

The New York Times

OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Stop Spying on Wikipedia Users

By Jimmy Wales and Lila Tretikov

March 10, 2015

SAN FRANCISCO — TODAY, we're filing a lawsuit against the National Security Agency to protect the rights of the 500 million people who use Wikipedia every month. We're doing so because a fundamental pillar of democracy is at stake: the free exchange of knowledge and ideas.

Our lawsuit says that the N.S.A.'s mass surveillance of Internet traffic on American soil — often called “upstream” surveillance — violates the Fourth Amendment, which protects the right to privacy, as well as the First Amendment, which protects the freedoms of expression and association. We also argue that this agency activity exceeds the authority granted by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act that Congress amended in 2008.

Most people search and read Wikipedia anonymously, since you don't need an account to view its tens of millions of articles in hundreds of languages. Every month, at least 75,000 volunteers in the United States and around the world contribute their time and passion to writing those articles and keeping the site going — and growing.

On our servers, run by the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, those volunteers discuss their work on everything from Tiananmen Square to gay rights in Uganda. Many of them prefer to work anonymously, especially those who work on controversial issues or who live in countries with repressive governments.

These volunteers should be able to do their work without having to worry that the United States government is monitoring what they read and write. Unfortunately, their anonymity is far from certain because, using upstream surveillance, the N.S.A. intercepts and searches virtually all of the international text-based traffic that flows across the Internet “backbone” inside the United States. This is the network of fiber-optic cables and junctions that connect Wikipedia with its global community of readers and editors.

As a result, whenever someone overseas views or edits a Wikipedia page, it's likely that the N.S.A. is tracking that activity — including the content of what was read or typed, as well as other information that can be linked to the person's physical location and possible identity. These activities are sensitive and private: They can reveal everything from a person's political and religious beliefs to sexual orientation and medical conditions.

**You have 4 free articles remaining.
Subscribe to The Times**

The notion that the N.S.A. is monitoring Wikipedia's users is not, unfortunately, a stretch of the imagination. One of the documents revealed by the whistle-blower Edward J. Snowden specifically identified Wikipedia as a target for surveillance, alongside several other major websites like CNN.com, Gmail and Facebook. The leaked slide from a classified PowerPoint presentation declared that monitoring these sites could allow N.S.A. analysts to learn “nearly everything a typical user does on the Internet.”

The harm to Wikimedia and the hundreds of millions of people who visit our websites is clear: Pervasive surveillance has a chilling effect. It stifles freedom of expression and the free exchange of knowledge that Wikimedia was designed to enable.

During the 2011 Arab uprisings, Wikipedia users collaborated to create articles that helped educate the world about what was happening. Continuing cooperation between American and Egyptian intelligence services is well established; the director of Egypt's main spy agency under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi boasted in 2013 that he was “in constant contact” with the Central Intelligence Agency.

So imagine, now, a Wikipedia user in Egypt who wants to edit a page about government opposition or discuss it with fellow editors. If that user knows the N.S.A. is routinely combing through her contributions to Wikipedia, and possibly sharing information with her government, she will surely be less likely to add her knowledge or have that conversation, for fear of reprisal.

And then imagine this decision playing out in the minds of thousands of would-be contributors in other countries. That represents a loss for everyone who uses Wikipedia and the Internet — not just fellow editors, but hundreds of millions of readers in the United States and around the world.

In the lawsuit we're filing with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, we're joining as a fellow plaintiff a broad coalition of human rights, civil society, legal, media and information organizations. Their work, like ours, requires them to engage in sensitive Internet communications with people outside the United States.

That is why we're asking the court to order an end to the N.S.A.'s dragnet surveillance of Internet traffic.

Privacy is an essential right. It makes freedom of expression possible, and sustains freedom of inquiry and association. It empowers us to read, write and communicate in confidence, without fear of persecution. Knowledge flourishes where privacy is protected.

Jimmy Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, is a board member of the Wikimedia Foundation, of which Lila Tretikov is the executive director.

A version of this article appears in print on March 10, 2015, on Page A21 of the New York edition with the headline: Stop Spying on Wikipedia Users

[READ 403 COMMENTS](#)