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I write about video games: the industry and the culture.

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Report: NSA Intercepting Laptops Ordered Online, Installing Spyware



With each new story we hear of the NSA’s spying program, things get a little bit crazier—a little more Hollywood, and a lot more galling.

From planting agents [in video games like *World of Warcraft*](#) to [a spy satellite adorned with a world-devouring, tentacled octopus](#) (pictured above) the NSA has shown time and again that it’s willing to go to just about any length to gather intelligence on both domestic and foreign citizens.

The latter isn’t problematic beyond diplomatic tension. Spy agencies are, by design, bankrolled to spy on allies and enemies abroad. When it comes to domestic spying, however, we run into problems.

The latest report, this time via [Der Spiegel](#) and based on [internal NSA documents](#), reveals that the NSA, in conjunction with the CIA and FBI, has begun intercepting laptops purchased online in order to install (quite literal) spyware and even hardware on the machines. The NSA terms this “interdiction.” Agents divert shipments to secret warehouses, carefully open the packages, install the software and/or hardware, and send them on their way.

According to the report, this operation is carried out by the NSA’s elite

hacking unit, or TAO—not to be confused with the much less imposing Taoism—though there are few details on the scope or targets of the program.

The spy agency reportedly has backdoor access to numerous hardware and software systems from prominent tech companies such as Cisco, Dell, and Western Digital, among others. The NSA can even exploit Microsoft Windows error reports to find weak spots in compromised machines in order to install Trojans and other viruses.

The *Der Spiegel* report also notes that the NSA has successfully tapped into some of the massive, under-sea fiber-optic cables that connect the global data infrastructure, in particular the “SEA-ME-WE-4” cable system.

“This massive underwater cable bundle connects Europe with North Africa and the Gulf states and then continues on through Pakistan and India,” *Der Spiegel* reports, “all the way to Malaysia and Thailand. The cable system originates in southern France, near Marseille. Among the companies that hold ownership stakes in it are France Telecom, now known as Orange and still partly government-owned, and Telecom Italia Sparkle.”

As the aforementioned giant octopus logo proudly proclaims: “Nothing is beyond our reach.” Lately it appears that this is not so much boasting as a simple statement of fact.

(Hat-Tip: [The Verge](#))

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