

FBI probes went beyond targeted suspects: newspaper

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NEW YORK (Reuters) - FBI investigations using telecommunications companies' records of terrorism suspects have gone farther than previously acknowledged, including information on phone call and e-mail patterns of the suspects' associates, The New York Times reported in Sunday editions.

Newly obtained FBI records indicate the bureau used secret demands for records to obtain data not only on individuals it saw as targets but also details on their "community of interest," the Times said, referring to individuals with whom targets were in contact.

Officials said the bureau had recently halted the practice, partly due to questions raised about its use of the records demands, which are known as national security letters, the Times said.

According to law enforcement and industry officials, community-of-interest data might typically include an analysis of which people the targets called most frequently, how long and when they talked, sudden fluctuations in activity or geographic regions that were called, the newspaper reported.

But even some counterterrorism official warned that such "link analysis" could be misused to establish tenuous links to people with no real connection to terrorism but who would nonetheless be pulled into an investigation, the Times said.

While the FBI declined to specify what data had been turned over, the newspaper said it was limited to people, phone numbers and e-mail one connection away from the actual target of the national security letters, citing a government official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The bureau also declined to discuss any aspect of the community of interest requests, saying the issue was part of an investigation by the Justice Department inspector general's office into national security letters, the Times said. A March review by the inspector general found widespread violations and possible illegality in the FBI's use of the letters but did not mention community-of-interest data, the Times said.

A federal judge last week struck down parts of the Patriot Act that authorized FBI use of national security letters, ruling that certain provisions violated both the First Amendment and the Constitution's separation of powers guarantee.

The Times also reported that officials at other U.S. intelligence agencies including the National Security Agency and the CIA have explored using link analysis to trace patterns of communications that were two, three or four people removed from the original targets, citing current and former intelligence officials said.