

The government is reading your tweets

Dean Obeidallah and Special to CNN
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A surveillance program monitors "bad" words on Facebook and other social-media sites, a privacy group's lawsuit reveals.

PHOTO: AFP/Getty Images

Editor's Note: [Dean Obeidallah](#), a former attorney, is a comedian. He has appeared on Comedy Central's "Axis of Evil" special, ABC's "The View" and HLN's "The Joy Behar Show." He is co-executive producer of the annual New York Arab-American Comedy Festival and co-director of the documentary, "The Muslims Are Coming!" Follow him on [Twitter](#).

(CNN) —

There were once seven words you couldn't say on television, as the late comedy icon George Carlin famously lampooned 40 years ago.

Now it appears there are more than 500 words you shouldn't say on Twitter or Facebook unless you want to be flagged by the Department of Homeland Security. There is a surveillance program the agency quietly began in February 2011 to monitor social media, according to the Electronic Privacy Information Center.

Documents obtained only after the privacy organization [filed a lawsuit to enforce its Freedom of Information Act request](#) reveal that anything you post on social-media websites such as Twitter

and Facebook could come under review by the Department of Homeland Security, or at least by General Dynamics, the military defense contractor hired to implement the surveillance program.



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Like the probes in the movie “The Matrix,” they are looking for “Items of Interest,” which in this case are [words on a watch list](#) that are considered “bad.”

So what [words are of interest to them](#)? Are they like the seven words that Carlin joked about not being able to say on television because they “... will infect your soul, curve your spine and keep the country from winning the war.” (By the way, if Carlin tweeted these words today, he would get noticed because the word “infection” is part of the watch list.)

No, Carlin’s joke dealt with curse words, which are actually now heard nightly on cable TV. In contrast, the Department of Homeland Security is concerned with a broader range of words that you can say on television, or anywhere, usually without a problem. However, if you tweet or post these specific words on social-media websites, then you’ll catch the attention of the security agency.

The watch list includes hundreds of words and phrases that have been organized into certain categories: domestic security, HAZMAT, health concern, Southwest border violence, federal agencies, terrorism, weather/disaster/emergency, cybersecurity and Infrastructure security.

Two questions jump out regarding this surveillance program. How effective is it? And more importantly, is this an invasion of our privacy?

The effectiveness question is hard to answer. When you look at all the words on the watch list, it’s hard to believe that any terrorist or criminal would tweet or post them unless they wanted to get caught.

For example, the watch list contains words such as dirty bomb, hostage, al Qaeda and ammonium nitrate. What terrorist in his right mind would tweet, “Looking for ammonium nitrate, please direct message me if you have leads?”

There are also terms under the category “Southwest border violence” that seem ridiculous, such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, meth lab and drug war. If a drug dealer mentioned on his Facebook wall, “Great deal today on heroin and methamphetamine, and it’s all organically made in my own meth lab,” I would hope that people would turn that person in – or at the very least, not “like” his post.

But it’s the long list of innocent words on the watch list that raises more concerns.

Words such as subway, delays, infection, San Diego, cloud, pork, wave and Mexico are monitored. If you posted on Twitter, “I’m going on vacation to San Diego, hope no clouds because want to catch some waves,” your tweet would be considered suspicious because you used three words on the watch list.

In the event that your Facebook or Twitter post is flagged, a further investigation could be triggered, and information could be shared with other government agencies.

As a former attorney, I am fully aware that you have little grounds to claim that your postings on Facebook and Twitter have an expectation of privacy. Social media is almost the equivalent of speaking loudly at a crowded party – people beyond your intended recipients will hear your words.

However, putting the legality issues aside, we should be concerned the government is engaged in the wholesale monitoring of our social-media streams. This program is akin to the Chinese government’s monitoring of the Internet. Our government must not emulate an authoritarian regime.

We should reject the notion that tweeting words included in the watch list, such as San Diego or clouds, justifies monitoring our activities on social-media platforms. If we don’t object now to the unfettered surveillance of our social-media communications, the next step could be the government’s reading of our direct messages on Facebook and Twitter. Following that, the reading of our personal e-mails would not be far behind.

Since 9/11, we have far too often willingly forfeited privacy in the name of security, be it the Patriot Act, the New York Police Department’s spying of Muslim Americans, body-scanning machines, intrusive pat-downs at airports and who knows what else is out there that we have yet to find out about. If it were not for the Electronic Privacy Information Center’s lawsuit, we would be unaware of the details of this latest program.

Benjamin Franklin famously warned us, “Any society that would give up a little liberty to gain a little security will deserve neither and lose both.”

The Department of Homeland Security’s surveillance program – and our acceptance of programs like it – is just another step in the direction that Franklin so wisely cautioned us to guard against.

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