Snowden: 'If I Happen to Fall out of a Window, You Can Be Sure I Was Pushed'

by Martin Knobbe and Jörg Schindler via jane - Der Spiegel *Friday, Sep 13 2019, 10:02pm*
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> In a DER SPIEGEL interview, whistleblower Edward Snowden talks about how he managed to mislead the most powerful intelligence agency in the world, about his life in Russia and about why the internet must be reinvented.

Edward Snowden

Book a suite in a luxury hotel in Moscow, send the room number encrypted to a pre-determined mobile number and then wait for a return message indicating a precise time: Meeting Edward Snowden is pretty much exactly how children imagine the grand game of espionage is played.

But then, on Monday, there he was, standing in our room on the first floor of the Hotel Metropol, as pale and boyish-looking as he was when the world first saw him in June 2013. For the last six years, he has been living in Russian exile. The U.S. has considered him to be an enemy of the state, right up there with Julian Assange, ever since he revealed, with the help of journalists, the full scope of the surveillance system operated by the National Security Agency (NSA). For quite some time, though, he remained silent about how he smuggled the secrets out of the country and what his personal motivations were.

Now, though, he has written a book about it. It will be published worldwide on September 17 under the title "Permanent Record." Ahead of publication, Snowden spent over two-and-a-half hours patiently responding to questions from DER SPIEGEL.

DER SPIEGEL: Mr. Snowden, you always said: "I am not the story." But now you've written 432 pages about yourself. Why?

Edward Snowden: Because I think it's more important than ever to explain systems of mass surveillance and mass manipulation to the public. And I can't explain how these systems came to be without explaining my role in helping to build them.

DER SPIEGEL: Wasn't it just as important four or even six years ago?

Snowden: Four years ago, Barack Obama was president. Four years ago, Boris Johnson wasn't

around and the AfD (Germany's right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany) was still kind of a joke. But now in 2019, no one is laughing. When you look around the world, when you look at the rising factionalization of society, when you see this new wave of authoritarianism sweeping over many countries: Everywhere political classes and commercial classes are realizing they can use technology to influence the world on a new scale that was not previously available. We are seeing our systems coming under attack.

DER SPIEGEL: What systems?

Snowden: The political system, the legal system, the social system. And we have the proclivity to think that if we get rid of the people we don't like, the problem is solved. We go: "Oh, it's Donald Trump. Oh, it's Boris Johnson. Oh, it's the Russians" But Donald Trump is not the problem. Donald Trump is the product of the problem.

DER SPIEGEL: A system failure.

Snowden: Yes. And that's why I'm writing this book now.

DER SPIEGEL: You write that you wanted to tell the truth. What was the biggest lie people told about you?

Snowden: Oh, God, there's a zillion of those. The biggest was ?

DER SPIEGEL: ? that you are a Russian spy?

Snowden: Not even that one, but that it was my plan to end up in Russia. Even the NSA admits that Russia wasn't my intended destination. But people repeat it because it's guilt by association. It's part of this typical warfare, that is going on at the moment. The facts don't matter. What you know is less important than what you feel. It's corrosive to democracy. Increasingly we cannot agree about things. If you can't even acknowledge what is happening, how can you have a discussion about why it is happening?

DER SPIEGEL: While writing, did you discover any truths about yourself that you didn't like?

Snowden: The most unflattering thing is to realize just how naïve and credulous I was and how that could make me into a tool of systems that would use my skills for an act of global harm. The class of which I am a part of, the global technological community, was for the longest time apolitical. We have this history of thinking: "We're going to make the world better."

DER SPIEGEL: Was that your motivation when you entered the world of espionage?

Snowden: Entering the world of espionage sounds so grand. I just saw an enormous landscape of opportunities because the government in its post-9/11 spending blitz was desperate to hire anybody who had high-level technical skills and a clearance. And I happened to have both. It was weird to be just a kid and be brought into CIA headquarters, put in charge of the entire Washington metropolitan area's network.

DER SPIEGEL: Was it not also fascinating to be able to invade pretty much everybody's life via state-sponsored hacking?

Snowden: You have to remember, in the beginning I didn't even know mass surveillance was a thing

because I worked for the CIA, which is a human intelligence organization. But when I was sent back to NSA headquarters and my very last position to directly work with a tool of mass surveillance, there was a guy who was supposed to be teaching me. And sometimes he would spin around in his chair, showing me nudes of whatever target's wife he's looking at. And he's like: "Bonus!"

DER SPIEGEL: Was there a turning point for you?

Snowden: No, it happened over years. But I remember one specific moment: In my last position I was an infrastructure analyst. There are basically two forms of mass surveillance analysts at the NSA. There are persona analysts, all they do is read people's Facebook traffic, their chats, their messaging. Infrastructure analysts are frequently used for counterhacking. We're trying to see what others have done to us, without having names or numbers. Instead of tracking people, you're tracking devices.

DER SPIEGEL: Like a public computer?

Snowden: We would, for instance, track a computer in a library and turn on the camera to actually watch the users. And you would record it and store the video file away in case it ends up being interesting later. We've got a ton of like up-nose pictures from Iraqi cybercafés. So somehow I came across a recording of this guy who was an engineer somewhere in Southeast Asia and had been applying for a job in some university that was suspected of being related to a nuclear program or a cyberattack. I don't even remember because there's always some justification. And this man had his child on his lap, which was innocently banging on the keyboard.

DER SPIEGEL: That's when you had a prick of conscience?

Snowden: I knew that I was using tools of mass surveillance. But it had been all very abstract. And suddenly you actually see a person looking at you through the screen. They don't know they're looking at you, of course. But you realize that, as people are reading, we are reading them. And these systems had gotten this far without anyone knowing. It took forever for me to develop a sense of skepticism. But once it began bit by bit, it sort of continued to develop because you're more aware. You're looking more for contradictions in what your employers tell you and what they actually do.

DER SPIEGEL: You became seriously ill and fell into depression. Have you ever had suicidal thoughts?

Snowden: No! This is important for the record. I am not now, nor have I ever been suicidal. I have a philosophical objection to the idea of suicide, and if I happen to fall out of a window, you can be sure I was pushed.

DER SPIEGEL: When you started gathering the information which would later be known as the Snowden files, you were working in Hawaii for the "Office of Information Sharing." Sounds like a joke.

Snowden: I was the sole employee of this office. I ended up in that chair by accident. After my health scare, I was trying to take it easy, rebuild my relationship, repairing all of that stuff. It gave me the mandate to have access to everything. And by sheer chance, I was collocated between a major Windows systems engineering team. They knew I had experience as a systems administrator and engineer. And they're like: Oh, you can help us out on the side. So I had just ridiculous access. It was incredible access. The NSA never realized how good I would be in that job of sharing information.

DER SPIEGEL: That was in an underground office, right?

Snowden: Yes, it was that in "the tunnel." There is this long road that cuts through the centre of Oahu. And there's just this little parking lot that turns off to the left before a massive air base, which is a closed NSA facility. And from the parking lot you go through a long tunnel into a hill, on which pineapples grow.

DER SPIEGEL: How did you smuggle the files out of this complex?

Snowden: There's a limit to what details I can go into because I might one day be in court. Not that it really matters because if I'm ever inside a courtroom, I'll spend the rest of my life in prison.

DER SPIEGEL: You write that you sometimes smuggled SD memory cards inside a Rubik's cube.

Snowden: The most important part of the Rubik's cube was actually not as a concealment device, but a distraction device. I had to get things out of that building many times. I really gave Rubik's cubes to everyone in my office as gifts and guards saw me coming and going with this Rubik's cube all the time. So I was the Rubik's cube guy. And when I came out of the tunnel with my contraband and saw one of the bored guards, I sometimes tossed the cube to him. He's like, "Oh, man, I had one of these things when I was a kid, but you know, I could never solve it. So I just pulled the stickers off." That was exactly what I had done -- but for different reasons.

DER SPIEGEL: You even put the SD cards into your mouth.

Snowden: When you're doing this for the first time, you're just going down the hallway and trying not to shake. And then, as you do it more times, you realize that it works. You realize that a metal detector won't detect an SD card because it has less metal in it than the brackets on your jeans.

DER SPIEGEL: You've read indictments against former whistleblowers to learn from their mistakes. What did you discover?

Snowden: It was to try to determine where the points of maximum danger were, where arrests are made, where and how searches are executed. I thought it was going to be man traps, where they can just lock you in there or at the exit of the tunnel. Then one night, I'm actually driving out of the parking lot, and there's an NSA police vehicle behind me. So I'm just like: Oh my God, drive carefully! But they were just leaving for the end of their day and didn't bother me.

DER SPIEGEL: How did you cope with the prospect of being treated like a traitor?

Snowden: You have to have a confidence that you're doing what you're doing for the right reasons. It's not enough to believe in something. If you actually want things to change, you have to be able to take a risk.

DER SPIEGEL: What did you do on your last day in Hawaii before you fled to Hong Kong to meet with journalists?

Snowden: It was basically all business and sadness and trying to come to terms with how not to make a mistake. Writing a note for Lindsay ...

DER SPIEGEL: ... who was your girlfriend at the time, and is now your wife. What kind of note?

Snowden: Just to say that I have to go away for work because I couldn't tell her what I was doing.

DER SPIEGEL: Why couldn't you?

Snowden: If I had told this to Lindsay, or to my family, and they didn't immediately call the FBI, the government could say they were a member of a conspiracy according to U.S. laws.

DER SPIEGEL: You never told Lindsay about your doubts and thoughts so that she could understand a bit more about what was going on with you?

Snowden: I think she could see a change in my mood. But I had to be careful. If you love someone, you don't tell them things that could put them in prison.

DER SPIEGEL: Are you expecting to return to your home country at some day?

Snowden: It seems more and more likely that someday I will be able to go back. You don't see the same allegations against me in 2019 that you did in 2013. All the claims about this tremendous harm to national security have fallen away. At the same time, the public benefits of what happened in 2013 have become more and more clear.

DER SPIEGEL: You describe your arrival in Moscow as a walk in the park. You say you refused to cooperate with the Russian intelligence agency FSB and they let you go. That sounds implausible to us.

Snowden: I think what explains the fact that the Russian government didn't hang me upside down my ankles and beat me with a shock prod until secrets came out was because everyone in the world was paying attention to it. And they didn't know what to do. They just didn't know how to handle it. I think their answer was: "Let's wait and see."

DER SPIEGEL: Do you have Russian friends?

Snowden: I try to keep a distance between myself and Russian society, and this is completely intentional. I live my life with basically the English-speaking community. I'm the president of the Freedom of the Press Foundation. And, you know, I'm an indoor cat. It doesn't matter where I am -- Moscow, Berlin, New York -- as long as I have a screen to look into.

DER SPIEGEL: So there is no outside life?

Snowden: Of course there is. I'm meeting friends in town and I'm going out to eat for dinner. I'm walking around in the park with Lindsay. I ride the metro. I ride cabs. And I'm regularly condemning the Russian government's human rights record and their refusal of free and fair elections. But I am not taking selfies in front of the Kremlin, because the U.S. government would use that to attack me and discredit all of the work that I do.

DER SPIEGEL: The whistleblower for WikiLeaks, Chelsea Manning, suffered through a long prison sentence and is back in prison right now. The founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, was imprisoned and is waiting to be extradited to the U.S. Are you next?

Snowden: I hope not. But look, if I had wanted to live a safe life, I would still be sitting in Hawaii in paradise with the woman I love collecting a huge paycheck to do almost no work. But what makes a life? It's not just who we think we are, it's the choices we make. If I can't return home to my country,

I will at least know that I made it better. And no matter what happens, that's something I can live with.

DER SPIEGEL: Western authorities accuse the Russian government on a regular basis of being one of the biggest disrupters in the digital world. Are they right?

Snowden: Russia is responsible for a lot of negative activity in the world, you can say that right and fairly. Did Russia interfere with elections? Almost certainly. But do the United States interfere in elections? Of course. They've been doing it for the last 50 years. Any country bigger than Iceland is going to interfere in every crucial election, and they're going to deny it every time, because this is what intelligence services do. This is explicitly why covert operations and influence divisions are created, and their purpose as an instrument of national power is to ask: How can we influence the world in a direction that improves our standing relative to all the other countries?

DER SPIEGEL: Are you demanding the abolishment of intelligence services?

Snowden: I think one of the biggest problems in the world of intelligence is the refusal to separate covert action, propaganda and influence from intelligence. We need intelligence. Intelligence reduces the likelihood of war. The problem is when these services become an institution of their own that is not responsive to the desires of lawmakers, policymakers and the public, but in fact is shaping it and directing it. They will always say: Look, if you know this or that, people will die. But it's almost never true.

DER SPIEGEL: What's the solution?

Snowden: We have to stop bulk collection. If you're watching everyone in the world all of the time just in case they become dangerous, that's really problematic, because it changes the character of society.

DER SPIEGEL: Is the internet broken?

Snowden: Oh, no. It works all too well -- but for the wrong people.

DER SPIEGEL: Is it possible to reinvent the internet, as internet pioneer Tim Berners-Lee has suggested?

Snowden: I respect Tim Berners-Lee greatly. He is pushing for a re-decentralization of the internet. The idea is that we can make an internet that is more individually owned without having to be incredibly difficult to maintain and administer.

DER SPIEGEL: How might that work?

Snowden: What do we have today? We have Facebook, Google, big datacenters all over the world, and these guys are remotely administering the computers. You send your requests out to Google. When you are looking for the right way, you ask Google Maps. Google processes the request and sends the results back to you. It's the same with voice recognition, Siri, Alexa and the rest. But today, phones are enormously more capable than they used to be. Requests are increasingly solvable without relying on the cloud. And as that happens, we can start to move all of these capabilities back to the edges because, after all, why does Google need to know where you're going? They don't need to know that for a maps application to function, even though they claim they do.

DER SPIEGEL: But people seem to be content with using Facebook, Google Maps and Siri?

Snowden: Look at the phone on this table. Could you tell me what it is doing while the screen is off?

DER SPIEGEL: Not really.

Snowden: Well, I can tell you with some authority that this phone is communicating hundreds or thousands of times every minute. It's contacting an ad network, analyzing your behavior, tracking your location and so on. The central problem is that it's happening invisibly. Let's assume you could simply poke an icon and all the hidden activity would stop, would you do that?

DER SPIEGEL: Of course.

Snowden: But right now, that is not an option that is made available to us. They just say: Scroll down this window, click "I agree," and you're life is getting better. And if nobody else will challenge this, I'm going to do it my goddamn self, because the primary thing right now is the visibility of this predation.

DER SPIEGEL: What was the hardest moment for you in the last six years?

Snowden: Leaving Lindsay. Because that's the real crime that I'm guilty of. I am probably the worst boyfriend in the history of the United States.

DER SPIEGEL: As a former spy, you know how to disinform and to disrupt. Why should we believe anything you write in your book?

Snowden: You shouldn't. It was a very difficult book to write, and I think I have been overly honest. In fact, the lesson you should be taking from it is: Question me, doubt me, be skeptical. But then be skeptical as well of the people who are actually in charge.

DER SPIEGEL: Mr. Snowden, thank you very much for this interview.

https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-edward-snowden-about-his-story-a-1286605.html

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