The Ethics of Edward Snowden

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We’ve all heard about the recent ongoing scandal with the government and our right, as citizens, to privacy. The name most associated with this scandal is Edward Snowden who has been appropriately dubbed the ‘Whistle Blower’. Snowden is a computer specialist who used to work for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) before becoming a contractor for the National Security Agency (NSA). During his time working for the government, Snowden had access to some of the most top secret programs being run.

One of these was the surveillance of American citizens in a program known as PRISM. PRISM is the code word for a nationwide data mining operation officially known as SIGINT (signals intelligence) Activity Designator or SIGAD US-984XN. SIGAD is a joint, worldwide operation between the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. SIGAD, in the joint operation, is the name for the collection of signal collection stations operated within bases or ships. The string of characters behind SIGAD designated which source(s) were used to collect the information.

The PRISM program was leaked to the American public by Edward Snowden along with many other things. Before Snowden leaked anything confidential though, he fled the United States to Hong Kong in order to escape government persecution. Along with the first documents he leaked to the Guardian, Snowden also sent a note saying, "I understand that I will be made to suffer for my actions," but "I will be satisfied if the federation of secret law, unequal pardon and irresistible executive powers that rule the world that I love are revealed even for an instant."

What PRISM actually is a GIAGANTIC data set of a large percentage of internet traffic. The NSA worked with tech companies such as Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, PafTalk, YouTube, Skype, AOL, and Apple in order to collect information such as e-mails, voice chats, video chats, videos, photos, stored data, VoIP, file transfers, video conferences, notifications of activities, social networking details, and some special requests.
On top of PRISM, Snowden also leaked MAINWAY, a database that collects meta data from the 3 top cell phone providers in the United States: AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint. This doesn’t mean the NSA listens to every call, but it does receive data such as who was called, when the call was made, where the call was made, and how long the call lasted. While this may not give insight into what the call was about, since the phone had to be connected to a cell tower during its duration, it gives the government a rough estimate of where a person was throughout the call, whether the person moved or not. It’s estimated that MAINWAY has near two trillion (that’s a two followed by twelve zeros) individual records.

The third major thing Snowden leaked was a project called Boundless Informant. Boundless Informant is a big data analysis and visualization system. This system collects and analyzes international data usage. Boundless Informant collects data such as electronic surveillance program records and telephone meta data like an international MAINWAY. The system deals with higher level information. This means that the data doesn’t dive very deep; instead it gives a broad overview over statistics of the data, such as how much intelligence was collected from a certain country.

All of this information barely scratches the surface of what has been leaked by Edward Snowden. The Guardian, who was Snowden’s chosen media outlet due they’re constantly publishing information in a timely manner, has a huge web page dedicated to the leak. Not only does it have all of the documents Snowden has leaked, but it also has explanations for most, if not all, of the individual pieces, what has been done, what is being done, and a ton of interviews with technical and political experts over the various parts of the case. All in all the site has a wealth of information that anyone can read up on to become an informed citizen. The title of the page is NSA FILES: DECODED and can be found at

There is an abundance of ethical dilemmas in this situation. When Snowden came out as the Whistle Blower he was trying to show the American public, and in some instances the international public, that what the American government was ethically wrong and illegal. In response he wanted the citizens to rise up and demand the government to reconform to and obey the laws set forth by the constitution along with being more ethically sound in the ways they treat the public, such as being more transparent being as the American government was established as a government “for the people, by the people”. However, what Snowden was actually was a backlash from the American government attacking his personal ethics and using this as a means to turn the public from the actual issue to some propaganda scandal over a supposed government employ with tons of top secret information selling secrets and defecting to a foreign enemy. This is common logical fallacy called tu quoque that much of the uninformed public take to be an actual argument.

First we’ll talk about the ethics of Edward Snowden followed by the ethics of the American government. The ethical arguments centered on Snowden are as follows: should he have revealed the top secret information, should he have accepted a job knowing he would collect top secret information, should he have fled the country, and should he return to the country to accept the punishment due his ‘crime’. The ethical arguments centered on the American government are: should they be collecting domestic information, should they be collecting international information on such a huge scale, should they be hiding this operation from the public, should they have labeled Edward Snowden a criminal for bringing this to the public’s eye, and should they be attacking Edward Snowden’s character?

The most prominent question that has come up, which should in fact be one of the lesser asked questions, is should Edward Snowden have stolen and released the information to the public. First of all I’ll address the claim that Snowden stole the information. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines steal as “to take (something that does not belong to you) in a way
that is wrong or illegal”. Snowden did take something that didn’t belong to him, and he did do this in a wrong way; he purposely applied for and took a lower paying job for contractors that worked more in-depth, with more access to NSA data, and with less monitoring than his current position offered. However, the information was not the NSA’s nor the government’s to begin with. If one drug cartel stole another drug cartel’s drug smuggling boat that that cartel stole from an innocent bystander, the general public would probably care more about the fact that the boat being stolen from a law-abiding citizen. Most people would also say that beings the first cartel stole the boat, that when it was stolen from them they would have no claim to either legally or ethically. This is the same situation. Except the first drug cartel is the government stealing our information, and the second is Snowden who is stealing the information about the stole information and giving it back to us. A second definition for steal, also from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is “to wrongly take and use (another person's idea, words, etc.)”. Which exactly what the government has done.

The next question, should he have accepted the position allowing him to collect the information, is easily answered. Wouldn’t most people say it is ethically justified for a police man or an undercover federal agent to go under cover, infiltrate a criminal syndicate, collect information pertaining to the illegal activities of that organization and report back to an authority so that the proper legal actions can be taken? Of course they would. And this is exactly what Edward Snowden did, except in his case the organization he was infiltrating was the government, and the authority he was reporting to was the American public.

Should he have fled the country and should he return to accept his punishment can be addressed at the same time. When a member of a gang starts felling that what his ‘organization’ is morally wrong and he defects and becomes and informant to a government agency, does he not flee, and in some cases is even relocated for his safety by the government, to help protect him from retaliation when his organization finds out? I believe that’s called the Witness
Protection Program. This, again, is the same thing Snowden did, expect in his case the organization he defected from is the largest, arguably most powerful country in the world. He moved for his safety because he knew the government would persecute him. The defected gang member wouldn’t stay in the area after it became known he snitched, he’d most likely be killed. People have said that if Snowden did nothing wrong, then he would have nothing to fear if he were to come back. However the government has labeled him a traitor and would most likely charge him with treason were he to come back on US soil. All of this because he let the people of a ‘free’ country know what the government was doing to them. The hacktivist organization known as Anonymous responded to this whole situation with the simple quote, “When exposing a crime is treated as committing a crime, you are ruled by criminals.”

The real big question that the American public should be asking is, should our government being collecting our data? Or, more appropriately, why in the hell is our elected government recording everything from our emails to who we called last to the recording of my niece’s recital. Our right to privacy as citizens is protected by the first, third, fourth, and ninth amendments of the Constitution. The first gives us the freedom, and privacy of religion. The third, guarantee the privacy of our home. The fourth, and most privacy related amendment, says “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.” And the ninth amendment is more of a general rights amendment that, assumingly, includes privacy. The government has tried to justify small scale intelligence gathering via the Patriot Act and a few others for the monitoring of potential terrorists, most of which has been met with passive disregard and mild disapproval of the public. However, now the government has twisted the meaning to the laws to allow mass surveillance of everything and everything by being everything and everyone back to terrorism
with a few ambiguous and trivial connections. Such as on Tuesday of last week you received a phone call from a friend named X. Earlier on that same day, X made a call to his brother who is doing a study abroad program for international relations in Iran. This obviously makes you a potential terrorist plotting to cause the next 9/11. Both ethically and legally, all citizens have the right to privacy. Benjamin Franklin once said, “Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”

Another question, though certainly not as pertinent to American citizen’s concerns, is should the government be collecting as much international ‘intelligence’ as it is currently. Everyone from potential terroristic nations to countries whom we might go to war with to our allies are being monitored. A sad reality is that the American government collects more intelligence on its own citizens than it does from communist countries like Russia and China. The main reason the international monitoring is an issue is because we include our allies in with everyone else. The only countries safe from the NSA’s prying eyes after the few isolated countries and the very poor nations in Africa that don’t have much, if any at all, infrastructure. Our allies finding out about our government’s collecting information on them will probably lead to some closed door meetings among themselves to establish a way to make the US repent for its transgressions. We, as American citizens, would obviously be upset if we found out that an ally of ours was recording and monitoring everything we do.

Should the government be hiding this operation from its citizens? The founding fathers created this country to be a nation for the people by the people. The people run for political office and the people vote for who gets the position. The government should be working with the people, not behind their backs. I understand that some situations need to be kept privy only to the highest authorities, and that some things should be hidden from the people for their own good. But this is not one of them. The excuses the government uses to justify this abuse of power is full of holes and in no can be upheld or supported by the informed public.
Finally, should they have labeled Edward Snowden a criminal and should they be destroying his character in the public’s opinion? These are two sides of the same coin. The government, just as any other organization that had their secrets spilled, does not like the fact that Snowden shared national secrets with the public. They call him traitor and consider him treasonous because they considered what he did, ‘stealing’ information from the state, a crime because it was released publicly, giving everyone, citizen or not, access to it. The government is labeling Snowden a criminal for two reasons. Firstly, they consider what he did was a crime, which we’ve already covered that. Secondly, if they didn’t, it would make them look weak, or that what he did really wasn’t a crime. Which is why they tried to destroy he character. By attacking him purposely they tear down his personal morals and make him look like he did what he did for some kind of personal gain; which it can obviously be shown otherwise by watching is thirteen minute interview with the Guardian. Also when this leak of government secrets became a scandal with a government employee, the media coverage shifted from what the government had done to what Snowden had done; even though it was a good natured gesture to help inform the American public, the government through their pull with the media outlets, turned what he did into a crime and cast him into a bad light.

I whole heartedly support what Snowden did. The American government, regardless of whatever bill or law they wish to site, have no right to infringe upon citizen’s privacy. Honestly, I am a bit appalled by the general public’s apathy towards the whole situation. It’s only been a few months since the leak and now it has hardly any media coverage. This means it has been long forgotten by most people, nothing has been changed, no major political shift or adjustments have been made, and the NSA is back to what is was doing before, except even more hidden and protected. I’ll close with my favorite quote that can be applied to this whole situation by Ron Paul, “truth is treason in the empire of lies.”
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