



## A US-European Crisis Over Privacy Invasions? Part I

*Nicolas Véron assesses the political and economic implications of European outrage over the United States' practice of tapping into vast amounts of communications data. Tomorrow: Jacob Funk Kirkegaard offers a separate view of the controversy.*

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Steve Weisman: The transatlantic furor [has erupted] over disclosures that the United States has been listening in to the leadership of France, Germany and perhaps other European countries, but also to millions of ordinary European citizens because of the National Security Agency programmed to monitor calls and emails and websites looking for terrorism. This controversy is spilled over into the political and economic relationship in ways that Nicolas Véron, visiting fellow at the Peterson Institute and senior fellow at Bruegel, will now discuss. Nicolas, how big of a problem is this in relations between the United States and France and Germany on the other hand and other European countries?

Nicolas Véron: Yes, I don't think it's just France and Germany. Maybe they are both vocal in their different ways, but this is not limited to those two countries. It's not limited to Europe either. I think it's both big and not that big. It's not that big because it won't alter the fundamentals of the relationships. The map of the world is not being redrawn by this story. At the same time, it's big because I think it's seen as a big failure of leadership by the US.

As usual when there is US-bashing, uptakes are the US is doing bad things and the underlying reality is we're not sure if the US is doing what we expected it to do. And what we expected it to do at this point was monitoring everything but have a system that was reliable, secure and ultimately benevolent. And at this point, the system is being shown as not reliable, not secure. Otherwise Mr. Snowden would not have made the declarations he's made and therefore if it's not reliable and secure, it cannot be entirely benevolent. I think that's where deep down, beyond the posturing, beyond the grandstandings that you would expect in such a circumstance, that's where the real worry is.

Steve Weisman: You're saying that it's the ability of Snowden to compromise the system, rather than the system itself that alarms Europeans deep down?

Nicolas Véron: Yes. Let me explain. I think most Europeans have been aware for a long time that the US government was listening to their conversations, watching their emails, watching their correspondence. This is not news. I think what is really scary is the thought that the information in the hands of the US government could go to the public, could go to third parties, could go to competitors, could go to US corporate interests, foreign corporate interests, foreign governments. This is where it becomes really scary and I think here there is a real loss of trust in the ability of the US government to control the use of the information it collects.

And in a way, it's irrelevant what the intention of Mr. Snowden is in this debate. What is relevant is that Mr. Snowden was able to get this information and do what he wanted with it. And if he was able to do this, probably others have been and will be able to do this. And this is what really changes the terms of the relationship to all this espionage, if you want to call it that way, programs. If you can no longer assume that the information is safe in the hands of the US government, you will see change in the way you relate to it.

Steve Weisman: Isn't it naïve to think that any system is foolproof?

Nicolas Véron: You know, there's this great book that was published recently, titled *Command and Control*, about the near accidents that happened with the US handling its nuclear weapons. I think there is indeed a naïve belief in the rest of the world that the US knows how to deal with these things. And probably there is an overestimation of the security and the professionalism with which the US is handling its global leadership and military and intelligence and security affairs. And in a way, well, thank God no nuclear bomb was detonated by mistake, and apparently if this book is to be relied upon, there were some very close calls. Here we have a massive accident, if you want to call it that way, that is fundamentally of the same nature.

Steve Weisman: You can't speak for ordinary Europeans, no one could...

Nicolas Véron: Even though I think of myself as an ordinary European. By the way, I don't think of myself as an intelligence or security expert, so I'm a layman in those particular issues. I have no security clearance.

Steve Weisman: Still, these things fluctuate in the United States. When terrorism attacks occur, something as mundane and awful as the Boston Marathon bombings, people seem glad that there is this infrastructure of monitoring of ordinary activities that led to the identification and capture of the marathon bombers within days. So when something like that happens, people think, "Oh, I'm glad there is such a system." But then at other moments they find it scary. Isn't that similar to what the ups and downs are in Europe as well?

Nicolas Véron: No. Again, I don't think there is fundamental disagreement in Europe that the US should monitor all sorts of activity to identify risk. We're in an era of big data, so more insightful participants in this debate can perfectly understand that the US needs to monitor much more than just the most dangerous individuals if it wants to be able to identify patterns and new threats.

The question is, what's the tradeoff? OK, we gained this additional security. What do we lose? And until Snowden, I think the thinking was, "Well, we don't lose that much because information is not going to leak." And now we know that the information has leaked and will leak again. That's where the calculation has changed.

Steve Weisman: Various delegations from Europe, the European parliamentarians and emissaries from Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande and others are coming to Washington to work out new protocols, new understandings. What is the likelihood of that succeeding?

Nicolas Véron: It depends on your definition of success. I think irrespective of what the Europeans are asking for, Snowden has consequences. So I hope and I assume that there are reviews of the security upholds this information systems, the access given to contractors, the very size of the system, if I'm correct there are near to five million individuals in the US who have a top secret security clearance. Now it's well known in the intelligence community apparently that top secret is the lowest possible level of security clearance. But even levels above that level are shared by a worryingly large number of individuals.

So I think it's fair to say that there is a feeling, at least from those who look at the system from outside, and again I'm a total outsider in those things, that this system has grown out of control. It has grown too fast. After September 11th, there had been too many different competing programs, each of them ring-fencing information. And there has been no check on this enormous growth of the security and intelligence parties. So I think it's reasonable to expect there would be some streamlining, consolidation and better controls, especially after what has happened.

Will the protest from European leaders contribute to that? Perhaps. I don't think it will be the main driving force. I think even assuming the Europeans would not protest at all,

which of course is not a realistic assumption, the US would have to do the streamlining and controlling anyway. So I think in a way, the European protests are a bit of a sideshow in a larger issue which is by many aspects a US domestic issue, is how to bring this system under control, how to make it much more robust and strong.

Steve Weisman: Thank you, Nicolas.

Nicolas Véron: Thank you, Steve.

