

NSA Whistleblower: Wiretaps Were Combined with Credit Card Records of U.S. Citizens

By Kim Zetter January 23, 2009 , Wired Blog

NSA whistleblower Russell Tice was back on Keith Olbermann's MSNBC program Thursday evening to expand on his Wednesday revelations that the National Security Agency spied on individual U.S. journalists, entire U.S. news agencies as well as "tens of thousands" of other Americans.

Tice said on Wednesday that the NSA had vacuumed in all domestic communications of Americans, including, faxes, phone calls and network traffic.

Today Tice said that the spy agency also combined information from phone wiretaps with data that was mined from credit card and other financial records. He said information of tens of thousands of U.S. citizens is now in digital databases warehoused at the NSA.

"This [information] could sit there for ten years and then potentially it marries up with something else and ten years from now they get put on a no-fly list and they, of course, won't have a clue why," Tice said.

In most cases, the person would have no discernible link to terrorist organizations that would

justify the initial data mining or their inclusion in the database.

"This is garnered from algorithms that have been put together to try to just dream-up scenarios that might be information that is associated with how a terrorist could operate," Tice said. "And once that information gets to the NSA, and they start to put it through the filters there . . . and they start looking for word-recognition, if someone just talked about the daily news and mentioned something about the Middle East they could easily be brought to the forefront of having that little flag put by their name that says 'potential terrorist'."

The revelation that the NSA was involved in data mining isn't new. The infamous 2004 hospital showdown between then-White House Counsel Alberto Gonzales and Deputy Attorney General James Comey over the legality of a government surveillance program involved the data mining of massive databases, according to a 2007 *New York Times* article.

But there was always a slight possibility, despite the suspicions of many critics, that the NSA's data

mining involved only people who were legitimately suspected of connections to terrorists overseas, as the Bush Administration staunchly maintained about its domestic phone wiretapping program.

"There's no spying on Americans," former Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell insisted to the *New Yorker* last year.

But Tice's assertions this week contradict these claims.

With regard to the surveillance of journalists, Tice wouldn't disclose the names of the specific reporters or media outlets he targeted when he worked as an analyst for the NSA but said in the part of the program he covered, "everyone was collected."

"They sucked in everybody and at some point they may have cherry-picked from what they had, but I wasn't aware of who got cherry-picked out of the big pot," he said.

The purpose, he was told, was to eliminate journalists from possible suspicion so that the NSA could focus on those who merited further surveillance. But Tice said on Wednesday that the data on journalists was collected round-the-clock, year-round, suggesting there was never an intent to eliminate anyone from the surveillance.

New York Times reporter James Risen, who co-authored that paper's 2005 story on the warrantless wiretapping program with colleague Eric Lichtblau, suspects he could have been among those monitored, because Bush Administration officials obtained

copies of his phone records, which they showed to a federal grand jury. The grand jury is investigating leaked information that appeared in Risen's 2006 book *State of War* about a CIA program, codenamed Operation Merlin, to infiltrate and destabilize Iran's nuclear program. Risen doesn't know if his records were obtained by the FBI with a legitimate warrant or through the NSA program that Tice described.

Risen told Olbermann that the NSA program to monitor journalists was likely intended to be used to ferret out and intimidate possible sources "to have a chilling effect on potential whistleblowers in the government to make them realize that there's a Big Brother out there that will get them if they step out of line."

Who else might have been among those targeted by the NSA?

Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-West Virginia) said, in a separate interview, that he could very well have been targeted, too.

Rockefeller was speaking to MSNBC host Chris Matthews and gave a cryptic reply when Matthews asked him what he thought about Tice's spying allegations (see 4:14 in the video below).

"I'm quite prepared to believe it," Rockefeller said. "I mean, I think they went after anybody they could get. Including me."

Matthews replied, "They didn't eavesdrop on you, did they Senator?"

"No," Rockefeller said shaking

his head, "and they sent me no letters."

If Rockefeller were among those who were spied on, it would be very ironic, since he was instrumental in helping the Bush Administration obtain retroactive immunity for the telecommunications companies that are accused of aiding the Administration in its warrantless surveillance program.