

# Against the Public Interest

*Edward Snowden  
interviewed by  
Glenn Greenwald*

*Edward Snowden began to lift the lid on global surveillance in a filmed interview conducted in Hong Kong on 6 June 2013, and posted on YouTube. The Russell Foundation has transcribed what was broadcast and publishes it in the spirit of Mr Snowden's revelations.*

**EDWARD SNOWDEN:** My name is Ed Snowden. I am 29 years old. I work for Booz Allen Hamilton as an infrastructure analyst for NSA [National Security Agency] in Hawaii.

**GLENN GREENWALD:** *What are some of the positions that you held previously within the intelligence community?*

**SNOWDEN:** I have been a systems engineer, a systems administrator, a senior advisor for the Central Intelligence Agency, a solutions consultant and a telecommunications information systems officer.

**GREENWALD:** *One of the things people are going to be most interested in, in trying to understand who you are and what you're thinking, is there came some point in time when you crossed this line about thinking about being a whistleblower to making the choice to actually become a whistleblower. Walk people through that decision making process.*

**SNOWDEN:** When you are in positions of privileged access, like a systems administrator for these sorts of intelligence community agencies, you are exposed to a lot more information on a broader scale than the average employee and, because of that, you see things that may be disturbing, but over the course of a normal person's career you'd only see one or two of these instances. When you see everything you see them on a more frequent basis and you recognise that some of these things are actually abuses and when you talk to people about them, in a place like this where this is

the normal state of business, people tend not to take them very seriously and move on from them. But over time that awareness of wrongdoing sort of builds up and you feel compelled to talk about it and the more you talk about it the more you're ignored, the more you are told it's not a problem until, eventually, you realise that these things need to be determined by the public, not by someone who was simply hired by the government.

**GREENWALD:** *Talk a little bit about how the American surveillance state actually functions. Does it target the actions of Americans?*

**SNOWDEN:** NSA, and the intelligence community in general, is focused on getting intelligence wherever it can, by any means possible that it believes, on the grounds of a sort of a self-certification, that they serve the national interest. Originally we saw that focus very narrowly tailored as foreign intelligence gathered overseas. Now, increasingly, we see that it is happening domestically. And to do that they, the NSA specifically, targets the communications of everyone; it ingests them by default, it collects them in its system and it filters and it analyses them and it measures them and it stores them for periods of time, simply because that is the easiest, most efficient and most valuable way to achieve these ends. So while they may be intending to target someone associated with a foreign government or someone that they suspect of terrorism, they are collecting your communications to do so. Any analyst at any time can target anyone; any selector anywhere. Where those communications will be picked up depends on the range of the sensor networks and the authorities that that analyst is empowered with. Not all analysts have the ability to target everything, but I sitting at my desk certainly had the authorities to wiretap anyone from you or your accountant to a federal judge to even the President if I had a personal email.

**GREENWALD:** *One of the extraordinary parts about this episode is that usually whistleblowers do what they do anonymously and take steps to remain anonymous for as long as they can, which they hope often is forever. You, on the other hand, have decided to do the opposite, which is to declare yourself openly as the person behind these disclosures. Why did you choose to do that?*

**SNOWDEN:** I think that the public is owed an explanation of the motivations behind the people who make these disclosures that are outside of the democratic model. When you are subverting the power of

government, that is a fundamentally dangerous thing to democracy, and if you do that in secret consistently, as the government does when it wants to benefit from a secret action that it took, it'll kind of give its officials a mandate to go, hey, tell the press about this thing and that thing so the public is on our side. But they rarely, if ever, do that when an abuse occurs; that falls to individual citizens, but they are typically maligned. It becomes a thing of these people are against the country, they are against the government, but I am not. I am no different from anybody else. I don't have special skills. I am just another guy who sits there day to day in the office, watches what is happening and goes this is something that is not our place to decide, the public needs to decide whether these programmes and policies are right or wrong, and I am willing to go on the record to defend the authenticity of them and say I didn't change these, I didn't modify the story. This is the truth and this is what is happening. You should decide whether we need to be doing this.

**GREENWALD:** *Have you given thought to what it is that the US government's response to your conduct is in terms of what they might say about you, how they try to depict you, what they might try to do to you?*

**SNOWDEN:** Yes. I could be rendered by the CIA. I could have people come after me, or any of their third party partners; they work closely with a number of other nations. Or they could pay off the Triads, or any of their agents or assets. We have got a CIA station just up the road at the consulate here in Hong Kong and I am sure they are going to be very busy for the next week, and that is a fear I will live under for the rest of my life, however long that happens to be. You can't come forward against the world's most powerful intelligence agencies and be completely free from risk because they are such powerful adversaries that no one can meaningfully oppose them. If they want to get you they'll get you in time, but at the same time you have to make a determination about what it is that's important to you. If living unfreely but comfortably is something you are willing to accept, and I think many of us are, it's human nature, you can get up every day, you can go to work, you can collect your large pay check, for relatively little work, against the public interest and go to sleep at night after watching your shows. But, if you realise that that is the world that you helped to create and it is going to get worse with the next generation and the next generation who extend the capabilities of this sort of architecture of oppression, then you realise you might be willing to accept any risk and it doesn't matter what the outcome is so long as the

public gets to make their own decisions about how that is applied.

**GREENWALD:** *Why should people care about surveillance?*

**SNOWDEN:** Because even if you are not doing anything wrong, you are being watched and recorded, and the storage capability of these systems increases every year consistently by orders of magnitude to where it is getting to the point where you don't have to have done anything wrong, you simply have to eventually fall under suspicion from somebody, even by a wrong call, and then they can use this system to go back in time and scrutinise every decision you have ever made, every friend you have ever discussed something with, and attack you on that basis to derive suspicion from an innocent life and paint anyone in the context of a wrongdoer.

**GREENWALD:** *We are currently sitting in a room in Hong Kong, which is where we are because you have travelled here. Talk a little bit about why it is that you came here and, specifically, there are going to be people that will speculate that what you really intend to do is defect to the country that many see as the number one rival of the United States, which is China, and that what you are really doing is essentially seeking to aid an enemy of the United States with which you intend to seek asylum. Can you talk a little bit about that?*

**SNOWDEN:** Sure. So there are a couple of assertions in those arguments that are embedded in the questioning of the choice of Hong Kong. The first is that China is an enemy of the United States. It is not. There are conflicts between the United States government and the Chinese PRC government, but the peoples, inherently, we don't care. We trade with each other freely, we are not at war, we are not in armed conflict, and we are not trying to be. We are the largest trading partners out there for each other. Additionally, Hong Kong has a strong tradition of free speech. People think, 'oh China, great firewall'. Mainland China does have significant restrictions on free speech, but the people of Hong Kong have a long tradition of protesting in the streets and making their views known. The internet is not filtered here, no more so than any other Western government, and I believe that the Hong Kong government is actually independent in relation to a lot of other leading Western governments.

**GREENWALD:** *If your motive had been to harm the United States and help its enemies, or if your motive had been personal material gain, were there*

*things that you could have done with these documents to advance those goals that you didn't end up doing?*

**SNOWDEN:** Absolutely. Anybody in the positions of access with the technical capabilities that I had could suck out secrets and pass them on the open market to Russia; they always have an open door, as we do. I had access to the full rosters of anyone working at the NSA, the entire intelligence community and undercover assets all around the world. The locations of every station that we have, what their missions are and so forth. If I had just wanted to harm the US, you could shut down the surveillance system in an afternoon, but that is not my intention. I think for anyone making that argument, they need to think, if they were in my position, you live a privileged life, you are living in Hawaii, in paradise, and you make a ton of money, what would it take to make you leave everything behind? The greatest fear that I have regarding the outcome for America of these disclosures is that nothing will change. People will see in the media all of these disclosures. They will know the lengths that the government is going to grant themselves powers, unilaterally, to create greater control over American society and global society, but they won't be willing to take the risks necessary to stand up and fight to change things, to force their representatives to actually take a stand in their interests. The months ahead, the years ahead, it is only going to get worse until, eventually, there will be a time when policies will change because the only thing that restricts the activities of this surveillance state are policies. Even our agreements with other sovereign governments, we consider that to be a stipulation of policy rather than a stipulation of law, and because of that a new leader will be elected, they will flick the switch and say that, because of the crisis, because of the dangers that we face in the world, some new and unpredicted threat, we need more authority, we need more power, and there will be nothing the people can do at that point to oppose it. It will be turnkey tyranny.

*[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yB3n9fu-rM&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yB3n9fu-rM&feature=youtube_gdata_player)*

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