



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

By Luke Harding

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In a tour de force of investigative journalism that reads like a spy novel, award-winning *Guardian* reporter Luke Harding tells Snowden's astonishing story—from the day he left his glamorous girlfriend in Honolulu carrying a hard drive full of secrets, to the weeks of his secret-spilling in Hong Kong, to his battle for asylum and his exile in Moscow. For the first time, Harding brings together the many sources and strands of the story—touching on everything from concerns about domestic spying to the complicity of the tech sector—while also placing us in the room with Edward Snowden himself. The result is a gripping insider narrative—and a necessary and timely account of what is at stake for all of us in the new digital age.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Reads like a le Carré novel crossed with something by Kafka. . . . A fast-paced, almost novelistic narrative. . . . [The book] gives readers . . . a succinct overview of the momentous events of the past year. . . . Leave[s] readers with an acute understanding of the serious issues involved.”

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“[Snowden’s] story is one of the most compelling in the history of American espionage. . . . *The Snowden Files*, by Luke Harding, a correspondent for the Guardian newspaper, which broke the initial Snowden story, is the first to assemble the sequence of events in a single volume. The book captures the drama of Snowden’s operation in often-cinematic detail. . . . Harding has delivered a clearly written and captivating account of the Snowden leaks and their aftermath.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Engaging and lucid. . . . A gripping read. . . . Harding is a gifted writer. . . . The strength of Harding’s book is its ability to bring Snowden’s story to life while elucidating the contours of a much larger set of issues. . . . In rendering the complicated comprehensible in an entertaining way, Harding’s book provides an important public service.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“*The Snowden Files*, the first book on what British journalist Luke Harding calls ‘the biggest intelligence leak in history,’ is a readable and thorough account. The narrative is rich in newsroom details, reflecting Harding’s inside access as a correspondent for the London-based Guardian newspaper, which broke the story. . . . The writer deserves unqualified praise for fueling the debate on privacy that Snowden so hoped to ignite.”

—*Newsday*

“A super-readable, thrillerish account of the events surrounding the reporting of the documents. . . . Harding has done an amazing—and speedy—job of assembling material from a wide variety of sources and turning it into an exciting account.”

—*The London Review of Books*

“*The Snowden Files* is a one-stop shop, covering his formative years, the government jobs that would eventually give him access, and even the development of the data-gathering programs he exposed to the world. It’s as impressive in its execution as it is infuriating to revisit how much government manipulation and duplicity was involved. (Harding does an equally thorough job explaining the role played by the UK’s version of the NSA—the GCHQ—and their appallingly thuggish actions as the news stories broke.) . . . Harding is unflinchingly honest. . . . [He] ask[s] hard questions about the consequences of Snowden’s actions. While Harding is a Snowden supporter, he’s hardly a blind one.”

—*San Francisco Book Review*

“A newsworthy, must-read book about what prompted Edward Snowden to blow the whistle on his former employer, the National Security Agency, and what likely awaits him for having done so. . . . Whether you view Snowden’s act as patriotic or treasonous, this fast-paced, densely detailed book is the narrative of first resort.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

“Engaging. . . . Harding’s well-researched and compelling book is highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal*

“Recounts the incredible story of how Snowden becomes angry about the abuses he says he witnessed inside the system, resolves to pull off a stunning electronic heist by downloading the NSA’s and its partners’ most sensitive files, and gives them to journalists he has persuaded to meet him in Hong Kong. Harding captures nicely the moment when *The Guardian* pushes the button on its first Snowden story, an intense, adrenaline-filled cocktail of high-minded journalistic zeal and the sheer thrill of publishing sensitive information.”

—*Financial Times*

About the Author

Luke Harding is an award-winning foreign correspondent with the *Guardian*. He has reported from Delhi, Berlin and Moscow and has also covered wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He is the author of *Mafia State* and co-author of *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy* (2011) and *The Liar: The Fall of Jonathan Aitken* (1997), nominated for the Orwell Prize. The film rights to *WikiLeaks* were sold to Dreamworks and the film, "The Fifth Estate," came out in 2013. His books have been translated into 13 languages. Luke lives in England with his wife and their two children.

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Foreword

Edward Snowden is one of the most extraordinary whistleblowers in history. Never before has anyone scooped up en masse the top-secret files of the world’s most powerful intelligence organisations, in order to make them public. But that was what he did.

His skills are unprecedented. Until the present generation of computer nerds came along, no one realised it was possible to make off with the electronic equivalent of whole libraries full of triple-locked filing cabinets and safes – thousands of documents and millions of words.

His motives are remarkable. Snowden set out to expose the true behaviour of the US National Security Agency and its allies. On present evidence, he has no interest in money – although he could have sold his documents to foreign intelligence services for many, many millions. Nor does he have the kind of left-wing or Marxist sentiments which could lead to him being depicted as un-American. On the contrary, he is an enthusiast for the American constitution, and, like other fellow ‘hacktivists’, is a devotee of libertarian politician Ron Paul, whose views are well to the right of many Republicans.

What Snowden has revealed is important. His files show that the methods of the intelligence agencies that carry out electronic eavesdropping have spiralled out of control, largely thanks to the political panic in the US which followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

Let off the legal leash and urged to make America safe, the NSA and its British junior partner, the Government Communications Headquarters, GCHQ (secretly allied with the internet and telecommunications giants who control the hardware), have used all their technical skills to ‘master the internet’. That is their phrase, not ours. Democratic control has been vague, smothered in secrecy and plainly inadequate.

The result has been a world that is spied on. The technologies that the west has trumpeted as forces for individual freedom and democracy – Google, Skype, mobile phones, GPS, YouTube, Tor, e-commerce,

internet banking and all the rest – are turning into machines for surveillance that would have astonished George Orwell, the author of *1984*.

The *Guardian* was, I am glad to say, first among the free press to publish Snowden's revelations. We saw it as our duty to break the taboos of secrecy, with due regard, as Snowden himself wanted, to the safety of individuals and the protection of genuinely sensitive intelligence material.

I am proud we did so: fierce debate and demands for reform have been now launched across the world – in the US itself, in Germany, France, Brazil, Indonesia, Canada, Australia, even in deferential Britain. The *Guardian* was eventually forced to publish from the safety of its New York division, because of British legal harassment. I think that readers of this book might well see the value of introducing a UK equivalent to the first amendment of the US constitution, which protects the freedom of the press. It is a freedom that can protect us all.

Alan Rusbridger
Editor-in-chief, *Guardian*
London, February 2014

Prologue: The Rendezvous

Mira Hotel, Nathan Road, Hong Kong
Monday 3 June 2013

'I don't want to live in a world where everything that I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of creativity or love or friendship is recorded ...'

EDWARD SNOWDEN

It began with an email.

'I am a senior member of the intelligence community...'

No name, no job title, no details. The *Guardian* columnist Glenn Greenwald, who was based in Brazil, started to correspond with this mysterious source. Who was he? The source said nothing about himself. He was an intangible presence, an online ghost. Possibly even a fiction.

After all, how could it be real? There had never before been a big leak out of the National Security Agency. Everybody knew that America's foremost intelligence-gathering organisation, based at Fort Meade near Washington DC, was impregnable. What the NSA did was a secret. Nothing got out. 'NSA, No Such Agency', as the Beltway wits had it.

Yet this strange person did appear to have access to some remarkable top-secret documents. The source was sending Greenwald a sample of highly classified NSA files, dangling them in front of his nose. How the ghost purloined them with such apparent ease was a mystery. Assuming they were genuine, they appeared to blow the lid off a story of global importance. They suggested the White House wasn't just spying on its enemies (bad guys, al-Qaida, terrorists, the Russians), or even on its supposed allies (Germany, France), but on the communications of millions of private US citizens.

Joined with the US in this mass snooping exercise was the UK. The NSA's British counterpart, GCHQ, was based deep in the English countryside. The UK and USA had a close intelligence-sharing relationship dating

back to the second world war. To the uncharitable, Britain was the US's reliable poodle. Alarmingly, the documents revealed that the NSA was stumping up millions of dollars for British surveillance activities.

And now Greenwald was about to meet his Deep Throat. Promising further disclosures, the source was summoning him to fly from his home in Rio de Janeiro to Hong Kong, run by communist China and thousands of miles away. Greenwald felt the location was 'bizarre' and confusing: did he have a senior foreign posting there?

The rendezvous was to be in Kowloon's Mira Hotel, a chic, modern edifice in the heart of the tourist district, and a short cab ride away from the Star Ferry to Hong Kong Island. Accompanying Greenwald was Laura Poitras, also an American citizen, documentary film-maker and notable thorn in the side of the US military. She had been a matchmaker, the first to point Greenwald in the ghost's direction.

The two journalists were given meticulous instructions. They were to meet in a less-trafficked, but not entirely obscure, part of the hotel, next to a large plastic alligator. They would swap pre-agreed phrases. The source would carry a Rubik's cube. Oh, and his name was Edward Snowden.

It appeared the mystery interlocutor was an experienced spy. Perhaps one with a flair for the dramatic. Everything Greenwald knew about him pointed in one direction: that he was a grizzled veteran of the intelligence community. 'I thought he must be a pretty senior bureaucrat,' Greenwald says. Probably 60-odd, wearing a blue blazer with shiny gold buttons, receding grey hair, sensible black shoes, spectacles, a club tie ... Greenwald could visualise him already. Perhaps he was the CIA's station chief in Hong Kong; the mission was down the road.

This theory, mistaken as it was, was based on two clues: the very privileged level of top-secret access the source appeared to enjoy, and the sophistication of his political analysis. With the very first batch of secrets the source had sent a personal manifesto. It offered his motive – to reveal the extent of what he regarded as the 'suspicion-less' surveillance state. It claimed the technology to spy on people had run way beyond the law. Meaningful oversight had become impossible.

The scale of the NSA's ambition was extraordinary, the source said. Over the past decade the volume of digital information coursing between continents had increased. Exploded, even. Against this backdrop the agency had drifted from its original mission of foreign intelligence gathering. Now, it was collecting data on everybody. And storing it. This included data from both the US and abroad. The NSA was secretly engaged in nothing less than electronic mass observation. Or so the source had said.

The pair reached the alligator ahead of schedule. They sat down. They waited. Greenwald briefly pondered whether the alligator had some significance in Chinese culture. He wasn't sure. Nothing happened. The source didn't show. Strange.

If the initial meeting failed, the plan was to return later the same morning to the same anonymous corridor, running between the Mira's glitzy internal shopping mall and one of its restaurants. Greenwald and Poitras came back. They waited for a second time.

And then they saw him – a pale, spindle-limbed, nervous, preposterously young man. In Greenwald's shocked view, he was barely old enough to shave. He was dressed in a white T-shirt and jeans. In his right hand he was carrying a scrambled Rubik's cube. Had there been a mistake? 'He looked like he was 23. I was completely discombobulated. None of it made sense,' Greenwald says.

The young man – if indeed he were the source – had sent encrypted instructions as to how the initial verification would proceed:

GREENWALD: What time does the restaurant open?

THE SOURCE: At noon. But don't go there, the food sucks ...

The exchange was faintly comic. Greenwald – nervous – said his lines, struggling to keep a straight face.

Snowden then said simply: 'Follow me.' The three walked silently towards the lift. No one else was around – or, at least, nobody they could see. They rode to the first floor, and followed the cube-man to room 1014. He opened the door with his swipe card, and they entered. 'I went with it,' Greenwald says.

It was already a weird mission. But now it had acquired the feel of a wild-goose chase. This thin-framed student type was surely too callow to have access to super-sensitive material? Optimistically, Greenwald speculated that possibly he was the son of the source, or his personal assistant. If not, then the encounter was a waste of time, a hoax of Jules Verne proportions.

Poitras, too, had been secretly communicating with the source for four months. She felt she knew him – or at least the online version of him. She was also struggling to adjust. 'I nearly fainted when I saw how old he was. It took me 24 hours to rewire my brain.'

Over the course of the day, however, Snowden told his story. He was, he said, a 29-year-old contractor with the National Security Agency. He had been based at the NSA's regional operations centre in Kunia on the Pacific island of Hawaii. Two weeks ago he had quit his job, effectively abandoned and bid farewell to his girlfriend, and secretly boarded a flight to Hong Kong. He had taken with him four laptops.

The laptops were heavily encrypted. But from them Snowden had access to documents taken from NSA and GCHQ's internal servers. Tens of thousands of documents, in fact. Most were stamped 'Top Secret'. Some were marked 'Top Secret Strap 1' – the British higher tier of super-classification for intercept material – or even 'Strap 2', which was almost as secret as you could get. No one – apart from a restricted circle of security officials – had ever seen documents of this kind before. What he was carrying, Snowden indicated, was the biggest intelligence leak in history.

Greenwald noticed the accumulated debris of many days of room service – trays, abandoned bowls of noodles, dirty cutlery. Snowden said he had ventured out just three times since checking into the Mira under his own name a fortnight earlier. He sat on the bed as Greenwald bombarded him with questions: where did you work, who was your boss in the CIA, why? Greenwald's credibility was on the line. So was that of his editors at the *Guardian*. Yet if Snowden were genuine, at any moment a CIA SWAT team could burst into the room, confiscate his laptops, and drag him away.

Snowden, they began to feel certain, was no fake. His information could well be real. And his reasons for becoming a whistleblower were cogent, too. His job as a systems administrator meant – he explained lucidly, persuasively, coolly – that he had a rare overview of the NSA's extraordinary surveillance capacities, that he could see the dark places where the agency was going.

The NSA could bug 'anyone', from the president downwards, he said. In theory the spy agency was supposed to collect only signals intelligence on foreign targets, known as SIGINT. In practice this was a joke, Snowden told Greenwald: it was already hoovering up metadata from millions of Americans. Phone

records, email headers, subject lines, seized without acknowledgement or consent. From this you could construct a complete electronic narrative of an individual's life – their friends, their lovers, their joys, their sorrows.

Together with GCHQ, the NSA had secretly attached intercepts to the undersea fibre-optic cables that ringed the world. This allowed the US and UK to read much of the globe's communications. Secret courts were compelling telecoms providers to hand over data. What's more, pretty much all of Silicon Valley was involved with the NSA, Snowden said – Google, Microsoft, Facebook, even Steve Jobs's Apple. The NSA claimed it had 'direct access' to the tech giants' servers.

While giving themselves unprecedented surveillance powers, the US intelligence community was concealing the truth about its activities, Snowden said. If James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, had deliberately lied to Congress about the NSA's programs, he had committed a felony. The NSA was flagrantly violating the US constitution and the right to privacy. It had even put secret back doors into online encryption software – used to make secure bank payments – weakening the system for everybody.

As Snowden told the story, the NSA's behavior seemed culled from 20th-century dystopian fiction. It was recognisable from the writings of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell. But the NSA's ultimate goal seemed to go even further: to collect everything from everybody, everywhere and to store it indefinitely. It signalled a turning point. It looked like the extirpation of privacy. The spy agencies had hijacked the internet – once a platform for individuality and self-expression. Snowden used the word 'panopticon'. This was a significant coinage by the 18th-century British philosopher and codifier Jeremy Bentham. It described an ingenious circular jail where the warders could see the prisoners at all times, without their knowing if they were being observed.

And this, Snowden asserted, was why he had decided to go public. To throw away his life and career. He told Greenwald he didn't want to live in a world 'where everything that I say, everything that I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of love or friendship is recorded'.

Over the coming weeks, Snowden's claims would ignite an epochal debate. They would enrage the White House and Downing Street. And they would cause international havoc, as Snowden slipped out of Hong Kong, attempted to gain asylum in Latin America, and got stuck in Vladimir Putin's Moscow.

In America and Europe (though not at first in the Britain of James Bond), there was a spirited argument about the right balance between security and civil liberties, between freedom of speech and privacy. Despite the febrile polarisation of US politics, right-wing libertarians and left-wing Democrats joined together to support Snowden. Even President Obama conceded the debate was overdue and reform was required. Though this didn't stop US authorities from cancelling Snowden's passport, charging him with espionage and demanding his return from Russia.

The fight to publish Snowden's story was to present the journalists themselves with dramatic problems – legal, logistical, editorial. It pitted a famous newspaper, its global website and a few media allies against some of the most powerful people on the planet. And it would lead to the destruction of the *Guardian's* computer hard drives in an underground basement, watched over by two British GCHQ boffins. The machine-smashing was to be a particularly surreal episode in the history of western journalism and its battles against the state.

As he sat in his Hong Kong hotel room, throwing the switch to launch all this, Snowden was calm. According to Greenwald, he was convinced of the rightness of his actions, intellectually, emotionally and

psychologically. In the aftermath of his leaks, Snowden recognised imprisonment would surely follow. But during that momentous summer he radiated a sense of tranquility and equanimity. He had reached a rock-like place of inner certainty. Here, nothing could touch him.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Warren Damron:

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Gerald Rountree:

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