Five hours with Edward Snowden

6 NOVEMBER, 2015

Suddenly he opens the door. DN's Lena Sundström and Lotta Härdelin had a unique meeting with the whistleblower who has fans all over the world but risks lifetime imprisonment in the home country he once tried to save.

Text Lena Sundström
Foto Lotta Härdelin

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Talking to room service, Edward Snowden covers the mouth piece of the phone and shouts across the room.

– How would you like your steak?

– Medium rare, I answer.

– And to drink?

– Water.

– Still or sparkling?

Sparkling.

– Wait.

He laughs.

– There's actually more. Vegetables or mashed potatoes?

– Vegetables.

The choice of two left shoes of the former Soviet Union is, since decades, history in Russia. On my way here, I passed Cyrillic letters that were perfectly readable, even without any knowledge of Russian. Brands like McDonald's, Starbucks, World Class Gym, Michael Kors and United Colors of Benetton are like a universal code language, making everything understandable, whether the signs are in Moscow, Stockholm, San Francisco or Bangkok. If you think you can measure totalitarian tendencies, freedom of speech and rule of law in a country, by the standard of the cars, the number of restaurants or Stella McCartney's latest spring collection, you're fooling yourself.

Poverty shows. Democratic deficit doesn't.

I watch the traffic thickening through my hotel room window; if this is possible in a city, where the traffic constantly is so congested that you're faster off walking.

Not too long ago, I was sitting with the photographer, Lotta Härdelin, at our established meeting point, where our contact would pick us up, and take us further, wondering if something was wrong.

For months, I had emailed encrypted messages back and forth with contacts and lawyers.

We finally got a date and a message telling us to go to Moscow, where further instructions would follow.

Now we're here, in a dim Russian hotel lobby. There's no plan B and everything feels uncertain and unpredictable. The security measures, concern and need for total control of the past weeks have now been reduced to waiting and quiet powerlessness in a cream-colored armchair.

Facts. Edward Joseph Snowden

Born: June 21, 1983 (32

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armenian?

In the morning, our contact told us to be at a hotel, pointed out to us on a big Moscow map at 12:45 PM. We were told to quietly signal our understanding.

Now we fear that we agreed to it too fast.

– Are you sure this is the spot he pointed out?

12:45 turns into 1:00 that turns into 1:25.

What if we're at the wrong place?

After a while, we pick up the map and start looking for buildings and hotels that could be mixed up with the place we're at. We left our cell phones at our hotel, just as instructed, as did our contact. Neither of us can reach the other if something has gone wrong, and there's no plan B.

The lobby is full of Russian military. Men boasting a low center of gravity step in and out of the lifts, ranks showing on their chests and in their eyes.

After a while, we order tea and croissants to try to blend in with the crowd. Everywhere we believe we see mysterious hotel staff and guests who don't blend in. As if we've ended up in a Roy Andersson movie where you don't know if the extras are actors or the actors are extras.

A woman is pointing a video camera in our direction. A man standing by a pillar is talking on his cell phone for a suspiciously long time.

We laugh, telling each other we're being paranoid.

Then our contact finally appears.

The contrast when standing outside the actual meeting point surprises me. Everything suddenly makes complete sense. Any concern that the interview would be cancelled; that something would happen – broken bones, vomiting disease, visa problems – seems to have vanished.

Edward Snowden opens the door. I sit down on the couch. In a strange kind of way, this feels like a place you could drop by any Wednesday to talk.

Reality is of course less simple.

Ever since Edward Snowden in June 2013 went public as the whistleblower behind the leaked classified documents that revealed the US mass surveillance of its own citizens, he has been one of the world's most hunted men. Back in the US he risks a lifelong sentence. Russia, which only should have been a stopover on his way to Cuba, is so far the only country that has granted him asylum. This made the country the only safe place in the world for him.

Two and a half years have passed. Edward Snowden – who has become a symbol of freedom of speech, an icon, a face without a body talking on giant screens through links – greets us with a disarming smile and a notebook in his hand.

He immediately asks what we want to eat. And looks so relaxed in his black shirt and three-piece suit that he makes it feel like something he would go jogging in. If he felt like it.

How are you doing?

He smiles.

– It's hard for me to talk about what it's like, because anything I say is going to be used by US critics. If I say good things about Russia, you know, like "it's not hell", then they'll be like "he fell in love with the Kremlin" or something like that. If I say something terrible, then it's

the same thing. Then they'll go "oh, he hates it in Russia, you know he's miserable."

– So I try not to talk about it in general.

I say that I've heard that he lives like an indoor cat in Russia.

On the other hand, you can of course live like an indoor cat in Hawaii as well, where you used to live. How much has your life changed?

– The indoor cat thing is voluntary, that's the way I've always lived. In Hawaii, occasionally, my girlfriend would drag me out of the house, into the beautiful paradise that it was. But generally, I spend most of my time in my head or on the internet. I'm not the type of person who's always going out to go somewhere. Instead I'd rather have a conversation or think or plan or design. People have different personalities and that's the sort of life I lived. It's actually extraordinary... because of my lifestyle, because of my involvement on the internet I'm working more now, than I've ever done before. And I think I have a greater impact.

– Yes of course I lost things, yes I paid a price: I can't go home.

Listen (26 sec)

What do you miss the most?

– My family. Of course. As it is for everybody. But I'm very comfortable with the choices I've made. I can still see my family when they come here to visit. I can still communicate with anyone anywhere. I regularly speak at the most prestigious universities in the United States for students who really care about these issues.

Listen (01:04 min)

– It used to be, when people were pressed into exile, they'd lose their connections, they'd lose their significance, they'd lose their influence in the political debate.That's why exile, as a strategy of response to political dissent, always has been so popular, whether it was the Soviet Union deporting authors they didn't like or American dissidents going to Cuba. But technology is changing that. Exile as, a strategy, is beginning to fail.

– This is something that's encouraging and something that really guides my future work. How can I help activists and dissidents who have something to say, something to contribute to the direction of their societies? To surmount these walls of opposition and say it doesn't matter where I am, this voice will be heard. And I think there is something extraordinarily powerful in that, that's really started to threaten governments.

On September 29th this year, he posted his first tweet: "Can you hear me now?"And people could. Edward Snowden reached 1.5 million followers in no time. He only follows one himself – the NSA's official account. His grim humor shines through in many of his tweets.

Edward Snowden
@Snowden

Följ

Can you hear me now?

18:00 - 29 sep 2015

124 608 123 636

One of the first ones reads ”Thanks for the welcome. And now we’ve got water on Mars! Do you think they check passports at the border? Asking for a friend.” When the former NSA and CIA Director, Michael Hayden, implied that Snowden would be killed in Moscow, Snowden wrote ”He used to be more fun” and posted a picture of the two of them smiling together.

Edward Snowden
@Snowden

Följ

Disappointed that Michael Hayden is implying I'll be killed in Moscow. He used to be more fun.wired.com/2014/08/edward…

20:09 - 6 okt 2015

3 635 6 126

At the same time, he has a clear passion stretching beyond mass surveillance, to issues of democracy on a more general level. After the attack in Kunduz in October, when the US bombed a hospital in Afghanistan, he made continuous comments – relaying information that

"Not a single member of our staff reported any fighting inside the hospital compound prior to the US airstrike", tweeting screenshots quoting the Geneva Convention and stating the need for an independent investigation.

Edward Snowden says that the most important aspect of social media is that you can get things out directly.

– You can take the story and simply quote the relevant part, simply signaling if the media didn't headline it appropriately or if someone misleads the public intentionally for a political advantage. You can get the facts out there. I think that is actually valuable.

Do you live on American or Russian time here in Moscow?

– Two nights ago, I didn't go to bed until 4:30 in the morning. A couple of days before that, I went to bed at like 9:30 in the morning. I've been really busy these last couple of months, working with organizations like the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union. Almost everything I do, all my associations, all my work is in English, which holds me back from trying to learn Russian. And when they're eight hours off, or ten hours off, it's hard. When they want you to speak at 9PM US Eastern standard time, that's 4AM in Russia. But I'm a night owl in general. I like the night, it's quiet, there's not that much traffic. It's easier to live.

Edward Snowden's first tweet alluded to a well-known commercial for the US telecom giant Verizon, where a man in different environments, a cell phone to his ear, is asking if he can be heard. The first Snowden story, published in June 2013, showed that the NSA had access to all of Verizon's data on their customers.

Later, people have merged the Verizon commercial with another well-known commercial on the internet. The Verizon guy asking: "Can you hear me now?" And Obama answering: "Yes we can."

Watch

Barack Obama 2007.

Edward Snowden was once one of those who believed in Barack Obama's promises of change. Obama ran for president promising "the most transparent administration in history". He celebrated whistleblowers as "noble" and "courageous", declaring that there would be no more spying on "American citizens who're not suspected of a crime, no more tracking of citizens who do no more than protest a misguided war, no more ignoring the law when it's inconvenient". Supported by the Espionage Act, he has since chased leaks with newfound strength, and during the Obama administration a total of eight people have been prosecuted – i.e. far more than any other administration in the history of the United States.

Do you get to vote?

Edward Snowden laughs.

– Well we'll find out. I'll definitely be trying!

It's about the symbolic value, he explains.

– I'll send them my vote by mail. It's not like it will count in a meaningful way because such

a small portion of the votes come by mail. But that's not the point; the point is the expression of it.

Have you decided who you will vote for?

– No, not yet.

Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump?

– Haha. If ... No. I shouldn't say that, it's too inflammatory.

I ask if he saw the Democratic presidential candidate debate the other night. Senator Bernie Sanders defended Edward Snowden, saying he had played an important role in spreading knowledge to the American people. Hilary Clinton, however, claimed he had violated American law and that he had stolen important information that had "fallen into the wrong hands".

Watch

CNN debate, october 13 2015.

That's also what Edward Snowden's critics point out. That the documents might have ended up with the Russian or the Chinese, and that he should come home to the US and be brought to justice for what he's done, rather than live in a country like Russia, becoming dependent on Putin. That he should have taken the fight at home, instead of running away.

Edward Snowden himself has said he knows exactly how many documents he was carrying when he flew from Hong Kong to Moscow: Zero. To avoid any risk, he had already handed over all the material to the journalists who published the revelations.

Facts. The Snowden documents: 5 dates

– I did see the debate live. It was actually extraordinarily encouraging. In 2013, they were calling for me to be hanged. They were using the word "traitor" and things like "blood on your hands". Nobody on the stage, as far as I know, used the word traitor now. In just two years, that's an extraordinary change.

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He says that it took 30 years for that to happen to Daniel Ellsberg, one of the most famous whistleblowers of all times, who leaked secret documents about the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

Following Snowden's revelations, President Barack Obama has welcomed the debate on surveillance, but has also said that the publications of the documents have "been damaging to the United States and our intelligence

Watch

capabilities, there were ways for us to have this conversation without that damage." In the Democratic presidential candidate debate, Hillary Clinton expressed herself in the same way, about an American system with a tradition of protecting whistleblowers.

Barack Obama 2013.

– The American tradition in regard to whistleblowers is to try to bury them, Edward Snowden says.

– But Hillary Clinton was roundly shamed for that in the press. They said, legally she's wrong, historically she's wrong and she's wrong even rhetorically, because everybody knows that this isn't the case.

Whistleblowers like Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg and Chelsea Manning – who supplied WikiLeaks with secret documents – all bear witness to this. But there are more.

Read more

PBS interviews Thomas Drake in 2013.

In 2007, FBI agents carried out so-called morning raids at the homes of people who worked or had worked at the NSA, and had tried to blow the whistle on a mass surveillance program they felt had gotten out of control. One man was dragged out of the shower in his home, a gun to his head, in front of his family. Another man opened his door and soon had the house full of black-clad agents in Kevlar vests searching his home until late at night. The home of Thomas Drake, a senior executive at the NSA, was searched, his passport was cancelled and he lived under the threat of 35 years imprisonment for four years, prosecuted under the Espionage Act. He lost his job, his pension and spent everything he owned on his defense lawyer. Today he works at an Apple store in Maryland and has been able to establish that the only person, who was investigated and prosecuted, after trying to talk to his superiors about the mass surveillance, was himself.

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The fourth amendment of the American Constitution.

These were people who had dedicated their lives to the US Government. Many of them had worked with intelligence for the NSA for over 30 years. What they protested against was that the US had monitored its own citizens, despite the fact that the US Constitution clearly states that all Americans have the right "to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches".

Also people outside the NSA tried to talk about what was going on. A lawyer at the Department of Justice one day sneaked out at lunch, to call a New York Times reporter from a pay phone in the subway. After a phone call from the FBI, he resigned.

A woman at the Intelligence Committee of the House of Representatives had her house raided by the FBI at six o'clock in the morning, because she'd asked questions about the program.

The recurring problem: there were no documents, there was no evidence.

Edward Snowden has previously talked about the importance of NSA Director, Thomas Drake.

You've said that if it hadn't been for Thomas Drake...

– ...there couldn't be an Edward Snowden. He followed every rule when he tried to raise the alarm. We see this in game theory, in sociological studies. Basically, each time you play a round of a game, people learn a little bit about it. They change their strategy and respond to it, so the way people play round ten is very different from round one.

And you learned from Drake...

– And even from Manning. I learned a lot from how the government responded. What happens when you're required to report violations of a law to those who ordered those violations of the law?

Was it the mass surveillance or the lies about it that upset you the most?

– In early 2013, when I still had the chance to change my mind, I saw James Clapper (Director of National Intelligence) raise his hand and swear to tell the truth: "Does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?" "No sir." "It does not?" "Not wittingly."

Watch

James Clapper 2013.

– Telling a lie under those circumstances is a felony.

The year before, Congress had questioned NSA Director Keith Alexander. His answers were the same. Does the NSA routinely intercept American citizens' emails? No. Does the NSA intercept Americans' cell phone conversations? No. Google searches? No. Text messages? No. Amazon.com orders? No. Bank records? No.

Edward Snowden not only knew they were lying, but also that the scope was much larger than anyone could imagine. During a 30 day period, the NSA intercepted more than three billion individual conversations just from American communication systems. 97 billion emails and 124 billion phone calls worldwide, in just one month's time.

Watch

Keith Alexander 2012.

At his own desk, Edward Snowden could listen in on anyone – ordinary people, someone's accountant, a federal

judge – as long as he had a private email address.

– Being a whistleblower is not about who you are; it's about what you've seen. Whistleblowers are elected by circumstance, anybody can do it. It's about people who watch, who think, and who eventually respond. And it takes a number of years. When I first saw things, I really didn't believe them. I grew up in the shadow of the NSA, my mother worked for the federal government, my father and my grandfather worked for the military. I couldn't believe the government would lie to us. But eventually the evidence becomes so great that you can't ignore it.

– When I was at the NSA, talking to my peers, we were seeing the Thomas Drake case in the media, and...

You talked about it at work?

– Yeah, you know, "it sucks to be *that* guy". When eventually I wanted to do something about it – I knew these programs were wrong and I was thinking about coming forward – I wanted to make sure I wasn't a crazy person. So I showed my co-workers and my supervisors documents for example stating that we were intercepting more about Americans in the United States than we were about Russians in Russia – and said that this doesn't make sense.

And you felt safe talking about it at work?

– Yeah, because everybody has their shoptalks. It's not like anybody at the NSA is a villain. No one's sitting there thinking "how can I destroy democracy?" They're good people doing bad things for what they believe is a good reason. They think the end justifies the means.

So there isn't a silent culture?

– There is and there's not. When you talk to your co-workers you talk to them in confidence, in trust. You're alone with them. You say: "What do you think about this? Do you think this is right? This is crazy." But what you see is constrained. You don't know what's going on in the office next to yours. It's an unlabelled office. It's got letters and numbers on it. And you don't think about how your piece fits into the larger picture.

– By virtue of my position I had a clearance which was called PRIVAC – privileged access – that meant that I could see across all these boundaries. I could see the whole picture. I could see the whole picture. Most people couldn't. So when I talked to them about that, they were concerned, but at the same time they would immediately go: "Don't tell anybody about this. You know what happens to guys like that. You say something about this and they're going to destroy you."

When Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the "Pentagon Papers" in 1971, decided to become a whistleblower, he secretly had to smuggle 7,000 pages of classified material out of his office. Night after night, he copied page after page on a

Read more

"The Pentagon Papers" leaked by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971

office. Night after night, he copied page after page on a Xerox machine which could only, slowly, manage one page at a time. To save time, Ellsberg stopped folding down the lid after a while, wondering whether he would go blind or to prison first.

1971.

Edward Snowden didn't need to photocopy his documents. Certain things have become easier over the years, while other things are just as hard. The risk of being caught. And the following demonizing campaigns.

Daniel Ellsberg was so worried his children would hate him; he felt he had to try to explain why he did what he was doing.

Edward Snowden laughs, nodding.

– Yeah, I think his son actually helped him Xerox. But, to the best of my knowledge, you can't charge a little child of espionage.

He says it would have been different if he'd told his girlfriend or his family. That would have made them accomplices. So all he did was leave a note in the house on Elue Street in Hawaii, where he lived with his girlfriend, saying he would be away for work.

– That's the problem; that you can't tell them. I had everything set up in such a way that my family could cut ties with me and condemn me if things went poorly. And I was okay with that; I was prepared to accept that.

Blowing the whistle was something he did for his own sake, he says. He's never seen it as a self-sacrificing act.

– I simply saw something and I realized that you have to believe in something. And if you believe in something, you have to be able to stand for it. I don't like the ideology of self-sacrifice. If a society is asking people to put themselves on fire, it's very soon going to find itself without volunteers. I don't believe in altruism. That can be a good thing in some cases, but not in the extreme cases. This was something that made me feel good, that I could be proud of.

Listen (8 sec)

All your life.

– Yes, even if life would be cut short. I reject that kind of labelling because it leads to a "waiting for Superman" way of thinking. People go "we need a hero but it's not me" and "these people did great things, but God I wish someone would do something about that".

My girlfriend actually understood, because she said ”That’s why I fell in love with you”. But she was certainly upset with me. For good reasons.

On May 20, 2013, he packed four laptops and such a large number of classified documents that no one still knows exactly how many. The only thing we can be sure of, is that the British authorities’ guess was too low when they, after the revelations, went to The Guardian saying: ”We are pretty aware of what you have got… We believe you have about 30 to 40 documents. We are worried about their security”.

Not even the NSA currently knows how many documents we’re talking about. Estimates claim that Edward Snowden had access to a total of 1.7 million documents and that he gave 50,000 to 200,000 documents to the journalists, Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras.

Experiences from previous whistleblowers had taught him that he needed documents to prove his claims, so that no one would dismiss them as lies. He’d also come to some other important insights:

He’d have to flee the country prior to the publications.

He’d have to be transparent in his operations, so that it would be clear that he was acting on

his own and that he wasn't funded by any foreign power.

He'd not publish anything on his own, but leave it to journalists to do the selection.

He'd choose journalists who had demonstrated that they would not allow themselves to be silenced by the White House.

He'd proactively make his name public, in order for his co-workers not to become subject to suspicion.

Laura Poitras was a journalist and an Academy Award and Emmy nominated documentary filmmaker who, like Thomas Drake, had experienced the totalitarian methods that can be accommodated in a democracy.

After her documentary on the war in Iraq "My country, my country" from 2006, she was constantly harassed. She was stopped more than 40 times, when returning to the US after travelling abroad. Each time they held her, often three or four hours, and interrogated her about who she'd met and where she'd been. Her computer, camera and cell phone were confiscated and not returned for weeks. They copied her credit card and receipts at several of the occasions. They even took her reporter notebook.

Poitras developed her own methods. She stopped travelling with electronic devices. She became an encryption expert. And she avoided talking on the phone about work related matters.

After she'd been detained and threatened with handcuffs at Newark Airport, she contacted the journalist Glenn Greenwald, who wrote an article about her in April 2012.

For Edward Snowden, she and Glenn Greenwald were the perfect choices.

Laura Poitras, who had eventually moved to Berlin to protect her material. Glenn Greenwald, a former lawyer, who now was a journalist living in Rio de Janeiro, and writing for The Guardian.

The problem was that Glenn Greenwald didn't have an encryption program, nor did he succeed in installing one. The months passed. Edward Snowden kept emailing him under the code name "Cincinnatus".

You never thought of giving up?

– The biggest problem for me was to get him to take me seriously. I don't blame him. I mean, if some random person on the internet is like "Hey, I got something you need to see, random journalist. It's about government mass surveillance whatever, they're just going to go, "Ah...man, here's another person thinking aliens are beaming signals through people's teeth."

He smiles, saying that it didn't bother him particularly. Instead, he kept sending encrypting instructions. For months.

– Trying to get Glenn Greenwald to do it was a little bit like trying to teach a cat how to

dance. But I can understand that. The problem is the language they use in the encryption programs, to teach it to people. They talk about public keys and asymmetric keys and nobody knows what the hell that means. But I've always enjoyed the process of teaching. When I was young, I wanted to do a lot of things, and teaching was one of them.

The documentary "Citizenfour" shows Laura Poitras and Glenn Greenwald meeting Edward Snowden in Hong Kong for the first time. Their surprise when the source turns out to be a 29 year old in a t-shirt and jeans, instead of the senior man in a suit they were expecting. For Ewan MacAskill, who was sent from The Guardian to assess the credibility of the source, all the alarm bells went off, when he met Edward Snowden. A guy the same age as his own kids was saying he'd worked for the CIA in Geneva and for the NSA in Japan and in Hawaii. When he said that he had served in the Special Forces and broken both his legs, Ewan MacAskill felt that it was overwhelming. At the same time, he had documents proving everything. And whatever they asked him, he gave them long, extensive and detailed answers. Eventually, MacAskill was convinced and sent the agreed green light back home to The Guardian:

Read more

More information and trailer of the documentary "Citizenfour".

"The Guinness is good."

You seemed very calm in the midst of all this. You even went to bed at half past ten every night and seemed to sleep like a child.

Listen (58 sec)

– Yeah, it's one of those things. I mean, it's really weird, I don't actually remember a lot from that period. I was so focused – everybody was so focused – I was in a state where I was functioning, working, being very lucid. But when I watched "Citizenfour" it was almost like news to me, because it wasn't in my memory as a lived experience, because I was so focused on information transmission. It was like, this slide shows... means this... explains this... None of us knew when the door would be kicked in. It was all very professional, hyper professional.

So when you seemed calm, it was simply because you weren't there.

– I actually think that's a stress response for me. I'm not very emotional; I don't get very angry, I don't get very sad, I don't get very happy. I'm very mellow and that goes for a lot of computer people. This kind of stereotype about this little autistic computer guy, who...

Listen (01:26 min)

...who looks at your shoes instead of his own, if he's an extrovert...

– Haha. Yeah, right, right, right. I'm not like that. I have a very rewarding relationship that has been going on for a

a very rewarding relationship that has been going on for a long time. But every girlfriend I've had, every time we're in an argument or something, they say "you're an emotionless robot". Because they would be upset and I'd be thinking logically, "what's the problem?", "what can I do to make her feel better" and "oh no, don't cry!" As an engineer, my whole professional life has been about finding the problem and fixing it. But when it comes to relationships, people aren't machines or computers...

I laugh. Saying he can't be a hopeless case, knowing that he made his girlfriend come all this way. To Russia.

He smiles.

– Yeah...

He pauses.

– That was kind of amazing... That she doesn't hate me forever, because she didn't know. She couldn't know.

Was she mad?

– Actually she understood, because she said "That's why I fell in love with you". But she was certainly upset with me. For good reasons.

When you first wrote to Laura Poitras, you wrote that you already knew how this would end for you.

– I was wrong. When I wrote that, I had an entirely other future in mind. I never expected to make it out of Hawaii. I thought I'd be arrested immediately. The idea that a single person, acting alone, could actually get the truth out from the NSA and share it with the press, for people to listen, was extraordinary. I've never been so glad to be so wrong.

Why Russia?

– I didn't choose Russia. They chose Russia.

Have you thought about it being a deliberate choice on the part of the US?

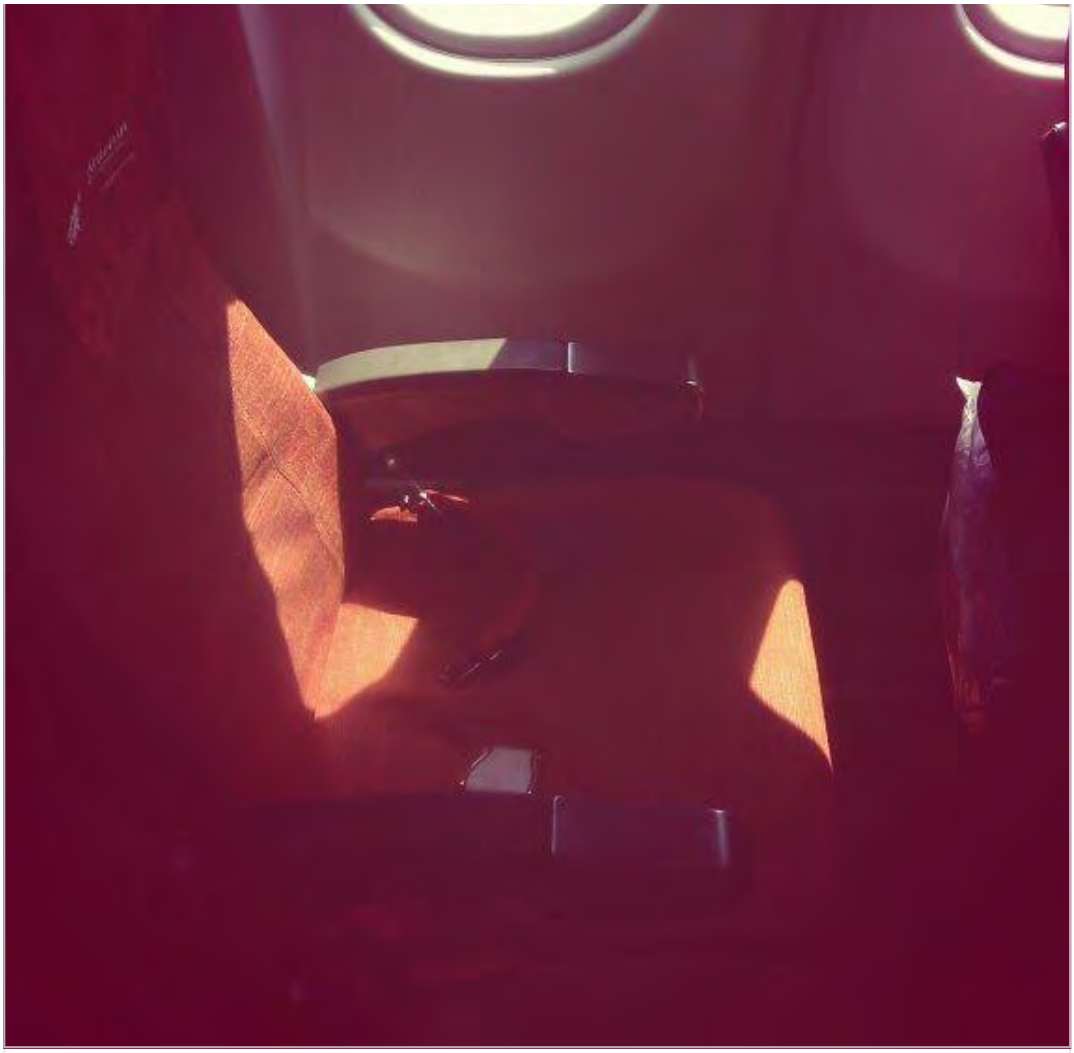
– Yes, I have. I mean, they said they were afraid that I would start working for the Russians, which is ridiculous for a number of reasons...

And so you got stuck in Russia when they cancelled your passport?

– Right. Shouldn't they do their damndest to make sure I'm out of that country? But instead, despite the fact that I applied for asylum in 21 different countries across the world, the largest portion in Western Europe, the US Government made phone calls to every one of these countries, saying: "*DON'T* do it".

President Vladimir Putin has compared Snowden to an "unwanted Christmas present" but Russia finally granted him asylum and on August 1st, 2013 Edward Snowden could leave the airport.

Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport was initially just meant to be a stopover on his way to Cuba. Reporters from all over the world had already bought tickets for the Aeroflot flight SU150 to Havana, because there were rumors that Edward Snowden had a ticket for row 17 on that plane. A correspondent from the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat drew the winning ticket, managing to book seat 17 F, but minutes before departure, it became clear to the reporters that they would be flying to Cuba alone, without Snowden. An AP reporter tweeted a picture of the empty seat with the caption "He ain't here". Some Russian journalists tried looking at it from a positive side, shouting "champagne trip, champagne trip". Whereupon cabin crew drily informed that the twelve hour flight to Cuba was a non-alcoholic flight.



max seddon
@maxseddon

Följ

Standing next to Edward Snowden's seat on flight to Cuba. He ain't here.

12:07 - 24 juni 2013

1 060 214

The Finnish correspondent afterwards said that he had watched ”The Muppets” during the entire flight, which had felt appropriate for the situation.

If the Americans were worried that Edward Snowden would start working with the Russians, this would have been the fastest transfer in the history of the airport. Instead, he was now stuck in Russia.

– Initially, I just think they panicked. They expected that the Hong Kong Government would basically just turn me over. And when I was in the air on my way to Moscow, they had like ten hours. They decided to freeze it and they didn’t roll the decision back, ever. At this point it was an emotional attack, where it didn’t matter what I’d done. It was more like,

”Russia, Russia, Russia”, because Russia has such a bad international reputation right now. They could just pin me with that. But I don’t know.

When asked by the US, how Edward Snowden could walk through passport control at Hong Kong’s Chek Lap Kok Airport without being stopped, Hong Kong blamed it on inadequate information. Something the US, in turn, rejected.

The documents that were sent to the Nordic countries from the US authorities also seem to have been written in a hurry.

One read: ”Good Morning – I hope this email finds you all doing well. I am sending you a notification our service is providing to many of our partners regarding the current status of US citizen Edward Snowden. This information is being provided in the event he should enter your country from his current location in Moscow. Please feel free to call or email me if you have any questions. Thank you.”

Read more

NRK: USA asked Norge to arrest Snowden (august 2015, in Norweigan).

In the slightly more formal request sent out separately (in any case to Norway, and certainly also to the other Nordic countries), the US embassy affirms its respect for the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, asking them to immediately inform the embassy and enforce the extradition of Mr. Snowden to the United States, should he show up.

The text was accompanied by this exhaustive description: ”He is a Caucasian male with brown hair and eyes, and wears glasses.”

If the Nordic countries were trusted to assist the US in the search for Snowden, US trust was considerably smaller when Bolivian President Evo Morales was flying home from Moscow. Allegedly, country after country – France, Portugal, Spain, Italy – suddenly denied the presidential plane airspace. The plane was forced to land in Vienna because it was suspected that Snowden was hidden on board.

The Bolivian President was furious, accusing Europe of running errands for the US.

When it comes to the CIA kidnappings, so-called ”extraordinary renditions”, the EU Parliament has, in an investigation, determined that at least 1,245 flights flew into European airspace or stopped over at European airports between the end of 2001 and the end of 2005. The ”War on terror” era is full of surveillance, harassment, kidnappings, torture and secret prisons.

At the same time it’s clear that the strategic values weigh heavily when it comes to the relationship with the US.

– It’s really just crazy, the way that the US Government has handled the issue of torture. Because it’s so clear that is what they’ve done. We’ve even had an investigation in the

intelligence committee, which almost never does anything meaningful. They usually act more like cheerleaders for the intelligence community, than watch-dogs. When they get a report that's so clear and when there were indications that there were people in the CIA, who wanted to talk about these things, but who felt stressed. Some even asked to be moved, because they couldn't cope with the things they were witnessing and they wanted to do something about it. But instead of providing some path for these individuals to report the wrongdoings that they were witnessing, the CIA actually asked them to stop documenting the abuse.

And the only person, who, to this point, has been convicted of this kind of wrongdoings, is the CIA officer who reported the waterboarding.

– They reason that it's better to avoid embarrassment and to hide or conceal a wrongdoing than to actually fix it, correct it, even though the failure to do so could create a far greater, more long-term threat. In the torture investigations, it was established that we never got any meaningful intelligence, despite the fact that we were torturing people over a period of years. The cost of this is not just the logistical cost for black prisons, or the money – we're talking about hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars of taxpayers' currency to torture people.

– Apart from the human costs for the people who are actually performing the torture and the people who are actually being tortured, there's the cost of foreign relations. The fact that we're asking groups, institutions and countries like Sweden to allow rendition flights or to enable them or countries like Romania and Poland to host black sites. The same thing with Thailand, where they had actual torture centers. These countries begin to think we're okay with that, these are things we're willing to do, because if America does it, it must be alright. As long as it's a serious enough case, as long as there is some reason for it. But ultimately, these things come out. You can't keep a secret that's so horrendous forever. You can keep it for years; you may be able to keep it for decades. But eventually it will come out. And you pay a moral cost. We actually spend money to shoot ourselves in the foot.

So why is the rest of the world turning a blind eye to this?

– It's legitimized by the threat of terrorism. Saying it will save lives and that anyone opposing it, risks getting blood on their hands.

Snowden says he also believes there's a degree of self-defense, just as in the case of the mass surveillance.

– They feel like acknowledging it would illustrate some weakness, or somehow legitimize abuse in countries like North Korea, Russia or China. But the truth is the opposite. It's a sign of strength to be able to say that we made mistakes, and then show that they can be corrected, show that they can be reformed.

The drone program creates more terrorists than it kills. There was no Islamic State until we started bombing these states. The biggest threat we face in the region was born from our own policies.

Suddenly the doorbell rings. The feeling of uncertainty, from when we were waiting at the meeting point earlier, slips back into the room for a few seconds.

But Edward Snowden calmly walks over and opens the door for the man from room service. I get my steak – medium rare – and Edward Snowden gets his hamburger with fries. The others in the room are having tea and scones. DN photographer Lotta Härdelin and our contacts: Ole von Uexküll and Xenya Cherny-Scanlon from the Right Livelihood Foundation, which awarded Snowden the Alternative Nobel Prize last year.

The announcement of the laureates, which usually is held in the Swedish Foreign Ministry, was temporarily banned last year by former Foreign Minister Carl Bildt. Edward Snowden's father, Lon, attended the award ceremony in his son's place.

Your father said he wishes Sweden would give you asylum. Would you feel safe in Sweden?

– It depends on the circumstances. But it would be important symbolically.

It's clear that he's proud of you.

He laughs.

– Yes, he's a little radical now. He never used to be radical.

Seriously?

– Yeah! I mean he worked for the military for 30 years. He's as conservative as it gets.

It was the same with Daniel Ellsberg's father. Who later supported him.

– Right, right. Well, it was the same with Daniel Ellsberg, he led the marines and I signed up for the war in Iraq when everybody else was protesting against it. People get in the whole conservatives versus liberal thing, and they like to think of those conservative people as hateful people that don't care. And that's true of a small percentage, but we make a mistake when we generalize.

During the Bush administration, people were kidnapped all over the world and dumped in secret prisons, where they were tortured. During the Obama administration, the kidnappings, the secret prisons and the torture, have been replaced by death lists and extrajudicial executions of people, carried out by pilotless aircrafts, known as drones.

In October this year, the online magazine The Intercept published new classified documents, the so-called "Drone Papers". The documents show that nine out of ten of the people killed by drones weren't the intended targets, but civilians who afterwards are categorized EKIAS, enemy killed in action, which looks better statistically. They also show which people decide who to target. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was one of those people.

Read more

The Intercept: The Drone Papers (october 2015).

The documents also show what Edward Snowden was talking about earlier.

– They're not targeting individuals, they're targeting phones. And they don't know whether the terrorist is holding the phone or whether his mother is holding it. And this is why so many drone strikes go wrong, why so many wedding parties get hit. The information they use is dangerous and unreliable. When I saw the Drone Papers, there wasn't a question in my mind that this was the most important security story of the year, he says.

I ask him about the terminology. "Jackpot" is when they kill the person they intended to kill. "Touchdown" is a drone attack targeting someone's cell phone. "Baseball card" refers to information about the people they want to wipe out. The hunted people are called "objects" and get names like "Brandy", "Post Mortem", "Lethal Aspen", "Ribeye".

What is that? Is it jargon?

– It's the military language, everything is an acronym, everything is euphemized. You don't say assassinations, you say targeted killings. You say "kill/capture operation", even if nobody is going to be captured. They've got their own culture.

Is it about dehumanizing people?

– There's a lot of abstraction in it, because you don't want to think about the fact that you're actually killing people. You don't want to think about the fact that these people may have a family. You want to think of them as objectives, you want to think of them as goals, you want to think of them as a puzzle. You don't want to think of you breaking into the heart of the most central infrastructure for communication in the world – Google. That you're basically rummaging through everybody's private life. You want to think of this as a piece of infrastructure that will be a valuable source of intelligence information.

I mention a quote in the Drone Papers. It's when Obama's former Director of National Intelligence explains the attraction of waging war by drone: "It is the politically advantageous thing to do – low cost, no US casualties, gives the appearance of toughness, ... it plays well domestically, and it is unpopular only in other countries."

Listen (57 sec)

Is it about fighting terrorists or about winning elections?

– It's just it's still politically beneficial. They can show that they're doing something. When they use the word security, they're not talking about safety. What they're talking about is stability. Like when they're saying that they're saving lives by bombing them. Stability is the new highest value. It's not about freedom, it's not about liberty, it's not even about safety. It's about avoiding change. It's about ensuring that things are predictable, shapeable, because then they are controllable.

At least you think they are.

– Right. You think they are controllable.

Until IS comes along and destroys the whole idea.

– Right. Like with the drone program, which creates more terrorists than it kills. There was no Islamic State until we started bombing these states. The biggest threat we face in the region was born from our own policies.

Edward Snowden says that's a recurring feeling.

– It's like they have been thinking on an emotional level, not on a smart level. You get this immediate response that really doesn't make sense. And to be honest, when you think about the US foreign policy over the last decade, that's the only thing that could possibly explain what they're doing. Because could anybody look at what we now spent 15 years doing and say this was a genius plan, like this was a grand strategy that really worked out. Sure there have been bright points right, but there have been clear things like, for example, the drone program, where they know it's not working, and yet they continue it.

He says another quote stuck with him from the Drone Papers.

– It's when he admits that the problem with the drone program is actually simply that it is creating more terrorists than it kills.

So why didn't it get bigger headlines?

Edward Snowden nods, saying he's still optimistic.

– What is important, is simply by having that material published, the whistleblower effected changes in both law and policy. We just don't know it yet. Almost certainly as a result of seeing that information made public, the government has ordered internal reviews within their bureaucracies. And now advocacy organizations, representatives of the civil society and the non-governmental space, like the ACLU, will be able to bring legal challenges for those who have had their rights violated by these programs. Because previously, at least in the US, the government could flush these challenges out of courts by saying this is speculation, "you can't prove this happened". Even if everybody knows that's the case. And there's no stronger confirmation of the government engaging in wrongdoings, than government documents detailing their own wrongdoings.

He says that way, the documents are very important for the future.

– Because if they can win a single court case, they can protect the rights of an entire generation.

You mean that we journalists aren't as important as we like to believe we are?

– But yes, it's disappointing that large institutional press, papers like The Washington Post, papers like The New York Times, try to avoid reporting on stories like this for competitive reasons, even when there's a significant public interest in doing so. Headlines are important for public awareness, for holding people in account in terms of vote. You have to remember that even judges, even the heads of the intelligence agencies, even the parliamentarians who make our laws, are not in the position of virtually being the greatest geniuses in society. They are not some extraordinary people who know everything about everything. They read the papers too and are informed as a result of these. It's not enough to simply have a free press. It's not enough that you can write anything. Journalists should feel at least some sense of obligation that corresponds to performing a public service. Helping people understand what they need to know, just as much as what they want to know. They can only govern with the consent of the governed. But consent isn't consent if it isn't informed.

Daniel Ellsberg leaked the "Pentagon Papers" in the 70s. He said he waited 40 years for someone to come forward with new documents. Then there was Chelsea Manning. Four years later, there was Edward Snowden.

And now roughly two years later, there's another leak. You talk about a Hydra. If you chop the head of a whistleblower or source, you'll have a new one. It seems to be going faster now. Can this

source remain anonymous?

– I hope so. And who knows, it might be me.

He says it a tad teasingly, explaining what he means.

– There's one beneficial thing with me. In court, anybody who releases documents that are older than May 2013 can use me as a fence since the NSA never identified all the documents that went walking.

We know that you took all these documents, due to the fact that you went to the press. The NSA still doesn't know which documents you've got. So if spies do the same thing, they should be able to walk away with documents all the time, without anyone finding out?

– Yes, yes, absolutely. I just spoke with a former FBI Agent at an ACLU conference and he made exactly that point. He said that the government has started all these programs called the "insider threat programs". It's basically the kind of model where you watch your co-workers, and what they're doing and report if they do anything that's an indicator of concern. For example if they have TOR stickers or EFF stickers (TOR enables anonymous communication; Electronic Frontier Foundation defends your digital rights) and they work for the NSA, they would say that's an indication of split loyalties. Something like that. So you should report that.

They've learned their lesson, in other words. When Edward Snowden worked in Kunia in Hawaii, he had a sticker with the text "Freedom isn't free" on the door of his house. To work, he often wore a sweater sold by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, featuring a parody of the NSA logo. The eagle's claws were carrying surveillance earphones instead of keys. And on his desk, he kept the US Constitution.

The odds of an intelligence officer from a foreign power walking around with their values written as clearly, might not be something to hope for too much. And just keeping track of intelligence service employees seems to require its own intelligence service.

After September 11, 2001, suddenly more than 1,200 government organizations and almost 2,000 private companies were working with terrorist control. Nearly five million Americans had some kind of security clearance, and about 1.4 million had access to top secret material. As someone described it – security clearances were handed out like Kleenex.

Even if the NSA is a public authority, it's part of countless constellations of private companies, where many of the main functions have been outsourced. The agency employs about 30,000 people, but within the NSA, there are also approximately 60,000 contracted employees through private companies.

The intelligence community has also seen a transfer of power from senior agents, not quite mastering the new technology, to younger talents, like Edward Snowden, who was hired by the CIA at the age of 22. A former employee said that there was nothing in his background that could have prevented him from qualifying for a "top-secret security clearance", for the simple

could have prevented him from qualifying for a "top secret security clearance", for the simple reason that "He was so young. He didn't have a history."

When Edward Snowden secured a job at the consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton in Hawaii, to get full access to the NSA's unprocessed surveillance archive, the company prided itself, both online and in its annual report from the previous year, on the fact that "In all walks of life, our most trusted colleagues and friends have this in common: We can count on them. No matter what the situation or challenge, they will be there for us. Booz Allen Hamilton is trusted in that way. You can count on us."

So how do you know who to trust?

Edward Snowden says you don't, of course. And he says that the former FBI Agent made that same point. That it's crazy that the government is so obsessed with whistleblowers who are working with the press.

– No spy in the world involves the press. He also said that, asking an audience, who knows the name Edward Snowden, everybody raises their hand. Who knows Chelsea Manning? And a lot of people raise their hand. Who knows about Thomas Drake? A few people raise their hand. Who knows the name Jeffrey Delisle? Nobody raises their hand.

Who is Jeffrey Delisle?

– Jeffrey Delisle was a Canadian spy, who was arrested like a year ago. He admitted to having entered a top secret facility with a thumb drive, plugged his thumb drive into a computer, taken everything in the system and brought it to the Russian embassy, where he sold it to them directly. For four years. And they never knew about it.

Read more

Canadian The Star on Jeffrey Delisle (may, 2013).

The risks of having a mass surveillance system collecting data on your own citizens without adequate security are obvious. The claims that Edward Snowden's leak would have put the lives of people at risk, as they said in 2013, have also proved groundless.

– CIA, NSA and DIA (Defence Intelligence Agency) Directors all have been brought on the floor of the congress and they have been asked by my strongest critics, begged for any evidence, that any national security interest has been harmed, that any individual has come to harm. And not in any single case have they shown concrete evidence that this occurred.

After Snowden's disclosures, a court of appeal in the US, established that the US government's collection of data on the telecommunication of millions of citizens was illegal.

At the same time there's a clear consensus among those defending the mass surveillance. A republican senator said: "None of your civil liberties matter much after you're dead".

A famous radio host said that "If you're sucking dirt inside a casket, do you know what your civil liberties are worth? Zilch. Zero, nada."

In brief: There's got to be occasions where security interests precede law and civil rights.

What is most favorable to the citizen will, of course, depend on who you ask.

A federal judge noted that the US does not cite a single case "in which analysis of the NSA's bulk metadata collection" actually stopped an imminent terrorist attack.

NSA's mass surveillance didn't prevent the failed terrorist attack on an airplane bound for Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, the plan to bomb Times Square, or the plan to attack the New York subway system. Instead, observant bystanders and traditional police work stopped these cases.

Nor has the surveillance been able to prevent any of the massacres that actually have happened.

"If you collect everything, you understand nothing", as Edward Snowden puts it.

That mass surveillance was aimed at controlling terrorists no longer felt that plausible, when it was revealed that the NSA had intercepted Angela Merkel's private cell phone. Just like when it was revealed that the GCHQ, NSA's partner in the UK, used their mass surveillance tools to monitor Amnesty.

Edward Snowden spreads his arms

Edward Snowden spreads his arms.

– Pardon my language; I'm actually not going to say it, but how...

He pauses for me to hear the unspoken words.

–.... is Amnesty threatening us?

So why are they doing it?

– Ultimately, it comes back to that same feeling when people put up cameras in their own homes to keep track of what's going on. Even if there's no threat, even if no one ever broke into their homes. It's the attractiveness of believing you're in control. You do it because you can do it.

Which also applied to the NSA employees who were caught having used the agency's powerful spy tool to monitor their partners.

After the disclosures, the hash tag #NSApickuplines started featuring tweets such as "I know exactly where you've been all my life" and "I bet you're tired of guys who only pretend to listen."

Read more

NPR on #NSApickuplines (august, 2013).

This kind of privacy invasion is uncomfortable to most people. Steaming ten letters open – a common practice of the German Stasi during the Cold War – feels like a greater privacy breach than intercepting several billion emails.

– A single death is a tragedy, a million is statistics. Of course it's a challenge. There is a point when the scope of a violation becomes so staggering that it becomes hard to understand, to imagine. It's hard to accept so we turn away from it. "We live in a free society *but* we're being watched all the time."

How do you explain mass surveillance to someone who doesn't feel monitored? Someone who "doesn't have anything to hide".

– It's not about not having something to hide; it's about having something to lose. What we lose when we're under observation is our humanity. What shapes us, what makes us individuals, is the fact that we can think, we can develop.

Listen (38 sec)

– Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide, is no different than saying you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say, or the freedom of press because you're not a journalist, or the freedom of religion because you're not a Christian. Rights in societies are collective, and individual. You can't give away the rights of a minority, even if you vote as a majority. Rights are inherent to our nature, they're not granted by governments, they're guaranteed by governments. They're protected by governments.

They say you can judge a society by how it treats its weakest members. I come to think of a

They say you can judge a society by how it treats its weakest members. I come to think of a few lines from Glenn Greenwald's book about the Snowden documents:

"The true measure of a society's freedom is how it treats its dissidents and other marginalized groups, not how it treats good loyalists. Even in the world's worst tyrannies, dutiful supporters are immunized from abuses of state power."

When The New York Times published the first excerpt of Daniel Ellsberg's 7,000 page Pentagon Papers, a court order requested by the Nixon administration prevented the newspaper from publishing the documents. For 13 days, Daniel Ellsberg was at the center of something the press described as the "biggest manhunt since the Lindbergh kidnapping", while he continued to distribute the documents across the country to 17 newspapers that now relay published them, to mock the FBI. On June 30, a Supreme Court decision finally lifted the ban.

When it came to the Snowden documents, Guardian editor-in-chief Alan Rusbridger, was determined to protect the material. He set up a special editorial room at the London office, which was guarded 24/7 by security guards with lists of who had access.

In the UK, the press is more independent than in the US, and not as close to the government. At the same time, British journalists don't boast the same constitutional rights and freedoms as their American colleagues, so as the British government started becoming increasingly aggressive, Alan Rusbridger got in touch with The New York Times. The temperature in the UK was rising, he explained. The plan was that The Guardian would hide behind the US Constitution by transferring the material to their American colleagues.

A week later, two men from the GCHQ came, insisting that The Guardian either destroy or surrender the files. They called themselves "Ian" and "Chris", but The Guardian nicknamed them "The Hobbits".

The man who went by the name Ian, said: "You've got plastic cups on your table. Plastic cups can be turned into microphones. The Russians can send a laser beam through your window and turn them into a listening device."

The GCHQ team then opened a bag and pulled out what looked like a large microwave. The Guardian staff was told that it was a demagnetizer and that its purpose was to destroy magnetic fields, and thus erase hard drives and data.

Ian said: "You'll need one of these".

A Guardian employee said: "We'll buy our own degausser, thanks".

Ian said: "No you won't. It costs GBP 30 000".

The employee answered: "Okay, we probably won't then".

The Guardian staff would then take turns to smash the computers, memory cards, chips and hard drives in the basement under the supervision of The Hobbits. It all took three hours.

Today, many investigative journalists in Western democracies work with handwritten notes, outdoor walks, encrypted coded correspondence and cell phones placed in microwaves when dealing with sensitive material. ”Just like during the Cold War,” as a New York Times reporter put it.

Surveys made after Snowden’s revelation, show that 58 percent of the journalists covering security policy issues in the US today have changed their working methods.

These are not people torturing people. These are people sitting behind a desk, thinking everything they do is completely legal.

Dusk is falling outside the window in Moscow. Lunch has started drifting to à la carte, as I ask Edward Snowden to write down his top five list of favorites among safe programs.

Just like in the documentary ”Citizenfour” I’m fascinated by how he, with all his computer skills, immediately steps down to another level. Like a Formula 1 driver who happily squeezes a child seat in the front seat, chugging along at 20 km/h. That extraordinary combination of

a child seat in the front seat, chugging along at 20 km/h. That extraordinary combination of IQ and EQ.

As he writes in my notebook, I can't help noticing how he holds the pen. A grip that tells me he's someone who's used to typing on a keyboard rather than writing by hand. It feels like I've forced a hockey player to unlace his skates and run ten meters on ice.

He adjusts his glasses, then takes them off for a while.

The short-sightedness.

– I have to hold things this close to be able to see them.

He holds up a piece of paper ten centimeters from his face.

Facts. Snowden's top 5 secure programs

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I'm thinking how strange it feels to meet people that you've already read so much about. I know he has -6.50 on one eye and -6.25 on the other. Unusually small feet, taking forever to find military boots his size at US Army base Fort Benning. That he doesn't drink alcohol or coffee, and has never been drunk. So mysterious and quiet at private parties that his friends would compare him to the vampire Edward in "Twilight". At the same time, he's one of the most verbal people I've ever met. A person who speaks clear American English in a voice that often emphasizes a word in each sentence, making also what's hard understandable.

I say that my experience is that the main problem is installing these programs. Using them isn't that hard once you've started.

He puts his glasses back on.

We want to make lower friction to lower the barriers. The problem is that these products are still too technical, I think, to pass the "grandma test". People say: please don't use the grandma test because it's disrespectful to "grandma".

We can also call it the "Greenwald test".

– Haha! Don't do that! He'll grouch at you on Twitter.

But why don't the internet companies make it easier for us to use encrypted communication?

– There are a lot of reasons. One is, if it's not making money, they don't have any incentive to do it. Two is, now their governments are complaining about it, so they're a little bit worried of picking and choosing sides, but I think they need to think really hard. Because if you work for one government you work for all the governments. Because if you give the US special back door access, you're not going to be able to sell your iPhone in China, unless you also give them a back door. The same in Russia.

I say that I've been surprised by how shamelessly the NSA

brags about what they do, like when they had drawn a map of how they broke into Google's system. One document even had a little smiley, saying encryption "added and removed here".

Read more

The Wire: NSA hacked Google (october 2013).

– These are not people torturing people. These are people sitting behind a desk, thinking everything they do is completely legal, and even if it isn't, it's never going to become public, because it's all classified. For them it's just solving a series of puzzles, to them it's just an interesting problem. They go: "We want to be able to read what Google is doing, but Google is encrypting stuff, so what can we do? How can we get around it?" And somebody probably spent six weeks on it...

He laughs.

– ... or actually more like six minutes.

Some people have had a hard time understanding how a 29 year old man could give up his high salary, his job, his life and his family, to defend the democratic values most of us claim we want to live by.

In totalitarian states around the world, 29 year old men and women are standing up for the right not to be monitored, the right not to be harassed, rule of law and freedom of speech, even when it means risking death penalty, lashing, life time imprisonment or exile.

Many journalists can bear witness to the fact that it can be easier to find sources willing to take great risks in countries where they risk more than in democracies, where people just risk silence in the coffee room or losing their jobs. I ask Snowden what he thinks is the reason.

Facts. The writer, the photographer and the meeting

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– Ultimately, in many cases, people are, on the large scale, rational actors. Living in a country where the worst case scenario is losing your job, at the same time they see that the system is very stable, very robust. Which means: The politicians will talk, the press will write something about it, they will move around some letters in some legislation. But the ultimate outcome of their sacrifice will be very small. There will be nominal changes to law or policy, as opposed to structural reforms. Whereas if you're in a weaker state, you're in a less stable regime, you have the chance of basically being the action, the spark that lights the fire, and changes the country for the better in a real and lasting way.

– But hey...

He laughs.

– I'm just speculating.

I come to think of something I heard Edward Snowden say of himself at some point. That he's an ordinary guy in an extraordinary situation. That is probably true. He maintains his right to be ordinary, despite the extraordinary circumstances. Someone who opens the door himself, takes food orders and meets us without lawyers for a several hours long conversation, because he likes travelling by talking – both in real life and on the internet, which he loves precisely because it's a "shark tank" where you are forced to sharpen your arguments, rather than a more pragmatic "think tank".

The symbolic value that materializes when an anonymous leak becomes a whistleblower with a name, a face and a context, someone who can carry a story with a weight that doesn't require medals on the chest.

Earlier in the conversation, Snowden mentioned there being a motto when he worked for the CIA: "Mission first, mission first."

Maybe just the mission has changed. The question that I've been pondering over for two years was probably put the wrong way from the start. Edward Snowden didn't give up his country to become a whistleblower.

He's here because he never gave up.

■■■

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