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NSA's ICReach acts as Google for US citizen, foreign national metadata

Summary: New documents reveal the existence of the US spy agency's ICReach, a search engine similar to Google which links to citizen communications data.

http://www.zdnet.com/nsas-icreach-acts-as-google-for-us-citizen-foreign-national-metadata-7000032975/
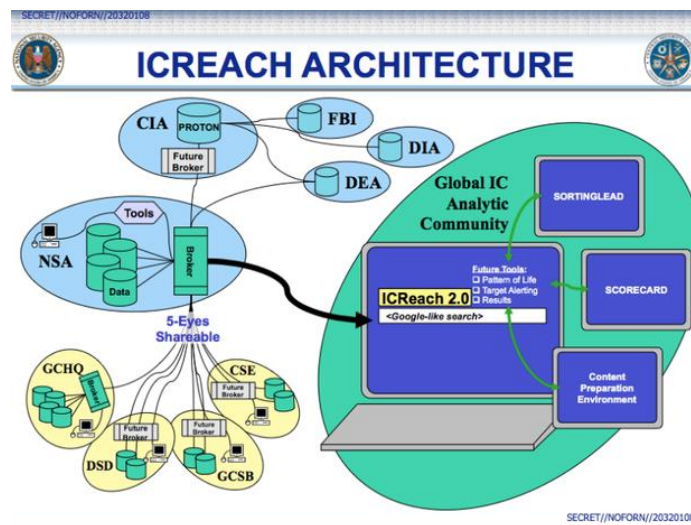
By Charlie Osborne

August 26, 2014

New documents leaked by Edward Snowden reveal the inner workings of a potent tool used by the NSA called ICReach, a Google-like search engine which shares the metadata of millions of citizens and foreign nationals.

According to documents acquired by The Intercept through former US National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden, the NSA's ICReach tool is used to share data acquired by

intelligence agencies across one platform. Partners include the NSA, CIA, FBI, DEA and various other local law enforcement agencies.

Approximately 850 billion records are being shared through the search engine. The metadata records include phone call data, emails, cellphone locations and Internet-based chats. Not only is the data of American citizens and foreigners made available through ICReach, but according to the publication, much of the information stored concerns citizens who "have not been accused of any wrongdoing."

Launched in 2007, ICReach was originally designed to internally share data gleaned from various networks, in order to track a suspect's movements, associate networks and reveal political or religion affiliations. A memo dated from this year -- although who knows how far the program has evolved since then -- says the "Google-like" engine "delivered the first-ever wholesale sharing of communications metadata within the US Intelligence Community."

The system can apparently handle upwards of five billion new records every day, and the metadata saved reveals information concerning when and to whom emails are sent, when and to whom phone calls are made, and could also hold the GPS location of a user's device. Users of ICReach input selectors, such as an email address or phone number, and then receive a page of results displaying relevant data -- such as phone call records in a month period, or emails sent to a particular address.

Over 1,000 analysts at 23 US intelligence agencies have access to the search engine's data, according to the publication. While the analysts do not have access to the content of emails or phone calls, for example, the metadata in itself can be used to piece together a suspect's past, present, and potentially future patterns. The "one-stop shopping tool" instead acts as a portal for analysts to pull information from various databases to gain a snapshot of a citizen's activities.

Speaking to The Intercept, a spokesman for the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence confirmed the system binds together programs authorized under Executive Order 12333 in the Reagan era, which allows the system to function without court orders because it is

targeting foreign communications networks rather than domestic systems. The spokesman called the sharing of intelligence data "a pillar of the post-9/11 intelligence community," and said sharing is necessary to prevent valuable data from being "stove-piped in any single office or agency."