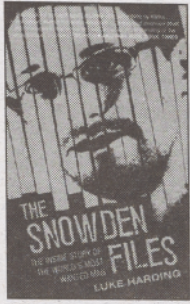


Edward Snowden and the biggest trove of classified documents in history



The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World's Most Wanted Man by Luke Harding

BY JOE MARTIN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The saga of whistleblower Edward Snowden continues to unfold. The May 29 edition of The Seattle Times carried a front page story of Snowden's recent interview with NBC anchorman Brian Williams. A year ago, this young, unknown National Security Agency (NSA) contract employee, who claims to have also been "trained as a spy," unleashed a staggering volume of top secret documents that he had downloaded from the NSA's labyrinthine network. It was the biggest security breach in history. This avalanche of information revealed the broad domestic and international reach of the NSA's sophisticated snooping powers. Contrary to the statements of officials that there were no deliberate bulk spying programs on American citizens, Snowden's cache of material proved otherwise. All kinds of data and content were being "hoovered up" by a voracious system, making a mockery of constitutional restraints on such invasive practices.

For his action, Snowden has been called a traitor by some. Others tout him as a defender of the U.S. Constitution and a hero for free speech and government transparency. His revelations have sparked an intense and often strident global conversation on crucial matters of individual privacy and national security in a complex digital age. Since June 2013, the exiled Snowden has resided in Russia where he was granted temporary asylum. His exact whereabouts in that country remain unknown.

In "The Snowden Files," The Guardian's Luke Harding has produced a brisk chronicle of the bombshell leaks from the ultra-secret NSA. Harding details the unveiling of Snowden's colossal trove of clandestine material.

It started in December 2012, when notable U.S. journalist Glenn Greenwald, writing then for Britain's The Guardian, received a cryptic email: "I have some stuff you might be interested in." Greenwald gets a horde of e-mails every day. Often senders claim to have critical information. Frequently the material is not that

important, and some e-mails are simply worthless. This particular correspondent asked Greenwald to install encryption software. Greenwald is a brilliant writer and astute analyst of political affairs but he lacked the technical know-how to encrypt his laptop. Busy with other pressing projects, Greenwald let the request slide. In doing so he nearly lost what would be the biggest news story since the release of the Pentagon Papers.

Greenwald's procrastination led the still unknown Snowden to approach filmmaker Laura Poitras: "At the end of January 2013, Snowden tried a different way to get to (Greenwald). He sent an e-mail to Laura Poitras. He was hoping to open an anonymous channel to the documentary film-maker, who was Greenwald's friend and a close collaborator. Poitras was another leading critic of the U.S. security state — and one of its more prominent victims."

Because of her trenchant films, Poitras had often encountered difficulties reentering the U.S. She had been detained at airports on about 40 different occasions. She would soon take the mystery man's communiqués very seriously: "He said he had got hold of Presidential Policy Directive 20, a top secret 18-page document issued in October 2012. It said that Obama had secretly ordered his senior national security and intelligence officials to draw up a list of potential overseas targets for U.S. cyber-attacks. Not (defense), but attacks. The agency was tapping fiber-optic cables, intercepting telephone landing points and bugging on a global scale, he said. He could prove all of it. 'I almost fainted,' Poitras says."

She contacted Greenwald, making him take a fresh look at the Internet seeker who had been trying to connect with him for months. Poitras knew nothing of Snowden's earlier attempts. Now aware of the gravity of what they were dealing with, Greenwald and Poitras would eventually fly to Hong Kong where they would meet in secret with their intriguing informant. The duo was accompanied by journalist Ewen MacAskill. At first none of them could believe that this young man could possibly be behind the leaks. All were expecting an older

intelligence veteran. Instead they were confronted by a fellow who looked like he could still be in his teens. Snowden proved he was genuine.

On June 5, 2013 The Guardian published its first story detailing a court order compelling Verizon to hand over data: "The implications were massive. The Verizon secret court order was dated 25 April 2013. It forced one of the U.S.'s largest telecom providers to hand over to the NSA the telephone records of millions of its U.S. customers. Verizon was passing on private details on an 'ongoing daily basis.' It was giving NSA information on all calls in its system, both inside the U.S. and between the U.S. and other countries. It was sensational apparent proof that NSA was a dragnet collecting the records of millions of U.S. citizens, regardless of whether they had committed any crime or been involved in terrorism."

This was just the start of astonishing revelations demonstrating the vast web of intelligence and data gathering pervading the planet. Although Snowden's shattering exposé shows the NSA to be a most formidable player, it is but one entity in an international espionage free-for-all in which an ocean of information about individuals and myriad organizations is collected, stored and analyzed. The USA Freedom Act is making its way through Congress and promises to place at least some control over the NSA's warrantless data collection. What will happen if another atrocity like 9/11 explodes somewhere on U.S. territory? Will we once again ignore rampant violations of the U.S. Constitution in the name of security? Those are exigent questions for our time.

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