

Reporting on Government Surveillance

Q&A: Barton Gellman '82



Barton Gellman '82 was among a small handful of journalists who earlier this year published bombshell revelations about the U.S. government's electronic-surveillance practices, based on documents leaked by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden. The stories prompted a national debate over how far the government should go in tracking telephone and electronic communications under the banner of protecting national security — and what should be reported about the actions. Gellman published the stories in The Washington Post, where he had spent years covering national-security issues. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, Gellman wrote Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency, and is now working on a book about the evolution of U.S. surveillance since the 9/11 attacks. He is a senior fellow at the Century Foundation as well as a freelance contributor to the Post and Time magazine. Gellman spoke with PAW in October.

Did you realize when Snowden first contacted you that the story was the real deal?

My first instinct was that this was probably the real thing. It looked good, and it kept looking better with each interaction. But I did have significant doubts for a substantial period of time. There's an old expression that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. I had to distinguish what I was seeing from a couple possible ways it could have gone wrong.

Was it put together by a very close student of the public record who just added on top of that in a plausible way? Was it someone with ill intent offering a false story?

I'd seen any number of scenarios over the years. In our early interactions, he [Snowden] demonstrated his knowledge — he didn't give up much, but enough to continue the conversation.

Did you have concerns or qualms about pursuing this story?

There was no doubt I was interested in it and that I was going to pursue it if it proved to be authentic. I have been acutely aware from the beginning that this is a very sensitive matter, and that some of it, if exposed, really would do damage to operations that almost anyone would support. There was stuff in what he gave me that, if I published it, people would say, "That's really cool — we didn't know they could do that, and we're glad they're doing that."

Were you concerned about your own legal situation?

This story raised all kinds of legal issues, so I have been talking to lawyers at every stage of it. There is a much more aggressive anti-leaks campaign in this administration, so I wanted to consider the risk of being subpoenaed. And there are all kinds of other hypothetical concerns. I wanted to go down the line and say we're sticking to the letter and the spirit of the law while also doing our jobs as journalists.

Do you believe that your own communications are monitored? How do you deal with that?

I assumed that if my anonymous source was who he purported to be, his communications could certainly be monitored. So we took every precaution one can take. He was trying to blow the whistle on a surveillance state without being surveilled himself, which is tricky. On the other hand, he knew about surveillance from the inside, and he let me know how to communicate securely. I already knew how to use many of these tools and had been worrying about protecting my confidential sources and notes for 10 years now.

Did you change how you operated as a result of what he revealed?

I've learned more about what works and what doesn't. Everyone who understands security knows it all depends on what the threat model is. You have all this jargon — “reduce your attack surface,” “layers of security,” “raise the cost of surveillance for the other side.” But no one can say that if you did all this, you'd guarantee you wouldn't be surveilled. People who promise that are quacks.

What I reconfirmed for myself by looking through the Snowden material is that if an entity with the capability of the U.S. government is willing to devote resources to you as a target, they will get what they want. There is no complete technological answer. You can raise the bar — legally, technically, by using defensive resources — but at the end of the day, they can still do it. I've always taken considerable precautions, but I'm taking even more now.

What percentage of the material Snowden provided did you decide not to reveal?

I can't go there.

With 20-20 hindsight, would you have handled the story any differently?

There are a few things on the margins that I can't talk about. But on the whole, I'm quite happy with the way things have gone. I wish I could have moved faster in some ways, but this was not a story for speed. I've spent most of the last 20 years covering national security, but this was by far the most complicated and difficult set of journalistic and national-security and legal decisions I've ever been faced with. I've taught about national-security secrets at Princeton and made public lectures, so I was reasonably well prepared. But this was a 100-year storm. It was *sui generis*. WikiLeaks had more documents — quite a bit more than we did — but none of them were classified as higher than “Secret.” I've seen U.S. Navy laundry manuals classified as secret. It's not a stamp you put on stuff when you really care about it. But the Snowden stuff is all “Top Secret” and above.

You come out of a background as a mainstream journalist, whereas Glenn Greenwald, another journalist who worked with Snowden, is more from the activist mold. How did that shape your approach to covering the story?

I approached it the same way I always have as a journalist, with verification and thinking through what the public interest is.

Generally speaking, I have been writing the facts as I see them without saying what I think the policy should be. The book I'm writing will have more of a point of view, and that's more appropriate for a book.

Have you personally decided where the proper line is for government surveillance, or do you go back and forth?

Everyone should be grateful I'm not in charge. As a citizen, there are times when I am bothered by what I'm seeing, and am surprised and disturbed by the degree of intrusiveness. And also as a citizen, I'm bothered by the dishonesty of the U.S. government about what's going on, both at the professional and the political level. There has been a succession of statements that turned out to be false under any normal definition of the term. Officials have used specifics in extraordinarily deceptive ways, and I think it's not OK to do something like that on behalf of the public.

Transparency serves the public good in deciding how we should draw the line. Transparency is what allows political debate about regulation and legislation. Surveillance depends to a certain extent on what the private sector does, and previously, the private sector had no reason to object. There was almost no functioning market for privacy before, because there wasn't enough information to drive demand. We didn't know what the threats were, and so the companies had no big reason to address them. Now the big Internet companies are beginning to compete on privacy. In specific response to one of my stories, Yahoo announced that it would begin encrypting all its Web Mail connections in January. Google, which had done that long ago, now says it will also encrypt the links that connect its data centers around the world. The list goes on.

Do you think Snowden's concern for privacy is genuine?

I think it's very clear, whether you agree with him or not, that he is acting out of idealistic motives and that he believes what he's saying. He's taken enormous risks and paid an enormous price for it. One of the things I do with any source is pay close attention to their motives. I'm alert to exaggeration, self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, and hidden agendas. This guy believed he was witnessing an out-of-control surveillance state. And as we've seen, it hasn't been beyond the pale of American public opinion, because when it became public, people welcomed the debate. The director of national intelligence and the president and the NSA have felt obliged to say that having this debate is a good thing, even if it shouldn't have come about this way. ♦ *Interview conducted and condensed by Louis Jacobson '92*

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