



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on May 12, 2017

So Many Americans “Unmasked” in Surveillance Reports, Spy Boss Can’t Keep Track

The Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released a report last year showing how many times federal officials requested the “unmasking” of the names of Americans captured in NSA surveillance for 2015. ODNI reported that 654 Americans had their names “unmasked” in NSA surveillance reports in response to requests from government officials. ODNI is now reporting that the *actual* number is 2,232.



The NSA — serving as the flagship of the surveillance state — is barred by law from directly spying on Americans. But given the unaccountable nature of the surveillance state, those restrictions do little to prevent Americans from being spied upon by the NSA and other agencies. The NSA routinely conducts surveillance that it knows will “accidentally” include the communications, locations, and other data of American citizens living stateside. When that happens, the NSA is required by law to “mask” (redact) the names of those Americans.

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Theoretically, that “masking” process is supposed to protect the rights and identities of Americans; in practice, it does little more than add a small speed-bump on the road to the surveillance state. Beginning in 2011, President Obama made it easier — by executive orders which were approved by the United States Foreign Surveillance Court (FISC) — to “unmask” American citizens. Of course, the ostensible reason for Obama’s orders was to make it easier to fight terrorism. The net effect of those orders was the dismantling of yet another layer of legal protection preventing the NSA from doing what it is not supposed to do: spy on American citizens.

Evidence of the fact that the loophole was designed to be abused can be seen in a report from Circa showing that in the waning days of his presidency, Barack Obama “distributed thousands of intelligence reports with the unredacted names of U.S. residents.” The [report](#) says:

In all, government officials conducted 30,355 searches in 2016 seeking information about Americans in NSA intercept metadata, which include telephone numbers and email addresses. The activity amounted to a 27.5 percent increase over the prior year and more than triple the 9,500 such searches that occurred in 2013, the first year such data was kept.

The government in 2016 also scoured the actual contents of NSA intercepted calls and emails for 5,288 Americans, an increase of 13 percent over the prior year and a massive spike from the 198 names searched in 2013.

Those 30,355 searches “ultimately resulted in 3,134 NSA intelligence reports with unredacted U.S. names being distributed across government in 2016,” according to Circa. And this is no anomaly: In 2015, the number of “unmasked” Americans was 3,354. The report also says, “About half the time, U.S. identities were unredacted in the original reports while the other half were unmasked after the fact by



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special request of Obama administration officials.”

This is not a matter of abusing a system; this system was created for this. It’s not a bug; it’s a feature. If the number of Americans who are “accidentally” being swept up in NSA surveillance is high enough for more than 30,000 metadata searches to be conducted on them in a single year, it is clear that it is no “accident.” To quote Inigo Montoya from *The Princess Bride*, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

Furthermore, ODNI reported numbers so low when compared to the actual numbers that it makes one wonder if the surveillance hawks are even aware of their data gluttony. Is it possible that they consume so much data — while crying into their sleeves about the problem of terrorists “going dark” — that they honestly can’t tell the difference between 654 and 2,232? ODNI blames the discrepancy on “a case of mistaken statistical categories,” according to a [report](#) published Wednesday by Circa:

“We noticed the mistake when compiling the 2016 statistics this spring and decided we should correct it,” a senior U.S. intelligence official familiar with the change explained to Circa. “We wanted the numbers we were releasing to be consistent, apples to apples. The number that should have been reported was 2,232.”

An ODNI spokesman confirmed it was a case of mistaken statistical categories.

“The NSA for the Calendar Year 2015 provided ODNI with the number of requests for unmasking as opposed to the number of identities released in response to an unmasking request. It’s an apples to oranges thing between CY 2015 and CY 2016,” the spokesperson said. “If you compare last year’s report to this year’s report using the original metric of requests compared to the current metric of identities, it appears as if there was an exponential increase when, in fact, there was a decrease in the number of identities released in response to a specific request.”

It has been said that figures don’t lie, but liars do figure. It appears that the surveillance hawks — having “accidentally” glutted themselves on the data of Americans — have lost the ability to even keep track of the figures. Any way you slice those figures, though, they are too high and they serve as evidence that the system of surveillance is itself the big lie and needs to be dismantled.



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