incorporate these functions into their programs in order to better reach Federal, state, local, tribal and private partners.

Media communication does not require “monitor[ing] traditional news sources as well as social media” or “identify[ing] any and all media coverage related to the Department of Homeland Security or a particular event.” The word that describes that is “surveillance.”

This DHS-sponsored surveillance is to be carried out on a grand scale. Under the heading “Specific Requirements/Tasks,” the SOW states that “Task One: Online & Social Media Monitoring” involves the ability to “track global online sources for coverage relevant to Washington” and lists the following bullet points:

- Ability to track > 290,000 global news sources
- Ability to track online, print, broadcast, cable, radio, trade and industry publications, local sources, national/international outlets, traditional news sources, and social media
- Ability to track media coverage in > 100 languages, including Arabic, Chinese and Russian. Translation function to instantly translate these articles to English
- Ability to create up to 20 searches with each unlimited keywords
- Unlimited coverage per search (no cap on coverage)
- Ability to change the searches at keywords at any given time
- Ability to create unlimited data tracking, statistical breakdown, and graphical analyses on any coverage on an ad-hoc basis

The scope for this one contract is greater than 290,000 news sources including just about every type of communication method.

The tools DHS will provide the surveillance contractor include “a password protected, mobile app” and “a password protected, media influencer database, including journalists, editors, correspondents, social media influencers, bloggers etc.”

This clearly indicates that DHS has already selected many of its more than 290,000 targets and is merely looking for a company that can handle the grunt work of monitoring those media sources.

That DHS is planning a long-term game is made clear in the “Period of Performance” section. The options include “(1) 12-month, and four (4) 12-month option periods.”

Once this listing was reported, DHS spokesman Tyler Q. Houlton tweeted:

Despite what some reporters may suggest, this is nothing more than the standard practice of monitoring current events in the media. Any suggestion otherwise is fit for tin foil hat wearing, black helicopter conspiracy theorists.

Besides the low-brow, junior-high level of “I know you are, but what am I?” that this conveys, there is a thing or two that deserves to be unpacked a bit. First, monitoring the media is “the standard practice”?

Let that sink in.

Monitoring the media is the stuff one expects to see in countries run by despotic regimes, not in a constitutional republic built on the principles of self-government that serve as the bedrock of the United States.



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Second, if what this listing is describing is “the standard practice,” then reporters would already know this and would not need to be told. After all, if “some reporters” seem uncomfortable with DHS carving out what will certainly be a multi-million dollar contract to monitor media, it must not be something that those reporters are used to seeing.

So which is it? Is this perfectly normal or do reporters need to be insulted as “tin foil hat wearing, black helicopter conspiracy theorists” for thinking something is amiss?

This is one journalist who refuses to accept either of those options. This is neither normal nor acceptable. And no journalist who questions it deserves to be excoriated for expecting DHS to back off and recognize a free press.

This is not the first time a spy agency from one of the “[Five Eyes](#)” nations has done something like this. As this writer [reported](#) in February 2015:

During a 10-minute period one day in November 2008, British spies vacuumed up 70,000 e-mails to and from journalists at major media outlets in the United States and the U.K. And they did it with the blessings of Washington.

In that instance, it is likely that GCHQ (the U.K. equivalent of the NSA) was providing that information to U.S. spy agencies, as well. Also from that article:

With several supranational agencies sharing their data, each of them is able to circumvent the laws of their respective nation by not collecting information they are not allowed to collect. They simply get that data from an ally that did the spying for them. In this case, GCHQ was scooping up information on the personal and professional communications of U.S. journalists — a clear invasion on the rights of a free press.

What is particularly troubling about GCHQ’s surveillance of media is the agency’s view of journalists as enemies. One secret internal GCHQ document leaked by Snowden says that “journalists and reporters representing all types of news media represent a potential threat to security.” The e-mails collected by GCHQ were from the BBC, Reuters, *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *The Sun* (U.K.), NBC, and the *Washington Post* — showing that the agency is casting quite a wide net.

So, before throwing out insults to journalists who question his agency’s cowboy tactics, perhaps Houlton would do well to realize that journalists have good reason to question the surveillance state.

Because it looks for all the world as though the surveillance state is declaring war on the free press.

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