

Edward Snowden: NSA whistleblower answers reader questions

The whistleblower behind the biggest intelligence leak in NSA history answered your questions about the NSA surveillance revelations

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The NSA leaker, Edward Snowden, pictured in a Hong Kong hotel. Photograph: The Guardian

Edward Snowden Q&A | 9:00am ET

It is the interview the world's media organizations have been chasing for more than a week, but instead Edward Snowden is giving Guardian readers the exclusive.

The 29-year-old former NSA contractor and source of the Guardian's NSA files coverage will – with the help of Glenn Greenwald – take your questions today on why he revealed the NSA's top-secret surveillance of US citizens, the international storm that has ensued, and the uncertain future he now faces. Ask him anything.

Snowden, who has fled the US, told the Guardian he "does not expect to see home again", but where he'll end up has yet to be determined.

He will be online today from 11am ET/4pm BST today. An important caveat: the live chat is subject to Snowden's security concerns and also his access to a secure internet connection. It is possible that he will appear and disappear intermittently, so if it takes him a while to get through the questions, please be patient.

To participate, post your question below and recommend your favorites. As he makes his way through the thread, we'll embed his replies as posts in the live blog. You can also follow along on Twitter using the hashtag #AskSnowden.

We expect the site to experience high demand so we'll re-publish the Q&A in full after the live chat has finished.

11:07am ET

Question: GlennGreenwald

Let's begin with these:

- 1) Why did you choose Hong Kong to go to and then tell them about US hacking on their research facilities and universities?
- 2) How many sets of the documents you disclosed did you make, and how many different people have them? If anything happens to you, do they still exist?

Answer: Snowden

1) First, the US Government, just as they did with other whistleblowers, immediately and predictably destroyed any possibility of a fair trial at home, openly declaring me guilty of treason and that the disclosure of secret, criminal, and even unconstitutional acts is an unforgivable crime. That's not justice, and it would be foolish to volunteer yourself to it if you can do more good outside of prison than in it.

Second, let's be clear: I did not reveal any US operations against legitimate military targets. I pointed out where the NSA has hacked civilian infrastructure such as universities, hospitals, and private businesses because it is dangerous. These nakedly, aggressively criminal acts are wrong no matter the target. Not only that, when NSA makes a technical mistake during an exploitation operation, critical systems crash. Congress hasn't declared war on the countries - the majority of them are our allies - but without asking for public permission, NSA is running network operations against them that affect millions of innocent people. And for what? So we can have secret access to a computer in a country we're not even fighting? So we can potentially reveal a potential terrorist with the potential to kill fewer Americans than our own Police? No, the public needs to know the kinds of things a government does in its name, or the "consent of the governed" is meaningless.

2) All I can say right now is the US Government is not going to be able to cover this up by jailing or murdering me. Truth is coming, and it cannot be stopped.

11:13am ET

Question: EwenMacAskill

I should have asked you this when I saw you but never got round to it.....Why did you just not fly direct to Iceland if that is your preferred country for asylum?

Answer: Snowden

Leaving the US was an incredible risk, as NSA employees must declare their foreign travel 30 days in advance and are monitored. There was a distinct possibility I would be interdicted en route, so I had to travel with no advance booking to a country with the cultural and legal framework to allow me to work without being immediately detained. Hong Kong provided that. Iceland could be pushed harder, quicker, before the public could have a chance to make their feelings known, and I would not put that past the current US administration.

11:17am ET

Question: ActivistGal

You have said [HERE](#) that you admire both Ellsberg and Manning, but have argued that there is one important distinction between yourself and the army private...

"I carefully evaluated every single document I disclosed to ensure that each was legitimately in the public interest," he said. "There are all sorts of documents that would have made a big impact that I didn't turn over, because harming people isn't my goal. Transparency is."

Are you suggesting that Manning indiscriminately dumped secrets into the hands of Wikileaks and that he intended to harm people?

Answer: Snowden

No, I'm not. Wikileaks is a legitimate journalistic outlet and they carefully redacted all of their releases in accordance with a judgment of public interest. The unredacted release of cables was due to the failure of a partner journalist to control a passphrase. However, I understand that many media outlets used the argument that "documents were dumped" to smear Manning, and want to make it clear that it is not a valid assertion here.

11:20am ET

Question: D. Aram Mushegian II

Did you lie about your salary? What is the issue there? Why did you tell Glenn Greenwald that your salary was \$200,000 a year, when it was only \$122,000 (according to the firm that fired you.)

Answer: Snowden

I was debriefed by Glenn and his peers over a number of days, and not all of those conversations were recorded. The statement I made about earnings was that \$200,000 was my "career high" salary. I had to take pay cuts in the course of pursuing specific work. Booz was not the most I've been paid.

11:23am ET

Question: Gabrielaweb

Why did you wait to release the documents if you said you wanted to tell the world about the NSA programs since before Obama became president?

Answer: Snowden

Obama's campaign promises and election gave me faith that he would lead us toward fixing the problems he outlined in his quest for votes. Many Americans felt similarly. Unfortunately, shortly after assuming power, he closed the door on investigating systemic violations of law, deepened and expanded several abusive programs, and refused to spend the political capital to end the kind of human rights violations like we see in Guantanamo, where men still sit without charge.

11:27am ET

Question: Anthony De Rosa

- 1) Define in as much detail as you can what "direct access" means.
- 2) Can analysts listen to content of domestic calls without a warrant?

Answer: Snowden

1) More detail on how direct NSA's accesses are is coming, but in general, the reality is this: if an NSA, FBI, CIA, DIA, etc analyst has access to query raw SIGINT databases, they can enter and get results for anything they want. Phone number, email, user id, cell phone handset id (IMEI), and so on - it's all the same. The restrictions against this are policy based, not technically based, and can change at any time. Additionally, audits are cursory, incomplete, and easily fooled by fake justifications. For at least GCHQ, the number of audited queries is only 5% of those performed.

2) NSA likes to use "domestic" as a weasel word here for a number of reasons. The reality is that due to the FISA Amendments Act and its section 702 authorities, Americans' communications are collected and viewed on a daily basis on the certification of an analyst rather than a warrant. They excuse this as "incidental" collection, but at the end of the day, someone at NSA still has the content of your communications. Even in the event of "warranted" intercept, it's important to understand the intelligence community doesn't always deal with what you would consider a "real" warrant like a Police department would have to, the "warrant" is more of a templated form they fill out and send to a reliable judge with a rubber stamp.

Glenn Greenwald follow up:

When you say "someone at NSA still has the content of your communications" - what do you mean? Do you mean they have a record of it, or the actual content?

Answer: Snowden

Both. If I target for example an email address, for example under FAA 702, and that email address sent something to you, Joe America, the analyst gets it. All of it. IPs, raw data, content, headers, attachments,

everything. And it gets saved for a very long time - and can be extended further with waivers rather than warrants.

11:41am ET

Question: HaraldK

What are your thoughts on Google's and Facebook's denials? Do you think that they're honestly in the dark about PRISM, or do you think they're compelled to lie?

Perhaps this is a better question to a lawyer like Greenwald, but: If you're presented with a secret order that you're forbidding to reveal the existence of, what will they actually do if you simply refuse to comply (without revealing the order)?

Answer: Snowden

Their denials went through several revisions as it become more and more clear they were misleading and included identical, specific language across companies. As a result of these disclosures and the clout of these companies, we're finally beginning to see more transparency and better details about these programs for the first time since their inception.

They are legally compelled to comply and maintain their silence in regard to specifics of the program, but that does not comply them from ethical obligation. If for example Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and Apple refused to provide this cooperation with the Intelligence Community, what do you think the government would do? Shut them down?

11:55am ET

Question: MonaHol

Ed Snowden, I thank you for your brave service to our country.

Some skepticism exists about certain of your claims, including this:

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.

Do you stand by that, and if so, could you elaborate?

Answer: Snowden

Yes, I stand by it. US Persons do enjoy limited policy protections (and again, it's important to understand that policy protection is no protection - policy is a one-way ratchet that only loosens) and one very weak technical protection - a near-the-front-end filter at our ingestion points. The filter is constantly out of date, is set at what is euphemistically referred to as the "widest allowable aperture," and can be stripped out at any time. Even with the filter, US comms get ingested, and even more so as soon as they leave the border. Your protected communications shouldn't stop being protected communications just because of the IP they're tagged with.

More fundamentally, the "US Persons" protection in general is a distraction from the power and danger of this system. Suspicionless surveillance does not become okay simply because it's only victimizing 95% of the world instead of 100%. Our founders did not write that "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all US Persons are created equal."

12:04pm ET

Question: Spencer Ackerman

Edward, there is rampant speculation, outpacing facts, that you have or will provide classified US information to the Chinese or other governments in exchange for asylum. Have/will you?

Answer: Snowden

This is a predictable smear that I anticipated before going public, as the US media has a knee-jerk "RED CHINA!" reaction to anything involving HK or the PRC, and is intended to distract from the issue of US government misconduct. Ask yourself: if I were a Chinese spy, why wouldn't I have flown directly into Beijing? I could be living in a palace petting a phoenix by now.

12:10pm ET

Question:



Answer: Snowden

US officials say this every time there's a public discussion that could limit their authority. US officials also provide misleading or directly false assertions about the value of these programs, as they did just recently with the Zazi case, which court documents clearly show was not unveiled by PRISM.

Journalists should ask a specific question: since these programs began operation shortly after September 11th, how many terrorist attacks were prevented SOLELY by information derived from this suspicionless surveillance that could not be gained via any other source? Then ask how many individual communications were ingested to achieve that, and ask yourself if it was worth it. Bathtub falls and police officers kill more Americans than terrorism, yet we've been asked to sacrifice our most sacred rights for fear of falling victim to it.

Further, it's important to bear in mind I'm being called a traitor by men like former Vice President Dick

Cheney. This is a man who gave us the warrantless wiretapping scheme as a kind of atrocity warm-up on the way to deceitfully engineering a conflict that has killed over 4,400 and maimed nearly 32,000 Americans, as well as leaving over 100,000 Iraqis dead. Being called a traitor by Dick Cheney is the highest honor you can give an American, and the more panicked talk we hear from people like him, Feinstein, and King, the better off we all are. If they had taught a class on how to be the kind of citizen Dick Cheney worries about, I would have finished high school.

12:12pm ET

Question: Mathius1

Is encrypting my email any good at defeating the NSA surveilance? Id my data protected by standard encryption?

Answer: Snowden

Encryption works. Properly implemented strong crypto systems are one of the few things that you can rely on. Unfortunately, endpoint security is so terrifically weak that NSA can frequently find ways around it.

12:24pm ET

Question:



Answer: Snowden

Binney, Drake, Kiriakou, and Manning are all examples of how overly-harsh responses to public-interest whistle-blowing only escalate the scale, scope, and skill involved in future disclosures. Citizens with a conscience are not going to ignore wrong-doing simply because they'll be destroyed for it: the conscience forbids it. Instead, these draconian responses simply build better whistleblowers. If the Obama administration responds with an even harsher hand against me, they can be assured that they'll soon find themselves facing an equally harsh public response.

This disclosure provides Obama an opportunity to appeal for a return to sanity, constitutional policy, and the rule of law rather than men. He still has plenty of time to go down in history as the President who looked into the abyss and stepped back, rather than leaping forward into it. I would advise he personally call for a special committee to review these interception programs, repudiate the dangerous "State

Secrets" privilege, and, upon preparing to leave office, begin a tradition for all Presidents forthwith to demonstrate their respect for the law by appointing a special investigator to review the policies of their years in office for any wrongdoing. There can be no faith in government if our highest offices are excused from scrutiny - they should be setting the example of transparency.

12:28pm ET

Question: Ryan Latvaitis

What would you say to others who are in a position to leak classified information that could improve public understanding of the intelligence apparatus of the USA and its effect on civil liberties?

What evidence do you have that refutes the assertion that the NSA is unable to listen to the content of telephone calls without an explicit and defined court order from FISC?

Answer: Snowden

This country is worth dying for.

12:34pm ET

Question: AhBrightWings

My question: given the enormity of what you are facing now in terms of repercussions, can you describe the exact moment when you knew you absolutely were going to do this, no matter the fallout, and what it now feels like to be living in a post-revelation world? Or was it a series of moments that culminated in action? I think it might help other people contemplating becoming whistleblowers if they knew what the ah-ha moment was like. Again, thanks for your courage and heroism.

Answer: Snowden

I imagine everyone's experience is different, but for me, there was no single moment. It was seeing a continuing litany of lies from senior officials to Congress - and therefore the American people - and the realization that that Congress, specifically the Gang of Eight, wholly supported the lies that compelled me to act. Seeing someone in the position of James Clapper - the Director of National Intelligence - baldly lying to the public without repercussion is the evidence of a subverted democracy. The consent of the governed is not consent if it is not informed.

12:37pm ET

Follow-up from the Guardian's Spencer Ackerman:

Regarding whether you have secretly given classified information to the Chinese government, some are saying you didn't answer clearly - can you give a flat no?

Answer: Snowden

No. I have had no contact with the Chinese government. Just like with the Guardian and the Washington

Post, I only work with journalists.

12:41pm ET

Question: tikkamasala

So far are things going the way you thought they would regarding a public debate?

Answer: Snowden

Initially I was very encouraged. Unfortunately, the mainstream media now seems far more interested in what I said when I was 17 or what my girlfriend looks like rather than, say, the largest program of suspicionless surveillance in human history.

12:43pm ET

Final question from Glenn Greenwald:

Anything else you'd like to add?

Answer: Snowden

Thanks to everyone for their support, and remember that just because you are not the target of a surveillance program does not make it okay. The US Person / foreigner distinction is not a reasonable substitute for individualized suspicion, and is only applied to improve support for the program. This is the precise reason that NSA provides Congress with a special immunity to its surveillance.