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Q. & A.: Edward Snowden Speaks to Peter Maass



People hold masks with the face of Edward J. Snowden at a hearing in Brazil on the N.S.A.'s surveillance programs.

Interview by PETER MAASS Published: August 13, 2013

In the course of reporting his profile of Laura Poitras, Peter Maass conducted an encrypted question-and-answer session, for which Poitras served as intermediary, with Edward J. Snowden. Below is a full transcript of that conversation.



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Peter Maass: Why did you seek out Laura and Glenn, rather than journalists from major American news outlets (N.Y.T., W.P., W.S.J. etc.)? In particular, why Laura, a documentary filmmaker?

Edward Snowden: After 9/11, many of the most important news outlets in America abdicated their role as a check to power — the journalistic responsibility to challenge the excesses of government — for fear of being seen as unpatriotic and punished in the market during a period of heightened nationalism. From a business perspective, this was the obvious strategy, but what benefited the institutions ended up costing the public dearly. The major outlets are still

only beginning to recover from this cold period.

Laura and Glenn are among the few who reported fearlessly on controversial topics throughout this period, even in the face of withering personal criticism, and resulted in Laura specifically becoming targeted by the very programs involved in the recent disclosures. She had demonstrated the courage, personal experience and skill needed to handle what is probably the most dangerous assignment any journalist can be given — reporting on the secret misdeeds of the most powerful government in the world — making her an obvious choice.

P.M.: Was there a moment during your contact with Laura when you realized you could trust



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her? What was that moment, what caused it?

E.S.: We came to a point in the verification and vetting process where I discovered Laura was more suspicious of me than I was of her, and I'm famously paranoid. The combination of her experience and her exacting focus on detail and process gave her a natural talent for security, and that's a refreshing trait to discover in someone who is likely to come under intense scrutiny in the future, as normally one would have to work very hard to get them to take the risks seriously.

With that putting me at ease, it became easier to open up without fearing the invested trust would be mishandled, and I think it's the only way she ever managed to get me on camera. I personally hate cameras and being recorded, but at some point in the working process, I realized I was unconsciously trusting her not to hang me even with my naturally unconsidered remarks. She's good.

- **P.M.:** Were you surprised that Glenn did not respond to your requests and instructions for encrypted communication?
- **E.S.:** Yes and no. I know journalists are busy and had assumed being taken seriously would be a challenge, especially given the paucity of detail I could initially offer. At the same time, this is 2013, and a journalist who regularly reported on the concentration and excess of state power. I was surprised to realize that there were people in news organizations who didn't recognize any unencrypted message sent over the Internet is being delivered to every intelligence service in the world. In the wake of this year's disclosures, it should be clear that unencrypted journalist-source communication is unforgivably reckless.
- **P.M.:** When you first met Laura and Glenn in Hong Kong, what was your initial reaction? Were you surprised by anything in the way they worked and interacted with you?
- **E.S.:** I think they were annoyed that I was younger than they expected, and I was annoyed they had arrived too early, which complicated the initial verification. As soon as we were behind close doors, however, I think everyone was reassured by the obsessive attention to precaution and bona fides. I was particularly impressed by Glenn's ability to operate without sleep for days at a time.
- **P.M.:** Laura started filming you from nearly the start. Were you surprised by that? Why or why not?
- **E.S.:** Definitely surprised. As one might imagine, normally spies allergically avoid contact with reporters or media, so I was a virgin source everything was a surprise. Had I intended to skulk away anonymously, I think it would have been far harder to work with Laura, but we all knew what was at stake. The weight of the situation actually made it easier to focus on what was in the public interest rather than our own. I think we all knew there was no going back once she turned that camera on, and the ultimate outcome would be decided by the world.

A version of this article appears in print on August 18, 2013, on page MM22 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Snowden's People.

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