

# Snowden's Revelations: Shifting American Public Opinion Over Time

Regular Paper

Philipp Leger<sup>1, \*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>HTLBVA Spengergasse

\* Corresponding author E-mail: philipp.leger@autistici.org

Received D M 2014; Accepted D M 2014

DOI: 10.5772/chapter.doi

© 2014 FIRST AUTHOR; licensee Junior Journal. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

---

**Abstract** This paper takes and in depth look at American public opinion regarding the National Security Agency and its programs. It analyses the attitude towards the NSA before, around and after the first publishing of classified documents by Edward Snowden. The author draws upon mostly British and American quality media and results from polls published by the Pew Research Center, regarding this topic. The paper demonstrates, that in order to shift the opinion of a majority, three factors which need to be fulfilled at the same time: 1) Information sources need to be trustworthy; 2) the issue must be understandable 3) it must be possible to relate to the information.

**Keywords** GCHQ; Government Communications Headquarters; NSA; National Security Agency; Edward Snowden; PRISM; public opinion; whistle-blower; wiretapping; surveillance; poll;

## 1. Introduction

You can say, as with so many other things, that privacy as a concept of withholding certain parts of personal information from public view, started with Adam and Eve. A fig leaf to cover their private parts is an ancient symbol of not revealing everything to the world. In modern society the right not to be subject to invasion of privacy by government, companies or individuals is part of many countries' privacy-laws, or even constitutions. In

other words, the concept of privacy is today's fig leaf, it covers, or keeps intimate, those objects and thoughts that are most personal to us. The idea of privacy became more prevalent with the rise of modern information technology like the telephone, teleprinter, the internet and the technological possibilities of secretly monitoring these means of communication. In fact, communication networks have been tapped since the introduction of the first telegraph in the early 1800's. Since that time, the ability to keep one's private life has only gotten worse.

## 2. Research Question

However, over the last several months privacy has become a topic that is no longer the plot of espionage or science fiction novels [1]. As soon as privacy is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is the former government consultant Edward Snowden and the data he revealed about the National Security Agency's (NSA) data collection practices [2]. But what impact do these leaked classified files actually have on public opinion, and in particular U.S. American public opinion? If you take a look at figure 1, you can see, that immediately after the first information on the NSA's programs was published (on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2013), the overall approval of these programs rose. In July, almost a month after the information had been released, the acceptance of these programs by the public, reached its peak. From there on, the results of the polls released by the "Pew Research Center" took an 180° turn. The overall amount of people who disapproved

of the NSA and its affairs increased, and the total amount of people in favor of the NSA gathering telephone- and internet data declined. But, it was not until September 2013, that the poll results were about level. The author now asks the questions: What made people change their mind and why did it take so long?

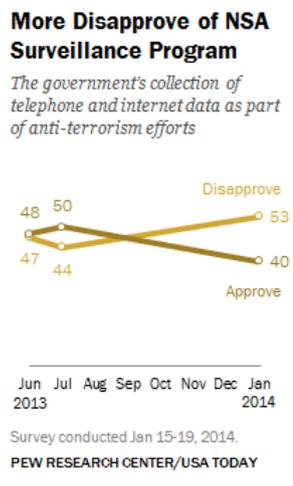


Figure 1. Graph provided by: [3]

### 2.1. Hypothesis

The heavy media coverage of the so called "war against terrorism" was the reason that the majority of the American people thought that the government should do, whatever they have to do, to prevent another terrorist attack on American soil. The citizens, for centuries proud of their privacy laws, did not even realize that their civil liberties were slowly and silently eroding. Only through the information provided by Edward Snowden, did people learn, step by step, that the NSA was not just spying on individual American citizens, but on the rest of the world. Even then, a discussion about what is the NSA doing abroad was, for most Americans, academic. Even people more experienced with computers did not fully grasp the extent of the espionage activities. Furthermore, less well-informed computer users thought: "nothing to hide, nothing to fear". Only when the information about the NSA's wiretapping of allied Chancellors and Presidents became public did it become clear to the average American that what the NSA was doing impacted the international relations of the country in a negative way. All of a sudden everybody could understand what was really going on. The real shock and turning point in the support of the government's spying activities came as the citizens learned, that the NSA was spying on their own fellow countrymen through friendly intelligence agencies like the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) [4]. It seems, in order shift the opinion of a majority, there need to be at least two requirements: 1) you have to understand what's going on; 2) you, or somebody you can identify with, has to be affected.

### 3. Setting the Scene

In 2010 the Pew Research Center conducted a poll with the help of the Washington Post and USA Today including, but not limited to the question: "What concerns you more about the government's anti-terrorism policies? That they have gone too far in restricting the average person's civil liberties [OR] That they have not gone far enough to adequately protect the country?" [5]. In the figure 2 you can see that at the start of 2010 58 % were in favor of more measures being taken, in an effort to improve the overall security against terrorism. In addition you can see, that the general attitude towards the right of privacy being reduced is almost tied with its all-time low at 27 %. However, these two figures are not representative, because this part of the poll was performed from the 6<sup>th</sup> until the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2010, only a little over a week after the attempted terror attack on flight 253 to Detroit on Christmas Day [6]. Considering this event, thus ignoring these two values of the statistic, nothing really changes. People thinking the government has gone too far, never climbs above the 36 % mark and only averages around 32,6 %. Conversely, the population demanding a harder approach on the subject of counterterrorism, averages about 47,78 %. Taking the information of this graph into account and analyzing the knowledge publicly available back in 2010, the author also has found that most of the information regarding this topic has been provided by the government. Now, one cannot really assume that the government planned all of this, unless it can be confirmed that the current administration was informed of all, or even some, of the programs deployed by the NSA.

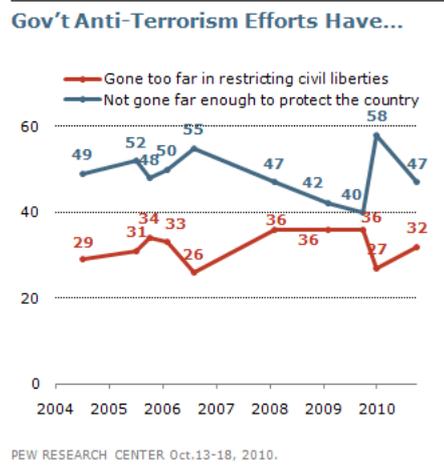


Figure 2. Graph provided by: [5]

### 4. When the News first broke

Edward Snowden, surprised everyone. Maybe not with the information about PRISM (a clandestine mass electronic surveillance data mining program launched in 2007 by the National Security Agency [7]) alone, but for sure with the wealth of information he made public about the staggering number of overly invasive programs the NSA had deployed. Nonetheless when the news first

spread, it seemed as though American society did not believe it right away. As shown in Figure 1 and explained in section 2 the overall approval of the NSA surveillance program first increased. This could stem from many reasons. In order to eliminate some possibilities, the author will take a look at when these polls were taken.

Year	2013	2013	2014
Date	Jun 12 - 16	Jul 17-21	Jan 15-19
Approve	48	50	40
Disapprove	47	44	53
Don't know/Refuse	4	6	6

**Table 1.** Shows when the polls were conducted. Provided by:[3]

The first documents were published on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. Therefore, the first poll considered in figure 1 was conducted only between seven and eleven days after the information became public. We are obviously living in an age where communication has been redefined by the internet, pretty much everything from the way we interact on a social level, to how we read our news, has changed drastically. Yet, after more or less one week, these polls demonstrate that people living, in arguably the most connected country in the world, had not heard of these classified files. In this post-modern age, where Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and other social media sites are almost ubiquitous, one would expect, that news, especially if upsetting like this, should have spread like wildfire. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, the results of another poll were released by the Pew Research Center. One of many questions was : "As I read a list of some stories covered by news organizations this past week, please tell me if you happened to follow each news story very closely, fairly closely, not too closely, or not at all closely.[...] The government collecting records about Verizon phone calls for national security purposes". [8]. Results are also displayed by table 2. It was carried out from the 6<sup>th</sup> until the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. 65 % answered with: "Very closely, Fairly closely, or Not too closely" only 35 % stated that they were "Not at all closely" following this news story. As a matter of fact, the majority did know about the leaked documents, so the argument, that they were not informed, cannot be made. Additionally, a deeper look at figure 3, which is from the same poll shows that in 2013, even though, 65 % are informed, the belief, what is more important : " Either the investigation of terrorist threats or not to intrude on privacy", has not significantly changed.

Very closely	Fairly closely	Not too closely	Not at all closely
27	21	17	35

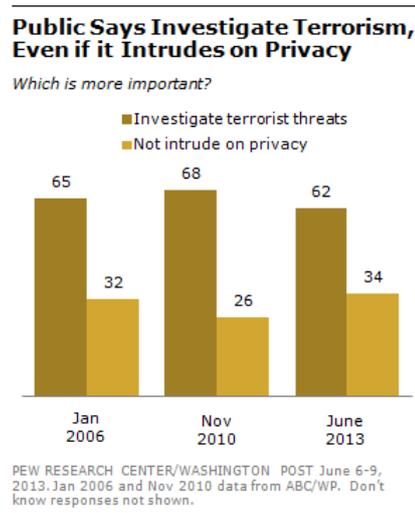
**Table 2.** Shows how answers were spread. Provided by: [8]

Another very interesting result from the same source, are the answers to the question:"[...] secret court

orders to track telephone call records of MILLIONS of Americans in an effort to investigate terrorism. [...] acceptable or unacceptable way for the federal government to investigate terrorism?" [8].

Type	Total	Strongly	Somewhat
Acceptable	56	30	26
Unacceptable	41	27	14

**Table 3.** Shows, how the answers were spread. Provided by: [8]



**Figure 3.** Graph provided by: [8]

So in the opinion of the author these two outcomes do not really add up. Asked the first question, over 62 % consider the war against terrorism more important than privacy protection, figure 3. Yet only 30 % agree strongly with the practice described above. This is almost tied with the 27 %, who strongly disagree with the programs and methods used by the NSA. The author finds, that approximately 40 % are not really sure if they are in favor of these procedures or not. Provided, that these assumptions are true, this result could have one of two reasons.

First, the people asked, do not have enough expertise, thus are not able to understand the information presented, or its consequences.

Second, due to the fact, that this poll was conducted, only five days after the first Snowden documents were published, the overall uncertainty was very high. Therefore people turned to a trusted source for answers, which at first was the current administration.

Taking a closer look at the second option, the statistic mentioned before, displayed by table 3, comes to mind. Where 35 % stated, that they were "Not at all closely" following this story. Thus one could argue, that 65 % were informed enough to make an educated statement regarding this topic. Granted, if this theory were true, it

would result in 35 % of the population having unsettled opinions on the topic. This uncertainty favored the government.

The first possible reason, is also highly unlikely due to the fact, that most people, nowadays, have a cell phone and this technology is by no means new. Now, one could expect, that the majority of people should understand what is meant by wiretapping the phones of millions of Americans.

### 5. The Intensification

On July the 26<sup>th</sup>, more than a month after the first documents were published, the Pew Research Center, released another set of results, this time the poll was conducted from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> of July [9]. Combined with some of the data, discussed in the previous sections, very interesting arguments and conclusions can be made. As already named in section 2, 4 and displayed by figure 1 and table 1 the general approval regarding the NSA and its programs first increased. In this poll, the overall approval rose even further, reaching its peak, which is also displayed in figure 1 and table 1. Figure 4 shows, that 70 % believe, the government is not just gathering information in order to fight terrorist groups and networks, but also for other usage. Furthermore, the majority opinion is, with 63 %, that not only metadata is being tapped, but also the content of emails and phone calls. However, those polled, are split whether or not they believe their calls and emails are being monitored and saved or not. Looking back at a statistic already mentioned before [10], about a week after the news first spread, 54 % answered yes when asked if they suspect, that the government has illegally recorded their data. Additionally, over 63 %, would feel their personal privacy violated, if the administration did collect data about them.

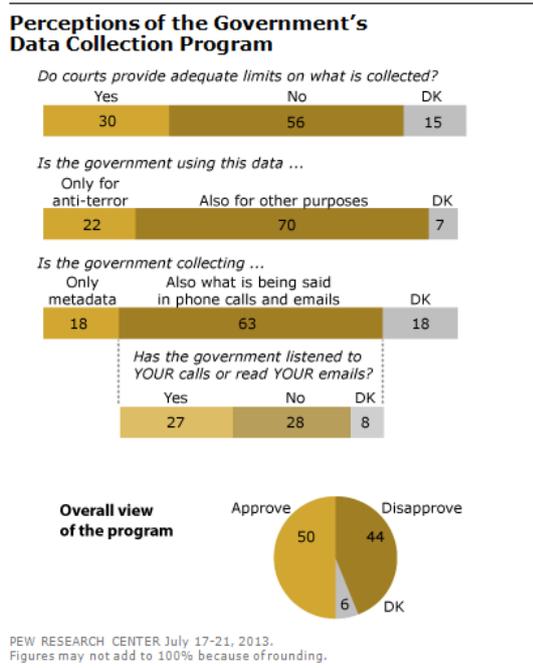


Figure 4. Graph provided by: [9]

Taking these two results into account, it is pretty obvious, that the opinion, regarding whether or not the government does actually monitor, calls and emails of the American people, has changed dramatically. This significant shift in opinion can be explained by closely examining the information provided by Edward Snowden. On June the 5<sup>th</sup>, the very first article, written by Glen Greenwald in the Guardian, revealed "The order, a copy of which has been obtained by the Guardian, requires Verizon on an "ongoing, daily basis" to give the NSA information on all telephone calls in its systems, both within the US and between the US and other countries." [2]. This information spread rapidly all over the globe. Back in June the knowledge, that such a program exists, was still fresh, new and especially shocking, thus affecting the outcome of the first poll, conducted just a week after this event. Additionally, the last pieces of new information, regarding American citizens, published before the second poll, was on June the 20<sup>th</sup>. Again the Guardian published an article along with some documents. The authors Glen Greenwald and James Ball summarize: "The documents show that even under authorities governing the collection of foreign intelligence from foreign targets, US communications can still be collected, retained and used." [11]. The next poll by the Pew Research Center, regarding this topic, was not carried out until the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, providing enough time for these memories and chunks of information to fade away.

### 6. The Turnaround

In early 2014, the Pew Research Center, conducted another public poll, some of the results are shown in figure 1 and table 1. As previously discussed in section 5, this is the first time the overall public disapproval outweighed total public approval of the practices implemented by the NSA. The answer to the question: "Why?" can be found, if a poll published on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2013 and the information available around the same time, is examined more closely.

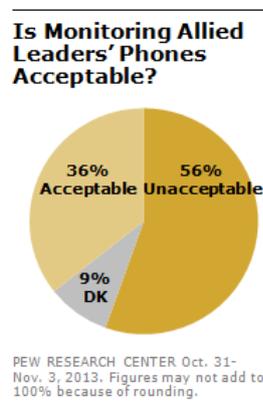


Figure 5. Graph provided by: [12]

In figure 5 you can clearly see, that the majority tends too disagree with the practice to wiretap allied

leaders. These results, can be explained, by looking at the date, when this poll was conducted: between the 31<sup>st</sup> of October and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November. Therefore this poll was carried out, in the wake of the article published, by the German newspaper, "Der Spiegel", with the title: "Berlin Complains: Did US Tap Chancellor Merkel's Mobile Phone?" [13] on 23<sup>rd</sup> of October. However, this was only the tip of the iceberg, with another two articles [14], [15] similar, being published in less than two days, after the story about the German Chancellor's phone first became known. This information, created a massive uproar, especially in the countries directly affected, with Germany leading the way. Furthermore, the American people were given the chance, to first fully understand the scope and impact of the programs, implemented by the NSA and ally's intelligence agencies. The article released, by the Guardian, on October the 30<sup>th</sup>, proving, that Google, Microsoft and Yahoo, and their worldwide services, were also targeted by the NSA, also helped most people, not just Americans, to fully acknowledge and register the information. For the reasons mentioned above and the huge amount of people affected, from the author's point of view, explains the change of perspective shown in figure 1 and table 1.

## 7. Conclusion

In section 2.1, the author stated that he believes that in order to change the opinion of a majority, it is necessary, that, that majority be educated about the issue, and someone they know, if not themselves, must to be affected. These requirements, were fulfilled right from the start, with the first story about Verizon and its customers [2]. Considering the poll results, this was probably the perfect start. Not too technical, for the general public, but still controversial and explosive enough to create a big buzz.

Section 4, explains, why despite the fact of all requirements being satisfied, the overall approval of the programs deployed by the National Security Agency rose, as seen in figure 1 and table 1. The reason, why the approval, for these programs, still increased, even after the first period of uncertainty was over, is explained, in section 5, where the factor of time is listed as an argument. At this point, the author, found the first flaw in his hypothesis, explained in section 2.1, due to the fact, that the aspect of time was not taken into consideration, thus overlooking the possibility, of memories being able to fade.

From about August until the end of September, the publishers, managed to build up trust solely, through the continuous release of well researched articles, about the NSA and it's collaboration with foreign intelligence agencies like the British GCHQ [16] . Furthermore they supported and reinforced their previous releases, with articles demanding a little more technical knowledge, with the revelation of programs like "Bullrun" [16], than the average citizen has at their disposal. Due to the fact, that this information, was not the leading argument, but rather played a supporting role for the arguments not as technical, this does not interfere with the hypothesis in section 2.1.

In the author's belief, the biggest shift in opinion, happened, when those articles around the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October and the German Chancellor, mentioned in section 6, were published in quick succession. As a result of these articles being very easy to understand, one did not have to be technically adept in order to fully understand the information. Furthermore it provided an opportunity to identify with these programs, people now were able to fully acknowledge the fact that they could be, and probably are being spied on. The author also thinks that with the proof provided by the Washington Post, that Google, Microsoft and Yahoo [17], all widespread services, were indeed targeted by the NSA, almost everyone was affected, in some shape or form.

The author also finds that this paper has shown that, if given all the information and tools, the general public, will consider the information available and develop an opinion. Edward Snowden put it this way "[...] This is something, that's not our[the NSA] place to decide, the public needs to decide, whether or not this programs or policies are right or wrong." [18]. In the authors opinion, it is simply not right, to withdraw and hold back knowledge as crucial as people's privacy. Furthermore, if society is not careful, it will slowly but surely continue down this path and will end up, like described in many books, like 1984 by George Orwell.

Society needs more whistle-blowers, like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, who are willing to risk their own lives, in order to reveal violations of privacy, which might have never been publicly available or not until it is already too late.

## 8. References

- [1] George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Secker and Warburg, 1st edition, 1949.
- [2] Glen Grennewald. "NSA collecting phone records of millions of Verizon customers daily". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/nsa-phone-records-verizon-court-order>, June 2013. [The Guardian; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [3] "Obama's NSA Speech Has Little Impact on Skeptical Public". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-questionnaires/01-20-14%20NSA%20topline%20for%20release.pdf>, January 2014. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [4] Spencer Ackerman and James Ball. "Optic Nerve: millions of Yahoo webcam images intercepted by GCHQ". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/27/gchq-nsa-webcam-images-internet-yahoo>, February 2014. [The Guardian; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [5] "Continued Positive Marks for Government Anti-Terror Efforts". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/667.pdf>, October 2010. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [6] Anahad O'connor and Eric Schmitt. "Terror Attempt Seen as Man Tries to Ignite Device on

- Jet ". [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/us/26plane.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/us/26plane.html?_r=0), December 2009. [New York Times; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [7] "NSA slides explain the PRISM data-collection program". <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/politics/prism-collection-documents/>, July 2013. [Washington Post; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [8] "Majority Views NSA Phone Tracking as Acceptable Anti-terror Tactic". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/06-10-13%20PRC%20WP%20Surveillance%20Release.pdf>, June 2013. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [9] "Few See Adequate Limits on NSA Surveillance Program". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/7-26-2013%20NSA%20release.pdf>, July 2013. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [10] "Public Split over Impact of NSA Leak, But Most Want Snowden Prosecuted". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/6-17-13%20NSA%20release.pdf>, June 2013. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [11] Glen Grennewald and James Ball. "The top secret rules that allow NSA to use US data without a warrant". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/20/fisa-court-nsa-without-warrant>, June 2013. [The Guardian; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [12] "Most Say Monitoring Allied Leaders' Calls Is Unacceptable". <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/11-4-13%20European%20Monitoring%20Release.pdf>, November 2013. [Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [13] Marcel Rosenbach Jacob Appelbaum, Holger Stark and Jörg Schindler. "NSA monitored calls of 35 world leaders after US official handed over contacts". <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/merkel-calls-obama-over-suspicious-us-tapped-her-mobile-phone-a-929642.html>, October 2013. [Der Spiegel; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [14] James Ball. "NSA monitored calls of 35 world leaders after US official handed over contacts". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/24/nsa-surveillance-world-leaders-calls>, October 2013. [Washington Post; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [15] Miguel González. "NSA revelations: Spain also a victim of US espionage". [http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/10/25/inenglish/1382703360\\_329586.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2013/10/25/inenglish/1382703360_329586.html), October 2013. [el país; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [16] Julian Borger James Ball and Glenn Greenwald. "Revealed: how US and UK spy agencies defeat internet privacy and security". <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/05/nsa-gchq-encryption-codes-security>, September 2013. [The Guardian; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [17] Barton Gellman and Ashkan Soltani. "NSA infiltrates links to Yahoo, Google data centers worldwide, Snowden documents say". [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nsa-infiltrates-links-to-yahoo-google-data-centers-worldwide-snowden-documents-say/2013/10/30/e51d661e-4166-11e3-8b74-d89d714ca4dd\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nsa-infiltrates-links-to-yahoo-google-data-centers-worldwide-snowden-documents-say/2013/10/30/e51d661e-4166-11e3-8b74-d89d714ca4dd_story.html), October 2013. [Washington Post; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].
- [18] Gabriel Rodriguez. "Edward Snowden Interview Transcript FULL TEXT: Read the Guardian's Entire Interview With the Man Who Leaked PRISM". <http://www.policymic.com/articles/47355/edward-snowden-interview-transcript-full-text-read-the-guardian-s-entire-interview-with-the-man-who-leaked-prism>, June 2013. [Policymic; Online; accessed 23-March-2014].