

The Washington Post

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January 21, 2014

To the judges:

In the massive cache of top-secret documents he leaked, Edward Snowden, the former contractor for the National Security Agency, included a simple drawing. The sketch showed two clouds — one where the “public Internet” resides and another where Google maintains its oceans of data. Various arrows pointed in various directions. The drawing would have meant nothing to a layperson. When The Washington Post showed it to two engineers with close ties to Google, they exploded in profanity. “I hope you publish this,” one of them said.

The Post did.

The story that resulted from that reporting revealed for the first time that the NSA was secretly breaking into the main communications links that connect Google and Yahoo data centers around the world. That clandestine program allowed the NSA to collect communications from hundreds of millions of user accounts, including those belonging to Americans. Over the following several weeks, several major U.S. technology companies, fearful that their networks were vulnerable, announced they were launching new efforts to encrypt their Internet traffic. Responding to this and other revelations about the NSA’s capabilities, lawmakers have pressed the top-secret agency for answers about its programs and advanced new legislation to curb its authorities.

For six months, The Post has been on the leading edge of reporting on the Snowden documents. It began by becoming the first news outlet to disclose PRISM, a massive program to vacuum up e-mails, documents and other electronic records from the largest U.S. Internet companies. Later, The Post revealed the NSA’s repeated violations of its own privacy rules; examined the workings of the secretive federal court overseeing surveillance activities; exposed the NSA’s clandestine collection of millions of e-mail address books globally; and broke the news that the agency was gathering nearly 5 billion records a day on the whereabouts of cellphones around the world.

The NSA had successfully shielded these programs from scrutiny for years. It did so, however, at the expense of any real discussion about the sometimes uneasy balance between individual privacy and national security, and about the power and responsibility the American people have invested in a relative few. The Post’s stories — based on reporting that went far beyond the documents themselves — were central to making that that debate possible.

The Post dug into the most complicated corners of the Snowden trove, putting a team of reporters with deep technical and legal expertise to work to break story after story. On their own, the NSA documents are enormously difficult to decipher. But The Post did, and then kept going beyond the documents, detailing the workings not only of the NSA but also of the broader intelligence community.

Government officials have argued that the disclosures have undermined national security. But others — including those who are just as passionate about the need for transparency in a democratic system — have embraced The Post’s reporting as an opportunity to demand reform. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) said on national television that a “front-page story in The Washington Post with respect to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court probably put more transparency on that court than anything in the history of a secret organization.” A few months later, the general counsel for Microsoft compared The Post’s revelations about the NSA’s hacking capability to “an earthquake, sending shock waves across the tech sector.”

The Post’s stories have brought new attention not only to the NSA but also to the broader U.S. intelligence community. Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that intelligence community, flush with billions of dollars in taxpayer money and aided by technological advances that were once unthinkable, has built a virtual surveillance empire. It has done so, however, without any effort to increase transparency and with only limited accountability.

Before reporting based on the Snowden documents, few Americans had even the most basic understanding of how the intelligence community operated. For decades, for instance, the government refused to declassify even portions of its “black budget,” which outlined basic spending priorities on intelligence.

The Post shattered that secrecy, publishing an in-depth story based on the budget summary for fiscal 2013, disclosing unprecedented details about spending levels in graphics in print and online, and following up with additional articles, including one about previously unknown offensive cyber-operations.

Lee H. Hamilton, an Indiana Democrat who chaired the House Intelligence Committee and co-chaired the commission that investigated the Sept. 11 attacks, explained the importance of transparency in The Post’s budget story: “Much of the work that the intelligence community does has a profound impact on the life of ordinary Americans,” he said. They “ought not to be excluded from the process.”

That sentiment has been the driving force behind The Post’s reporting on the Snowden documents. Its careful, exhaustive and penetrating work has given meaning to arcane government programs that, at their core, affect Americans’ lives in fundamental ways, from their security to their right to privacy. For that reason among many, we are proud to nominate The Post’s coverage of the NSA and the intelligence community for the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of fluid, connected strokes that form a name, likely the name of the person who signed the letter.