



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on July 5, 2013

NSA Surveillance Disclosures Recall Days of East German STASI

When Wolfgang Schmidt learned about NSA leaker Edward Snowden's revelations concerning the agency's ability to collect personal data on millions of American citizens, [he was astonished](#). When he was a lieutenant colonel in East Germany's secret police, the [STASI](#), his department, was limited to tapping just 40 phones every day. If a decision was made to tap a new phone, one of the others had to be disconnected. Said Schmidt: "For us, this would have been a dream come true ... so much information on so many people!"



Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) employed more than 90,000 people, including 15,000 soldiers in the GDR army and 2,000 full-time collaborators. There were also 175,000 "unofficial" collaborators. One STASI official estimated the total to be closer to 500,000 people, or about five percent of the country's population at the time.

They were assigned to all major industrial plants as well as schools, universities, and hospitals. Other informants worked as trolley conductors, janitors, doctors, nurses, and teachers — people who had frequent contact with citizens. At its peak the STASI had one informer for every six citizens.

When Malte Spitz, a member of Germany's Green Party, sued his telephone company, Deutsche Telekom (DT) back in 2010, [he learned](#) that the new technology is vastly more intrusive than even the STASI in its heyday. The compact disc he received from DT as part of the settlement [included](#) more than 35,000 pieces of data that revealed

when Spitz walked down the street, when he took a train, when he was in an airplane. It shows where he was in the cities he visited. It shows when he worked and when he slept, when he could be reached by phone and when [he] was unavailable. It shows when he preferred to talk on his phone and when he preferred to send a text message. It shows which beer gardens he liked to visit in his free time. All in all, it reveals an entire life.

Stefan Wolle, the curator at Berlin's East German Museum, was able to retrieve the STASI records of their surveillance of his activities and discovered, to his surprise, just how much of it was valueless and banal:

When the wall fell, I wanted to see what the STASI had on me, on the world I knew. A large part of what I found was nothing more than office gossip, the sort of thing people used to say around the water cooler about affairs and gripes, the sort of things that people today put in emails or texts to each other.

The lesson is that when a wide net is cast, almost all of what is caught is worthless.

And therein lies the problem facing the NSA today. As it collects and stores billions of e-mails and texts



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and phone calls, the amount of data is soaring into the trillions. The question becomes: Who is going to do the sorting, sifting and winnowing of that immensely large quantity of data? Where will these people come from? Who will train them? Who will pay for their education? How will they be able to sort through endless haystacks looking for an occasional needle?

The NSA is facing the “cotton gin” conundrum. With Eli Whitney’s invention of the [cotton gin](#) in 1793, the cost of producing cotton began slowly to fall. This made the value of each slave rise enormously over the next six decades. In 1790 there were approximately 700,000 slaves, but that number had nearly quintupled by 1860 to 3.2 million. From the [website](#) of the Eli Whitney Museum the impact of his invention on slavery is explained:

Whitney (who died in 1825) could not have foreseen the ways in which his invention would change society for the worse. The most significant of these was the growth of slavery. While it was true that the cotton gin reduced the labor of removing seeds, it did not reduce the need for slaves to grow and pick the cotton. In fact, the opposite occurred. Cotton growing became so profitable for the planters that it greatly increased their demand for both land and slave labor. In 1790 there were six slave states; in 1860 there were 15. From 1790 until Congress banned the importation of slaves from Africa in 1808, Southerners imported 80,000 Africans. By 1860 approximately one in three Southerners was a slave.

Here’s the conundrum: As the cost of gathering infinite data on large numbers of people falls essentially to zero, the cost of analyzing and acting on that data will rise dramatically. This will do to high-priced talent what it did to the price of slaves: It will drive it up. As professor Gary North noted [in his members-only newsletter](#): “Computers cannot file lawsuits. They cannot assess the importance of information. They cannot compare raw data to statute law. They cannot evaluate the relevance of raw data for various scenarios.”

This is the bottleneck facing the NSA. It can (and will) collect all the data it wants. It can store it in its data banks in [Bluffdale, Utah](#), [Fort Meade, Maryland](#), and [elsewhere](#). But the bottleneck remains. The “cotton gin” conundrum remains. Who is going to do the sorting? How many will it take? Where will the money come from?

Photo of Berlin Wall: AP Images

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