



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on December 7, 2011

WikiLeaks Exposing “Mass Surveillance Industry”

The anti-secrecy group WikiLeaks began releasing documents last week related to what it calls the “mass surveillance industry,” a little-known but expansive underworld of contractors offering tools for governments — from brutal dictatorships to more moderate Western states — to monitor citizens and hunt down dissidents. Furious activists reacted to the revelations by calling for stricter controls and measures to hold the firms accountable as “accomplices” to mass murder.



The information released so far covers over 150 companies spanning more than two dozen nations. The documents highlight the nature and growth of a multi-billion-dollar industry that, in addition to supplying espionage assistance to the most murderous regimes on earth, has been quietly turned against citizens in supposedly “free” countries as well.

“Who here has an iPhone? Who here has a Blackberry? Who here uses Gmail? Well you are all screwed,” WikiLeaks chief Julian Assange [told](#) a press conference in London announcing the new project. “The reality is intelligence contractors are selling right now, to countries across the world, mass surveillance systems for all of those products.”

Some of the newly released information details how governments are able to secretly intercept phone calls and take over victims’ computers. Cell phone owners, it turns out, can be tracked even when the devices are not activated. But it gets worse.

“In the last ten years systems for indiscriminate, mass surveillance have become the norm,” WikiLeaks [said](#) in a statement about the revelations posted online. “Intelligence companies such as VASTech secretly sell equipment to permanently record the phone calls of entire nations. Others record the location of every mobile phone in a city, down to 50 meters. Systems to infect every Facebook user, or smart-phone owner of an entire population group are on the intelligence market.”

Among the more than 1,000 documents involved are pamphlets, brochures, and catalogues marketing the surveillance products to government officials worldwide. Also included in the cache of information are videos, contracts, and more.

The transparency organization teamed up with other like-minded non-profit groups and several large media outfits worldwide including the *Washington Post*. The project, entitled “[Spy Files](#),” plans to release more documents and information into early next year.

“Today we release over 287 files documenting the reality of the international mass surveillance industry



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— an industry which now sells equipment to dictators and democracies alike in order to intercept entire populations," Assange [said](#) during the initial press conference last week.

Much of the information was gathered during a year-long inquiry by investigators with WikiLeaks and other groups infiltrating conferences related to the industry. More documents were obtained from looted government buildings in countries like Egypt and Libya after the collapse of existing regimes.

Of course, most of the companies exposed claim to follow the law and sell the technology only to governments and other authorized users. But for critics, that is not enough — and it is not an excuse.

"When it comes to surveillance technology, merely operating within the boundaries of current legislation and regulation is insufficient," said spokeswoman Emma Draper of Privacy International, one of the groups working on Spy Files with WikiLeaks. "The fact these companies are selling what are essentially tools of political control to oppressive regimes with impunity can no longer be tolerated."

Other privacy advocates also expressed serious concerns over the new revelations and claims that only governments are able to access the technology. "Even if American companies, as they claim, only sell to governments and law enforcement, there's no real regulation of end-users, even in the United States, let alone China and Russia," said Christopher Soghoian, a graduate fellow at the Center for Applied Cybersecurity Research at Indiana University.

In an interview with the *Washington Times*, Soghoian [explained](#) that nothing was being done to protect Americans from the surveillance technology. "There's nothing to stop [this equipment from] being used in the United States," he also noted. "Sure it's illegal ... but you're never going to get caught."

The top suppliers of the often-deadly technologies are based in countries such as the United States, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Less developed countries such as South Africa and Brazil are also host to some of the firms, while the communist dictatorship ruling mainland China is both a supplier and large consumer in the industry.

"Mass interception of entire populations is not only a reality, it is a secret new industry spanning 25 countries," the anti-secrecy organization said in [the statement](#) about the newly unveiled documents. "Wikileaks is shining a light on this secret industry that has boomed since September 11, 2001 and is worth billions of dollars per year."

After the news broke, a swarm of critics blasted the industry — and its association with mass murderers. "These systems that are revealed in these documents show exactly the kind of systems that the Stasi wished they could have built," [explained](#) former WikiLeaks spokesman Jacob Appelbaum, who now works as a computer expert at the University of Washington. "These systems are used to hunt people down and to murder."

Media and free speech activists also highlighted the danger, calling for action to protect dissidents and hold suppliers accountable. "These new revelations by WikiLeaks provide confirmation and better documentation of the disgraceful cooperation between western companies and authoritarian regimes," the press-freedom group Reporters Without Borders [said](#) in a statement, suggesting the creation of a new mechanism to prosecute companies that supply war criminals.

"By equipping oppressive regimes and giving them the means to track and arrest cyber-dissidents and human rights activists, these companies become the accomplices of serious crimes," the organization added. "It is time to end the impunity they enjoy and to impose financial sanctions on them."

Other privacy and human-rights activists have called for stricter export-control laws and regulations



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governing the sale of surveillance products to mass-murderers and other brutal tyrants. U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) is currently working on legislation to ban the sale of such equipment to regimes which restrict online speech or target dissidents, according to news [reports](#).

Among the handful of industry apologists quoted in the media, former security officials [said](#) export controls might not be the best solution. The reason: China, Russia, and other regimes will continue to sell the technology to whatever despot can afford it anyway, leaving Western companies at a competitive disadvantage.

Of course, governments in developed countries are also using the technology for nefarious purposes. In a section entitled "Weaponizing Data Kills Innocent People," WikiLeaks investigators [highlighted one troubling example](#) where the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was caught using spy software known to have problems in its program to [assassinate people with drone-fired missiles](#).

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