

Interview with Edward Snowden 'There Is Still Hope - Even for Me'

In an interview, whistleblower Edward Snowden discusses his life in Russia, the power of the intelligence apparatuses and how he will continue his battle against all-encompassing surveillance by governments.

Interview Conducted by *Martin Knobbe* ▾ and *Jörg Schindler* ▾



Edward Snowden: 'The NSA has a useful role in society when it limits itself.'

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The journey to interview Edward Snowden is a long one. For DER SPIEGEL, it began over a year ago, with numerous conversations with his lawyers in New York and Berlin. It ended two weeks ago on a Wednesday in a Moscow hotel suite with a view over Red Square.

The 34-year-old former United States intelligence worker, who exposed the global surveillance system deployed by the National Security Agency (NSA), lives somewhere in the Russian capital. Since blowing the whistle, he has been an enemy of the state in his home country. He has become an icon for defenders of civil liberties and also a man on the run. The journey to Snowden almost took even longer, when he came down with a bad cold and nearly had to delay the interview. In the end, Snowden turned up -- coming across as modest and astoundingly optimistic in an interview that lasted more than three hours.

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DER SPIEGEL: Mr. Snowden, four years ago, you appeared in a video from a hotel room in Hong Kong. It was the beginning of the biggest leak of intelligence data in history. Today, we are sitting in a hotel room

in Moscow. You are not able to leave Russia because the United States government has issued a warrant for your arrest. Meanwhile, the intelligence services' global surveillance machine is still running, probably faster than ever. Was it all really worth it?

Snowden: The answer is yes. Look at what my goals were. I wasn't trying to change the laws or slow down the machine. Maybe I should have. My critics say that I was not revolutionary enough. But they forget that I am a product of the system. I worked those desks, I know those people and I still have some faith in them, that the services can be reformed

DER SPIEGEL: But those people see you as their biggest enemy today.

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Snowden: My personal battle was not to burn down the NSA or the CIA. I even think they actually do have a useful role in society when they limit themselves to the truly important threats that we face and when they use their least intrusive means. We don't drop atomic bombs on flies that land on the dinner table. Everybody gets this except intelligence agencies.

DER SPIEGEL: What did you achieve?

Snowden: Since summer 2013, the public has known what was until then forbidden knowledge. That the U.S. government can get everything out of your Gmail account and they don't even need a warrant to do it if you are not an American but, say, a German. You are not allowed to discriminate between your citizens and other peoples' citizens when we are talking about the balance of basic rights. But increasingly more countries, not only the U.S., are doing this. I wanted to give the public a chance to decide where the line should be.

DER SPIEGEL: You have called mass surveillance a violation of the law. But as far as we know, so far not a single person responsible is sitting in jail.

Snowden: That is why I call it the secret law. These NSA activities were illegal. In a just world, the people who were authorizing these programs would actually be sitting in jail today. We are talking, for example, about the countless violations found and confirmed by a parliamentary inquiry of Germany's G10 law ...

DER SPIEGEL: ... which limits the intelligence services' right to access a person's phone calls or emails in instances covered by the mail and communications secrecy laws.

Snowden: But rather than punishment, rather than resignations, rather than changing these spying activities, all we got was a new law saying this is all OK.

DER SPIEGEL: Were you surprised when you learned that Germany's foreign intelligence agency, the BND, was surveilling "friends" like the Israeli prime minister or had 4,000 "selectors" directed at U.S. targets?

Snowden: I was disappointed, not surprised. It is actually the same in France as in Germany and all these other countries. All the governments just want to have more power when it comes to economic espionage, diplomatic manipulation and political influence.

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DER SPIEGEL: The main purpose of surveillance is to prevent attacks against our countries. In principle, there's nothing wrong with that.

Snowden: We don't have any proof that these mass surveillance programs are stopping terrorist attacks. But if you can't show us that cells have been uncovered thanks to these measures, and yet you say these are absolutely necessary, why is that? Because they are super interesting for other areas of spying. Like tapping a phone call between Kofi Annan and Hillary Clinton ...

DER SPIEGEL: ... which the BND did.

Snowden: This recording probably did not help to stop too many terrorist attacks.

DER SPIEGEL: So, what's the difference between the BND and the NSA?

Snowden: The most important difference is budget. How much play money do they have to throw around the sandbox? That really dictates the sort of capabilities. But Germany has tremendous capabilities because it is so centrally located and you sit on so many favorable geographic points, like the internet nexus DE-CIX in Frankfurt. It is like shooting fish in a barrel. It doesn't actually matter how bad you are, doesn't matter how poor you are, if all you have to do is dip a glass in the barrel and you come up with a fish.

DER SPIEGEL: The German authorities claim they would be deaf and blind without the NSA or CIA.

Snowden: Sure, Germany may not be the U.S. splashing out around \$70 billion per year on intelligence programs. But Germany is a very wealthy country. In 2013, they spent around a half-billion euros on the BND. Now it is something over 300 million euros more. When you combine that with the fact that the German public education system is already one of the best in the world, you clearly have a very talented technical base in Germany.

DER SPIEGEL: In Berlin, the NSA inquiry committee in parliament spent three-and-a-half years probing the cooperation between the NSA and BND. The final report says that you weren't called as a witness as originally planned because, among other reasons, getting asylum in Germany was your condition.

Snowden: It's a lie. I never at any time demanded asylum as a condition. I don't think we have anything that even used the word asylum in it.

DER SPIEGEL: Then how would you explain the fact that it was reported everywhere?

Snowden: Politics. The parties comprising the inquiry majority took a public position that they would block my entry into Germany to appease the White House. But as the revelations of unjustified surveillance against people around the world, including Germans, piled up over the following months, this position became increasingly unpopular and made an inquiry unavoidable. At this point, political orthodoxies incentivized the majority to devise a way to prevent the inquiry from uncovering anything too embarrassing, while simultaneously demonstrating promises to the White House are Germany's highest law. No matter what you might think of them, politicians aren't stupid, and I suspect they knew the only justification for such an unappealing result was to claim they had no choice. So they invent an asylum demand. Historians may not be impressed, but it works for the moment. And all too often in today's politics, 'for the moment' is all that matters.

DER SPIEGEL: What would the committee have learned from you? The documents you provided had already been published.

Snowden: I know, they think I was only a system administrator. It's true I was a system administrator at many points in my career, but that was not all I did. In my last position in Hawaii, I was literally using XKeyscore all day long to track Chinese hackers. XKeyscore was the program the Germans received from the NSA and used as well.

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DER SPIEGEL: You read parts of the final report on the inquiry. What is your opinion?

Snowden: We all had so much hope that this would be a reliable product, that this would be a real investigation. But the report of the majority parties is a disappointment. It was like a creative writing exercise for them. The German public was angry about their surveillance policies, so they needed to do something about it. But not that which I think the opposition heroically tried to do, which was to find out what's actually happening, establish some accountability and ultimately shape the activities of these intelligence services to make them comport with the law. Instead, these politicians went: Let's make the law looser so they don't break it anymore.

DER SPIEGEL: We hear a lot of resignation.

Snowden: Not at all. I think we have made much progress as a society -- we are using math and science to limit these abuses by governments.

DER SPIEGEL: You are talking about the encryption of our communications.

Snowden: Before he retired, former U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said that I had accelerated the adoption of an encryption by seven years. He meant it as an insult, but I took it as a kind of a compliment. We see dynamics such as the adaptation of end-to-end encryption that is turned on by default -- you don't even have to think about it. Prior to 2013, most news sites didn't even know what encryption was. Now almost every serious editorial staff has the ability to encrypt.

DER SPIEGEL: But terrorists use encryption as well.

Snowden: When you have three terrorists in a city, one uses a laptop and gets hit by a drone, the other uses a cell phone and gets hit by a drone. The guy who only sends messages via his cousin as a courier on a motorbike that are written on paper never gets hit by a drone. They can put two and two together really quickly. They don't need DER SPIEGEL, they don't need me to tell them what works and what doesn't.

DER SPIEGEL: Would you at least concede that some of the information that got published helped criminals and rogue states in that they learned how intelligence agencies do their work?

Snowden: No, this is very much a comfortable allegation for governments. Their basis for classifying this information is to say it will cause harm if it is revealed. I have sent lunch plans from the cafeteria that are classified as top secret. I'm not kidding.

DER SPIEGEL: But the files also included real secrets, programs and techniques.

Snowden: I came forward in 2013. We are now in 2017 and they have never shown any harm despite being asked by Congress and despite having spent more than two years investigating it. Even Michael Rodgers, the director of the NSA, said: The sky isn't falling, we are still doing our work. Yes, it was disruptive, but life goes on.

DER SPIEGEL: Why aren't there more whistleblowers like you? Are they afraid they'll wind up in Russia?

Snowden: There is a pessimistic answer to this. People feel the consequences are too severe if they get caught. But there is an optimistic one, too. Events of 2013 put these intelligence services on notice -- that they could be next.

DER SPIEGEL: We believe the pessimistic version is closer to reality.

Snowden: I think it is a mix of both. Just look at the Vault7 files that WikiLeaks has published. This was an unprecedented disclosure of very sensitive information, clearly from within the CIA's own servers. There haven't been any arrests yet and it has been months. There are two things to learn from that: Firstly, it's obviously still pretty easy to expose the intelligence services. And secondly, since this was clearly not my doing, there are others out there.

DER SPIEGEL: The files you leaked are a few years old now, as are the measures they described. Do they have anything more than historical value today?

Snowden: The system is pretty much the same. It's only if you understand the basic mechanism that is being exploited to spy on innocent people that you can start to correct it. So, the challenge is what comes next and how to deal with this.

DER SPIEGEL: And? What comes next?

Snowden: Governments are realizing that mass surveillance isn't really effective. They are moving from mass surveillance to what intelligence agencies are hoping will be their new panacea: hacking. But it is mass hacking and not really targeted hacking as they usually say. We have seen it in these darknet market takedowns and other joint operations by the EU and U.S.

DER SPIEGEL: So, it's all about cracking encryption now?

Snowden: Not cracking encryption -- the agencies are trying to bypass the encryption. They are looking for weak points on the device you use to see what you are writing before you encrypt your message. What they actually do is take over a website, infect it with a malicious software, and when you visit that website because, for example, you received a link, you get hacked. Then they own your computer or your phone. You paid for it, but they use it. I think this is far better than mass surveillance.

DER SPIEGEL: Why?

Snowden: Mass surveillance was incredibly cheap. It operates sort of freely, invisibly, constantly -- and there was no real defense other than using encryption schemes. Attacking these browsers, phones and computers is very much an expensive proposition.

DER SPIEGEL: But you just said yourself that a lack of money isn't the main problem for intelligence services.

Snowden: But even they can't use this to spy on everyone in the world all the time. The new approach makes life harder for the intelligence agencies in a good way. It creates a natural discipline that forces them to decide: Is this person I want to spy on really worth the cost? There was, for instance, this jihadi group that used an encryption

package called Mujahedeen Secrets. That is the kind of thing that they should go after because if you are installing Mujahedeen Secrets, you are probably part of the mujahedeen, right?

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