The multifarious methods of oppression employed by an imperial state would fill an encyclopedia. One general method is the control of language, and one sub-set covers rhetorical devices. A specific figure is euphemism, a powerful way of hiding folly and depravity. For example, our government has rebranded US state assassination as “high value targeting.” Dick

"I refuse to live in a country like this, and I'm not leaving"
Michael Moore

Nos. 3 & 4 at end

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Snyder, “Maincore”: US Martial Law Detainee List
Harris, The Rise of the America's Surveillance State
Surveillance Cameras
Greenwald, Future Surveillance
Solomon, Effective Resistance
New York Times Reports on Surveillance. For example, Lichtblau (NYT), Data-Gathering Law Widened. ADG (7-6-13) 1A.

Contents #7 Sept. 11, 2013
Resisting National Security Abuse
Free Press Action Fund
STOP WATCHING US RALLY OCTOBER 26, 2016

About the rally

Right now the NSA is spying on everyone's personal communications, and they're operating without any meaningful oversight. Since the Snowden leaks started, more than 571,000
people from all walks of life have signed the StopWatching.us petition telling the U.S. Congress that we want them to rein in the NSA.

On October 26th, the 12th anniversary of the signing of the US Patriot Act, we're taking the next step and holding the largest rally yet against NSA surveillance. We'll be handing the half-million petitions to Congress to remind them that they work for us -- and we won't tolerate mass surveillance any longer.

Who we are

StopWatching.us is a coalition of more than 100 public advocacy organizations and companies from across the political spectrum. We came together in June 2013 to demand the U.S. Congress investigate the full extent of the NSA's spying programs. Go here to read our letter to U.S. Congress demanding accountability and reform.

Members of the StopWatching.us coalition include:

PUBLIC ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS:
INDIVIDUALS:

Tim Berners-Lee
Inventor of the World Wide Web

Daniel Ellsberg
Whistleblower of the Pentagon Papers, Author

Gabriella Coleman
Author and academic

Glenn Greenwald

+ More than 100 others. See the full list.
Ai Weiwei
Chinese artist and activist

COMPANIES:

+ More than 20 others. See the full list.

NEWS

Project Megaphone:
Fight Surveillance With 9 Lines of Code
17 Oct 2013
Own a website? We need your help.
Read more ...

Announcing the Rally Against Mass Surveillance
18 Sep 2013
The recent NSA revelations have laid it all out: The NSA is watching us online and on our phones. The NSA has corrupted security and cryptography, undermining the fabric of the Internet. Its overreaching surveillance is creating a climate of fear, chills free speech, and violates our basic human rights — and it operates without any meaningful oversight.
Read more ...

WAYS TO TAKE PART
• In person in Washington, D.C
• At a viewing party in cities around the world
• Take part online

EVENT DETAILS
• **Location:**
  Gather at Columbus Circle in front of Union Station, then march to the Capitol Reflecting Pool
• **Date and time:**
  12pm Eastern, Saturday October 26th

WHAT TO EXPECT:
• The single largest rally yet in opposition to surveillance
• Live music

Sign up now:

EMAIL:

SIGN UP TO ATTEND
NSA IN *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 7-6-13 – 9-28-13

From early July to end of September 2013, Arkansas’ largest newspaper reported the abuses by the National Security Agency and related stories sufficiently, it would seem, to alert the reading public of the NSA’s catastrophic attack on the Bill of Rights. I look forward to the analyses of media reporting of these events in professional journals and books. --Dick

Lichtbau, Eric. “Court seen quietly widening data-gathering law.” *ADG* (7-6-13) 1A

London. “Privacy group sues over U.S., UK dragnet.” *ADG* (7-9-13) 6A

Washington. “High court asked to rule on spy program.” *ADG* (7-9–13) 2A

ADG Staff. “FBI pick defends spying. He also urges more light on secret court.” *ADG* (7-10-13) 1A

ADG Staff. “Lawmakers threaten to curtail spy authority in U.S.” *ADG* (7-18-13) 1A
Schoenberg, Tom. “Court to reporter: Testify. Trial question: Was ex-CIA official source for book?” ADG (7-20-13) 7A

Lafraniere, Sharon. “Leak scorecard spurs crackdown.” ADG (7-21-13) 11A

ADG Staff. “Snowden to stay in Russia.” ADG (7-25-13) 7A

Dozier, Kimberly. “U.S. denies agency spied on journalist: New Zealand rejects claim it had role.” ADG (7-30-13) 1A

ADG Staff. “Documents tell more on U.S. data spying.” ADG (8-1-13) 1A

Dishneau, David. “Leaks hurt U.S.’ foreign ties, general says at GI’s sentencing hearing.” ADG (8-1-13) 9A

Editorial Hamilton, Alexander, Fayetteville. “Access was negligible.” ADG (8-7-13) 5B

Fort Meade, Md. “GI’s leaks said to hurt human-rights push.” ADG 8-3-13 2A

Savage, Charles. NYT “NSA Searches Emails, Texts Into, Out Of U.S.” ADG (8-8-13) 1A

Brasila, Brazil. “Brazil Wants U.S. To Clarify Spying.” ADG (8-14-13 4A)

Goldman, Adam. AP “Increasingly Terrorists Tap Net For Plots.” ADG (8-15-13) 1A
Gellman, Barton. WP “Audit: NSA Broke Privacy Rules: Thousands of Infractions Racked Up Each Year Since ’08.” ADG (8-16-13) 1A

Dozier, Kimberly. AP “Lawmakers Call For Change After NSA Audit Leak.” ADG (8-17-13) 3A

ADG Staff. “NSA Unveils History On Its Email Collecting.” ADG (8-22-13) 2A

ADG Staff. “NSA Admits Rare, Willful, Spying Abuse.” ADG (8-24-13) 1A

Whitlock, Craig and Gellman, Barton. WP “Satellites Guided Bin Laden Raid.” ADG (8-31-13) 2A

Gellman, Barton. WP “U.S. On Offensive With Cyberwarfare, Documents Show.” ADG (8-31-13) 1A

ADG Staff. “Told NSA Read Email, Brazil Irked.” ADG (9-3-13) 1A

Perlroth, Nicole et al. NYT “Leak: Agency Widely Cracks Encrypted Net.” ADG (9-6-13)

Washington. “Surveillance-Court Papers To Be Released.” ADG (9-8-13) 4A

ADG Staff. “OK To Search Collected Data: NSA Cracked Access to Smart Phones.” ADG (9-9-13) 1A

ADG Staff. “NSA Broke Rules, Documents Show: Up To 16,000 Phone Queries Didn’t Pass Legal Standard Over 3-Year Span.” ADG (9-11-13) 1A

Braun, Stephen. AP “NSA Confirms 12 Spying Misuses: Agency Chief Says Employees Held
Accountable For Actions."* ADG (9-28-13) 2A
September 22, 2013

Tomgram: Calabrese and Harwood, Privacy Down the Drain

In the U.S. these days, privacy is so been-there-done-that. Just this week, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, a secret outfit that hears only the government side of any argument and has generally been a rubberstamp for surveillance requests, declassified an opinion backing the full-scale collection and retention of the phone records (“metadata”) of American citizens. That staggering act was, the judge claimed, in no way in violation of the Fourth Amendment or of American privacy. She also gave us a little peek at corporate courage in our brave new surveillance world, writing that “no holder of records [i.e., telecommunications company] who has received an order to produce bulk telephony metadata has challenged the legality of such an order.”

That story, like so many others in recent months, arrived thanks to the revelations of Edward Snowden about the ever-widening powers of the National Security Agency (NSA), led by a general who, we now know, lives in a world of intergalactic fantasies of power and control out of Star Trek: The Next Generation and once even worked in an Army intelligence war room created by a Hollywood set designer in the style of that show. As Christopher Calabrese and Matthew Harwood indicate today, however, gigantic as the NSA’s intrusions on privacy might be, they are only part of an uncomfortably large story in which many U.S. agencies and outfits feel free to take possession of our lives in ever more technologically advanced and intrusive ways.

Just this week, in fact, the American Civil Liberties Union (for which both Calabrese and Harwood work) released an important new report on the post-9/11 morphing of the FBI into a “secret domestic intelligence agency.” In addition to the subterranean surveillance of protesters and religious groups, the Washington Post offered this summary list of the ways in which, according to that report, the Bureau has expanded in the twenty-first century: “The changes highlighted in the report include the FBI's racial and ethnic mapping program, which allows the FBI to collect demographic information to map American communities by race and ethnicity; the use of secret National Security Letters, which asked for account information from telecommunications companies, financial institutions, and credit agencies and required no judicial approval; warrantless wiretapping; and the recent revelations about the government’s use of Section 215 of the Patriot Act to track all U.S. telephone calls.”

All of this and, as you’ll see in today’s piece, so much more has been done in the name of American “safety,” the mantra with which Washington has funded and built its new version of a global surveillance state. Tom
Destroying the Right to Be Left Alone
The NSA Isn’t the Only Government Agency Exploiting Technology to Make Privacy Obsolete
By Christopher Calabrese and Matthew Harwood

For at least the last six years, government agents have been exploiting an AT&T database filled with the records of billions of American phone calls from as far back as 1987. The rationale behind this dragnet intrusion, codenamed Hemisphere, is to find suspicious links between people with “burner” phones (prepaid mobile phones easy to buy, use, and quickly dispose of), which are popular with drug dealers. The secret information gleaned from this relationship with the telecommunications giant has been used to convict Americans of various crimes, all without the defendants or the courts having any idea how the feds stumbled upon them in the first place. The program is so secret, so powerful, and so alarming that agents “are instructed to never refer to Hemisphere in any official document,” according to a recently released government PowerPoint slide.

You’re probably assuming that...
28 September 13 PM  

**Reader Supported News**

**Noam Chomsky: 'The Foundations of Liberty Are Ripped to Shreds'**

_Satellite_

Excerpt: "I think it's everything from that to surveillance systems that will be of unimaginable scale and character. And of course now data can be collected endlessly. In fact Obama supposedly has a data storage system being constructed in Utah somewhere where all kinds of data are being poured in. Who knows what?" - Noam Chomsky

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29 September 13AM  **Reader Supported News**

**Snowden Files: NSA Gathers Data on Social Connections of US Citizens**

_James Risen, Laura Poitras, The New York Times_

Risen and Poitras report: "Since 2010, the National Security Agency has been exploiting its huge collections of data to create sophisticated graphs of some Americans' social connections that can identify their associates, their locations at certain times, their traveling companions and other personal information."

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Obama Admin Tries to Block Supreme Court Review of NSA Spying


[http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2013/10/16-5](http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2013/10/16-5)
US Using the Stasi Playbook: NSA Whistleblower Statement at EU Parliament
http://www.commondreams.org/video/2013/10/02-0

Oversight of NSA a Sham
'A Total Joke': Independent Review of NSA Not Actually Independent
by Sarah Lazare. "New report shows review board functions under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and is comprised of White House insiders."

Common Dreams commondreams@commondreams.org via uark.edu

18 September 13 AM Reader Supported News
Brazil's Rousseff Calls off State Visit to US Over Spying
Anthony Boadle, Reuters
Reuters writes: "Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff has called off plans for a state visit to Washington in October because of revelations that the United States spied on her personal communications and those of other Brazilians."
READ MORE

US IN UK: “BIG BROTHER AND THE SECRET SECURITY STATE” by Dave Webb
Space Alert! Fall 2013
Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space
PO Box 652
Brunswick, ME 04011
[NSA's Prism project in US, in UK at Menwith Hill, both massive satellite and fiber optic telecommunications interceptions. –Dick]
The outrage and shock, that greeted Edward Snowden’s exposure of the NSA’s Prism programme was a bit frustrating to many of us in the Global Network. We’ve been warning about all of this for a long time. There is so much that hasn’t yet been covered by the media that is even more frightening.

For those of us campaigning around the issues in the UK it was even more exasperating that there was hardly a mention of Menwith Hill’s role in all this.

As many in the Global Network know Menwith Hill, in North Yorkshire, is probably the biggest NSA establishment outside the US and has been key to the global system of US espionage, war planning and execution and general global hegemony. Menwith Hill has undergone a huge expansion of its surveillance capabilities, combining both satellite and fibre-optic telecommunications interceptions, with unbelievable computing power and analytical support in conjunction with GCHQ (the Government Communications Head Quarters, the UK equivalent to the NSA), it is probably the largest and most sophisticated technological system ever developed in the UK.

Although it is labelled as ‘RAF’ most of the staff are from the NSA and commercial contractors such as Lockheed Martin. The UK is represented through GCHQ operatives and Snowden has commented that UK eavesdropping through GCHQ is even worse than that of the US and NSA.

In 2011 Yorkshire CND commissioned writer and researcher Dr. Steve Schofield to carry out a study on the base and the
result was published in March 2012 as a 65-page report titled “Lifting the Lid on Menwith Hill.” In the report Steve describes how Menwith Hill’s primary mission is to provide “intelligence support for UK, US and allied interests.” The multimillion-pound expansion to the base known as Project Phoenix is “one of the largest and most sophisticated high technology programs carried out anywhere in the UK over the last 10 years” but there was little or no mention of these connections in the UK national media when the news of Prism broke. As Steve has pointed out “what should be even more disturbing is that Prism is only one element of a global, electronic surveillance system constructed by the NSA to ensure US supremacy in intelligence-led warfare, using special operations forces and armed drones.”

Then on 17th June the Guardian reported that the UK Ministry of Defence had issued a confidential D-Notice (Defence Advisory Notice) to the BBC and other media organisations. D-Notices are government requests not to publish or broadcast items on specified subjects on the grounds of “national security” and one was issued the day after the Guardian had printed their report on the extent of the NSA’s systematic police-state surveillance - its purpose was obviously to censor any further coverage and it is worth noting that a D-Notice was also served on the UK media in November 2010, two days before Julian Assange began publishing 251,287 secret US embassy cables that exposed the lies and criminal activities of the US and other governments. The UK government was
telling the ‘free’ press not to say or do anything that might jeopardise the illegal and criminal wars in which the UK was involved. In the UK as in the US, the mainstream media continues to do what it is told. The Guardian continues to highlight Snowden’s disclosures but the emphasis is still on privacy and on how the NSA or GCHQ “watches nearly everything we do online.” But even they are not saying anything about the other role of these systems.

Both Bush and Obama administrations have increased funding of the Big Brother and the Secret Security State (See Big Brother P 13.) [http://www.space4peace.org/newsletter/Space%20Alert%2028.pdf]

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**The Secret Breakers** by Peter Maass.

*The New York Times Magazine | August 18, 2013*

How Laura Poitras Helped Snowden Spill His Secrets [http://www.petermaass.com/articles/an_unusual_exhibit_about_our_invasion_of_iraq_ten_years_later/]

*** [For full article go to web site above. –Dick]

Greenwald lives and works in a house surrounded by tropical foliage in a remote area of Rio de Janeiro. He shares the home with his Brazilian partner and their 10 dogs and one cat, and the place has the feel of a low-key fraternity that has been dropped down in the jungle. The kitchen clock is off by hours, but no one notices; dishes tend to pile up in the sink; the living room contains a table and a couch and a large TV, an Xbox console and a box of poker chips and not much else. The refrigerator is not always filled with fresh vegetables. A family of monkeys occasionally raids the banana trees in the backyard and engages in shrieking battles with the dogs.
Greenwald does most of his work on a shaded porch, usually dressed in a T-shirt, surfer shorts and flip-flops. Over the four days I spent there, he was in perpetual motion, speaking on the phone in Portuguese and English, rushing out the door to be interviewed in the city below, answering calls and e-mails from people seeking information about Snowden, tweeting to his 225,000 followers (and conducting intense arguments with a number of them), then sitting down to write more N.S.A. articles for The Guardian, all while pleading with his dogs to stay quiet. During one especially fever-pitched moment, he hollered, “Shut up, everyone,” but they didn’t seem to care.

Amid the chaos, Poitras, an intense-looking woman of 49, sat in a spare bedroom or at the table in the living room, working in concentrated silence in front of her multiple computers. Once in a while she would walk over to the porch to talk with Greenwald about the article he was working on, or he would sometimes stop what he was doing to look at the latest version of a new video she was editing about Snowden. They would talk intensely — Greenwald far louder and more rapid-fire than Poitras — and occasionally break out laughing at some shared joke or absurd memory. The Snowden story, they both said, was a battle they were waging together, a fight against powers of surveillance that they both believe are a threat to fundamental American liberties.

Two reporters for The Guardian were in town to assist Greenwald, so some of our time was spent in the hotel where they were staying along Copacabana Beach, the toned Brazilians playing volleyball in the sand below lending the whole thing an added layer of surreality. Poitras has shared the byline on some of Greenwald’s articles, but for the most part she has preferred to stay in the background, letting him do the writing and talking. As a result, Greenwald is the one hailed as either a fearless defender of individual rights or a nefarious traitor, depending on your perspective. “I keep calling her the Keyser Soze of the story, because she’s at once completely invisible and yet ubiquitous,” Greenwald said, referring to the character in “The Usual Suspects” played by Kevin Spacey, a mastermind masquerading as a nobody. “She’s been at the center of all of this, and yet no one knows anything about her.”

As dusk fell one evening, I followed Poitras and Greenwald to the newsroom of O Globo, one of the largest newspapers in Brazil. Greenwald had just published an article there detailing how the N.S.A. was spying on Brazilian phone calls and e-mails. The article caused a huge scandal in Brazil, as similar articles have done in other countries around the world, and Greenwald was a celebrity in the newsroom. The editor in chief pumped his hand and asked him to write a regular column; reporters took souvenir pictures with their cellphones. Poitras filmed some of this, then put her camera down and looked on. I noted that nobody was paying attention to her, that all eyes were on Greenwald, and she smiled. “That’s right,” she said. “That’s perfect.”

Poitras seems to work at blending in, a function more of strategy than of shyness. She can actually be remarkably forceful when it comes to managing information. During a conversation in which I began to ask
her a few questions about her personal life, she remarked, “This is like visiting the dentist.” The thumbnail portrait is this: She was raised in a well-off family outside Boston, and after high school, she moved to San Francisco to work as a chef in upscale restaurants. She also took classes at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she studied under the experimental filmmaker Ernie Gehr. In 1992, she moved to New York and began to make her way in the film world, while also enrolling in graduate classes in social and political theory at the New School. Since then she has made five films, most recently “The Oath,” about the Guantánamo prisoner Salim Hamdan and his brother-in-law back in Yemen, and has been the recipient of a Peabody Award and a MacArthur award.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Poitras was on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when the towers were attacked. Like most New Yorkers, in the weeks that followed she was swept up in both mourning and a feeling of unity. It was a moment, she said, when “people could have done anything, in a positive sense.” When that moment led to the pre-emptive invasion of Iraq, she felt that her country had lost its way. “We always wonder how countries can veer off course,” she said. “How do people let it happen, how do people sit by during this slipping of boundaries?” Poitras had no experience in conflict zones, but in June 2004, she went to Iraq and began documenting the occupation.

Although the allegations were without evidence, they may be related to Poitras’s many detentions and searches. Hendrickson and another soldier told me that in 2007 — months after she was first detained — investigators from the Department of Justice’s Joint Terrorism Task Force interviewed them, inquiring about Poitras’s activities in Baghdad that day. Poitras was never contacted by those or any other investigators, however. “Iraq forces and the U.S. military raided a mosque during Friday prayers and killed several people,” Poitras said. “Violence broke out the next day. I am a documentary filmmaker and was filming in the neighborhood. Any suggestion I knew about an attack is false. The U.S. government should investigate who ordered the raid, not journalists covering the war.”

In June 2006, her tickets on domestic flights were marked “SSSS” — Secondary Security Screening Selection — which means the bearer faces extra scrutiny beyond the usual measures. She was detained for the first time at Newark International Airport before boarding a flight to Israel, where she was showing her film. On her return flight, she was held for two hours before being allowed to re-enter the country. The next month, she traveled to Bosnia to show the film at a festival there. When she flew out of Sarajevo and landed in Vienna, she was paged on the airport loudspeaker and told to go to a security desk; from there she was led to a van and driven to another part of the airport, then taken into a room where luggage was examined.

“They took my bags and checked them,” Poitras said. “They asked me what I was doing, and I said I was
showing a movie in Sarajevo about the Iraq war. And then I sort of befriended the security guy. I asked what was going on. He said: ‘You’re flagged. You have a threat score that is off the Richter scale. You are at 400 out of 400.’ I said, ‘Is this a scoring system that works throughout all of Europe, or is this an American scoring system?’ He said. ‘No, this is your government that has this and has told us to stop you.’

After 9/11, the U.S. government began compiling a terrorist watch list that was at one point estimated to contain nearly a million names. There are at least two subsidiary lists that relate to air travel. The no-fly list contains the names of tens of thousands of people who are not allowed to fly into or out of the country. The selectee list, which is larger than the no-fly list, subjects people to extra airport inspections and questioning. These lists have been criticized by civil rights groups for being too broad and arbitrary and for violating the rights of Americans who are on them.

In Vienna, Poitras was eventually cleared to board her connecting flight to New York, but when she landed at J.F.K., she was met at the gate by two armed law-enforcement agents and taken to a room for questioning. It is a routine that has happened so many times since then — on more than 40 occasions — that she has lost precise count. Initially, she said, the authorities were interested in the paper she carried, copying her receipts and, once, her notebook. After she stopped carrying her notes, they focused on her electronics instead, telling her that if she didn’t answer their questions, they would confiscate her gear and get their answers that way. On one occasion, Poitras says, they did seize her computers and cellphones and kept them for weeks. She was also told that her refusal to answer questions was itself a suspicious act. Because the interrogations took place at international boarding crossings, where the government contends that ordinary constitutional rights do not apply, she was not permitted to have a lawyer present.

“It’s a total violation,” Poitras said. “That’s how it feels. They are interested in information that pertains to the work I am doing that’s clearly private and privileged. It’s an intimidating situation when people with guns meet you when you get off an airplane.”

Though she has written to members of Congress and has submitted Freedom of Information Act requests, Poitras has never received any explanation for why she was put on a watch list. “It’s infuriating that I have to speculate why,” she said. “When did that universe begin, that people are put on a list and are never told and are stopped for six years? I have no idea why they did it. It’s the complete suspension of due process.” She added: “I’ve been told nothing, I’ve been asked nothing, and I’ve done nothing. It’s like Kafka. Nobody ever tells you what the accusation is.”

After being detained repeatedly, Poitras began taking steps to protect her data, asking a traveling companion to carry her laptop, leaving her notebooks overseas with friends or in safe deposit boxes. She would wipe her computers and cellphones clean so that there would be nothing for the authorities to see.
Or she encrypted her data, so that law enforcement could not read any files they might get hold of. These security preparations could take a day or more before her travels.

It wasn’t just border searches that she had to worry about. Poitras said she felt that if the government was suspicious enough to interrogate her at airports, it was also most likely surveilling her e-mail, phone calls and Web browsing. “I assume that there are National Security Letters on my e-mails,” she told me, referring to one of the secretive surveillance tools used by the Department of Justice. A National Security Letter requires its recipients — in most cases, Internet service providers and phone companies — to provide customer data without notifying the customers or any other parties. Poitras suspected (but could not confirm, because her phone company and I.S.P. would be prohibited from telling her) that the F.B.I. had issued National Security Letters for her electronic communications.

Once she began working on her surveillance film in 2011, she raised her digital security to an even higher level. She cut down her use of a cellphone, which betrays not only who you are calling and when, but your location at any given point in time. She was careful about e-mailing sensitive documents or having sensitive conversations on the phone. She began using software that masked the Web sites she visited. After she was contacted by Snowden in 2013, she tightened her security yet another notch. In addition to encrypting any sensitive e-mails, she began using different computers for editing film, for communicating and for reading sensitive documents (the one for sensitive documents is air-gapped, meaning it has never been connected to the Internet).

These precautions might seem paranoid — Poitras describes them as “pretty extreme” — but the people she has interviewed for her film were targets of the sort of surveillance and seizure that she fears. William Binney, a former top N.S.A. official who publicly accused the agency of illegal surveillance, was at home one morning in 2007 when F.B.I. agents burst in and aimed their weapons at his wife, his son and himself. Binney was, at the moment the agent entered his bathroom and pointed a gun at his head, naked in the shower. His computers, disks and personal records were confiscated and have not yet been returned. Binney has not been charged with any crime.

Jacob Appelbaum, a privacy activist who was a volunteer with WikiLeaks, has also been filmed by Poitras. The government issued a secret order to Twitter for access to Appelbaum’s account data, which became public when Twitter fought the order. Though the company was forced to hand over the data, it was allowed to tell Appelbaum. Google and a small I.S.P. that Appelbaum used were also served with secret orders and fought to alert him. Like Binney, Appelbaum has not been charged with any crime.

Poitras endured the airport searches for years with little public complaint, lest her protests generate more suspicion and hostility from the government, but last year she reached a breaking point. While being interrogated at Newark after a flight from Britain, she was told she could not take notes. On the advice of
lawyers, Poitras always recorded the names of border agents and the questions they asked and the material they copied or seized. But at Newark, an agent threatened to handcuff her if she continued writing. She was told that she was being barred from writing anything down because she might use her pen as a weapon.

“Then I asked for crayons,” Poitras recalled, “and he said no to crayons.”

She was taken into another room and interrogated by three agents — one was behind her, another asked the questions, the third was a supervisor. “It went on for maybe an hour and a half,” she said. “I was taking notes of their questions, or trying to, and they yelled at me. I said, ‘Show me the law where it says I can’t take notes.’ We were in a sense debating what they were trying to forbid me from doing. They said, ‘We are the ones asking the questions.’ It was a pretty aggressive, antagonistic encounter.”

Poitras met Greenwald in 2010, when she became interested in his work on WikiLeaks. In 2011, she went to Rio to film him for her documentary. He was aware of the searches and asked several times for permission to write about them. After Newark, she gave him a green light.

“She said, ‘I’ve had it,’” Greenwald told me. “Her ability to take notes and document what was happening was her one sense of agency, to maintain some degree of control. Documenting is what she does. I think she was feeling that the one vestige of security and control in this situation had been taken away from her, without any explanation, just as an arbitrary exercise of power.”

At the time, Greenwald was a writer for Salon. His article, “U.S. Filmmaker Repeatedly Detained at Border,” was published in April 2012. Shortly after it was posted, the detentions ceased. Six years of surveillance and harassment, Poitras hoped, might be coming to an end.

***

Poitras was not Snowden’s first choice as the person to whom he wanted to leak thousands of N.S.A. documents. In fact, a month before contacting her, he reached out to Greenwald, who had written extensively and critically about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the erosion of civil liberties in the wake of 9/11. Snowden anonymously sent him an e-mail saying he had documents he wanted to share, and followed that up with a step-by-step guide on how to encrypt communications, which Greenwald ignored. Snowden then sent a link to an encryption video, also to no avail.

“It’s really annoying and complicated, the encryption software,” Greenwald said as we sat on his porch during a tropical drizzle. “He kept harassing me, but at some point he just got frustrated, so he went to Laura.”
Snowden had read Greenwald’s article about Poitras’s troubles at U.S. airports and knew she was making a film about the government’s surveillance programs; he had also seen a short documentary about the N.S.A. that she made for The New York Times Op-Docs. He figured that she would understand the programs he wanted to leak about and would know how to communicate in a secure way.

By late winter, Poitras decided that the stranger with whom she was communicating was credible. There were none of the provocations that she would expect from a government agent — no requests for information about the people she was in touch with, no questions about what she was working on. Snowden told her early on that she would need to work with someone else, and that she should reach out to Greenwald. She was unaware that Snowden had already tried to contact Greenwald, and Greenwald would not realize until he met Snowden in Hong Kong that this was the person who had contacted him more than six months earlier.

There were surprises for everyone in these exchanges — including Snowden, who answered questions that I submitted to him through Poitras. In response to a question about when he realized he could trust Poitras, he wrote: “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.” When I asked him about Greenwald’s initial silence in response to his requests and instructions for encrypted communications, Snowden replied: “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 [he is] 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 April, Poitras e-mailed Greenwald to say they needed to speak face to face. Greenwald happened to be in the United States, speaking at a conference in a suburb of New York City, and the two met in the lobby of his hotel. “She was very cautious,” Greenwald recalled. “She insisted that I not take my cellphone, because of this ability the government has to remotely listen to cellphones even when they are turned off. She had printed off the e-mails, and I remember reading the e-mails and felt intuitively that this was real. The passion and thought behind what Snowden — who we didn’t know was Snowden at the time — was saying was palpable.”

Greenwald installed encryption software and began communicating with the stranger. Their work was organized like an intelligence operation, with Poitras as the mastermind. “Operational security — she dictated all of that,” Greenwald said. “Which computers I used, how I communicated, how I safeguarded the information, where copies were kept, with whom they were kept, in which places. She has this complete expert level of understanding of how to do a story like this with total technical and operational safety. None of this would have happened with anything near the efficacy and impact it did, had she not been working
with me in every sense and really taking the lead in coordinating most of it.”

Snowden began to provide documents to the two of them. Poitras wouldn’t tell me when he began sending her documents; she does not want to provide the government with information that could be used in a trial against Snowden or herself. He also said he would soon be ready to meet them. When Poitras asked if she should plan on driving to their meeting or taking a train, Snowden told her to be ready to get on a plane.

In May, he sent encrypted messages telling the two of them to go to Hong Kong. Greenwald flew to New York from Rio, and Poitras joined him for meetings with the editor of The Guardian’s American edition. With the paper’s reputation on the line, the editor asked them to bring along a veteran Guardian reporter, Ewen MacAskill, and on June 1, the trio boarded a 16-hour flight from J.F.K. to Hong Kong.

Snowden had sent a small number of documents to Greenwald, about 20 in all, but Poitras had received a larger trove, which she hadn’t yet had the opportunity to read closely. On the plane, Greenwald began going through its contents, eventually coming across a secret court order requiring Verizon to give its customer phone records to the N.S.A. The four-page order was from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, a panel whose decisions are highly classified. Although it was rumored that the N.S.A. was collecting large numbers of American phone records, the government always denied it.

Poitras, sitting 20 rows behind Greenwald, occasionally went forward to talk about what he was reading. As the man sitting next to him slept, Greenwald pointed to the FISA order on his screen and asked Poitras: “Have you seen this? Is this saying what I’m thinking it’s saying?”

At times, they talked so animatedly that they disturbed passengers who were trying to sleep; they quieted down. “We couldn’t believe just how momentous this occasion was,” Greenwald said. “When you read these documents, you get a sense of the breadth of them. It was a rush of adrenaline and ecstasy and elation. You feel you are empowered for the first time because there’s this mammoth system that you try and undermine and subvert and shine a light on — but you usually can’t make any headway, because you don’t have any instruments to do it — [and now] the instruments were suddenly in our lap.”

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Snowden had instructed them that once they were in Hong Kong, they were to go at an appointed time to the Kowloon district and stand outside a restaurant that was in a mall connected to the Mira Hotel. There, they were to wait until they saw a man carrying a Rubik’s Cube, then ask him when the restaurant would open. The man would answer their question, but then warn that the food was bad. When the man with the Rubik’s Cube arrived, it was Edward Snowden, who was 29 at the time but looked even younger.
“Both of us almost fell over when we saw how young he was,” Poitras said, still sounding surprised. “I had no idea. I assumed I was dealing with somebody who was really high-level and therefore older. But I also knew from our back and forth that he was incredibly knowledgeable about computer systems, which put him younger in my mind. So I was thinking like 40s, somebody who really grew up on computers but who had to be at a higher level.”

In our encrypted chat, Snowden also remarked on this moment: “I think they were annoyed that I was younger than they expected, and I was annoyed that they had arrived too early, which complicated the initial verification. As soon as we were behind closed doors, however, I think everyone was reassured by the obsessive attention to precaution and bona fides.”

They followed Snowden to his room, where Poitras immediately shifted into documentarian mode, taking her camera out. “It was a little bit tense, a little uncomfortable,” Greenwald said of those initial minutes. “We sat down, and we just started chatting, and Laura was immediately unpacking her camera. The instant that she turned on the camera, I very vividly recall that both he and I completely stiffened up.”

Greenwald began the questioning. “I wanted to test the consistency of his claims, and I just wanted all the information I could get, given how much I knew this was going to be affecting my credibility and everything else. We weren’t really able to establish a human bond until after that five or six hours was over.”

For Poitras, the camera certainly alters the human dynamic, but not in a bad way. When someone consents to being filmed — even if the consent is indirectly gained when she turns on the camera — this is an act of trust that raises the emotional stakes of the moment. What Greenwald saw as stilted, Poitras saw as a kind of bonding, the sharing of an immense risk. “There is something really palpable and emotional in being trusted like that,” she said.

Snowden, though taken by surprise, got used to it. “As one might imagine, normally spies allergically avoid contact with reporters or media, so I was a virgin source — everything was a surprise. . . . 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 the camera on.”

For the next week, their preparations followed a similar pattern — when they entered Snowden’s room, they would remove their cellphone batteries and place them in the refrigerator of Snowden’s minibar. They lined pillows against the door, to discourage eavesdropping from outside, then Poitras set up her camera and filmed. It was important to Snowden to explain to them how the government’s intelligence machinery worked because he feared that he could be arrested at any time.

Greenwald’s first articles — including the initial one detailing the Verizon order he read about on the flight
to Hong Kong — appeared while they were still in the process of interviewing Snowden. It made for a
strange experience, creating the news together, then watching it spread. “We could see it being covered,”
Poitras said. “We were all surprised at how much attention it was getting. Our work was very focused, and
we were paying attention to that, but we could see on TV that it was taking off. We were in this closed
circle, and around us we knew that reverberations were happening, and they could be seen and they could
be felt.”

Snowden told them before they arrived in Hong Kong that he wanted to go public. He wanted to take
responsibility for what he was doing, Poitras said, and he didn’t want others to be unfairly targeted, and he
assumed he would be identified at some point. She made a 12½-minute video of him that was posted
online June 9, a few days after Greenwald’s first articles. It triggered a media circus in Hong Kong, as
reporters scrambled to learn their whereabouts.

There were a number of subjects that Poitras declined to discuss with me on the record and others she
wouldn’t discuss at all — some for security and legal reasons, others because she wants to be the first to
tell crucial parts of her story in her own documentary. Of her parting with Snowden once the video was
posted, she would only say, “We knew that once it went public, it was the end of that period of working.”

Snowden checked out of his hotel and went into hiding. Reporters found out where Poitras was staying —
she and Greenwald were at different hotels — and phone calls started coming to her room. At one point,
someone knocked on her door and asked for her by name. She knew by then that reporters had discovered
Greenwald, so she called hotel security and arranged to be escorted out a back exit.

She tried to stay in Hong Kong, thinking Snowden might want to see her again, and because she wanted to
film the Chinese reaction to his disclosures. But she had now become a figure of interest herself, not just a
reporter behind the camera. On June 15, as she was filming a pro-Snowden rally outside the U.S.
consulate, a CNN reporter spotted her and began asking questions. Poitras declined to answer and slipped
away. That evening, she left Hong Kong.

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Poitras flew directly to Berlin, where the previous fall she rented an apartment where she could edit her
documentary without worrying that the F.B.I. would show up with a search warrant for her hard drives.
“There is a filter constantly between the places where I feel I have privacy and don’t,” she said, “and that
line is becoming increasingly narrow.” She added: “I’m not stopping what I’m doing, but I have left the
country. I literally didn’t feel like I could protect my material in the United States, and this was before I was
contacted by Snowden. If you promise someone you’re going to protect them as a source and you know
the government is monitoring you or seizing your laptop, you can’t actually physically do it.”
After two weeks in Berlin, Poitras traveled to Rio, where I then met her and Greenwald a few days later. My first stop was the Copacabana hotel, where they were working that day with MacAskill and another visiting reporter from The Guardian, James Ball. Poitras was putting together a new video about Snowden that would be posted in a few days on The Guardian’s Web site. Greenwald, with several Guardian reporters, was working on yet another blockbuster article, this one about Microsoft’s close collaboration with the N.S.A. The room was crowded — there weren’t enough chairs for everyone, so someone was always sitting on the bed or floor. A number of thumb drives were passed back and forth, though I was not told what was on them.

Poitras and Greenwald were worried about Snowden. They hadn’t heard from him since Hong Kong. At the moment, he was stuck in diplomatic limbo in the transit area of Moscow’s Sheremetyevo airport, the most-wanted man on the planet, sought by the U.S. government for espionage. (He would later be granted temporary asylum in Russia.) The video that Poitras was working on, using footage she shot in Hong Kong, would be the first the world had seen of Snowden in a month.

“Now that he’s incommunicado, we don’t know if we’ll even hear from him again,” she said.

“Is he O.K.?” MacAskill asked.

“His lawyer said he’s O.K.,” Greenwald responded.

“But he’s not in direct contact with Snowden,” Poitras said

When Greenwald got home that evening, Snowden contacted him online. Two days later, while she was working at Greenwald’s house, Poitras also heard from him.

It was dusk, and there was loud cawing and hooting coming from the jungle all around. This was mixed with the yapping of five or six dogs as I let myself in the front gate. Through a window, I saw Poitras in the living room, intently working at one of her computers. I let myself in through a screen door, and she glanced up for just a second, then went back to work, completely unperturbed by the cacophony around her. After 10 minutes, she closed the lid of her computer and mumbled an apology about needing to take care of some things.

She showed no emotion and did not mention that she had been in the middle of an encrypted chat with Snowden. At the time, I didn’t press her, but a few days later, after I returned to New York and she returned to Berlin, I asked if that’s what she was doing that evening. She confirmed it, but said she didn’t want to talk about it at the time, because the more she talks about her interactions with Snowden, the more removed she feels from them.
“It’s an incredible emotional experience,” she said, “to be contacted by a complete stranger saying that he was going to risk his life to expose things the public should know. He was putting his life on the line and trusting me with that burden. My experience and relationship to that is something that I want to retain an emotional relation to.” Her connection to him and the material, she said, is what will guide her work. “I am sympathetic to what he sees as the horror of the world [and] what he imagines could come. I want to communicate that with as much resonance as possible. If I were to sit and do endless cable interviews — all those things alienate me from what I need to stay connected to. It’s not just a scoop. It’s someone’s life.”

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Poitras and Greenwald are an especially dramatic example of what outsider reporting looks like in 2013. They do not work in a newsroom, and they personally want to be in control of what gets published and when. When The Guardian didn’t move as quickly as they wanted with the first article on Verizon, Greenwald discussed taking it elsewhere, sending an encrypted draft to a colleague at another publication. He also considered creating a Web site on which they would publish everything, which he planned to call NSADisclosures. In the end, The Guardian moved ahead with their articles. But Poitras and Greenwald have created their own publishing network as well, placing articles with other outlets in Germany and Brazil and planning more for the future. They have not shared the full set of documents with anyone.

“We are in partnership with news organizations, but we feel our primary responsibility is to the risk the source took and to the public interest of the information he has provided,” Poitras said. “Further down on the list would be any particular news organization.”

Unlike many reporters at major news outlets, they do not attempt to maintain a facade of political indifference. Greenwald has been outspoken for years; on Twitter, he recently replied to one critic by writing: “You are a complete idiot. You know that, right?” His left political views, combined with his cutting style, have made him unloved among many in the political establishment. His work with Poitras has been castigated as advocacy that harms national security. “I read intelligence carefully,” said Senator Dianne Feinstein, chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, shortly after the first Snowden articles appeared. “I know that people are trying to get us. . . . This is the reason the F.B.I. now has 10,000 people doing intelligence on counterterrorism. . . . It’s to ferret this out before it happens. It’s called protecting America.”

Poitras, while not nearly as confrontational as Greenwald, disagrees with the suggestion that their work amounts to advocacy by partisan reporters. “Yes, I have opinions,” she told me. “Do I think the surveillance state is out of control? Yes, I do. This is scary, and people should be scared. A shadow and secret government has grown and grown, all in the name of national security and without the oversight or national debate that one would think a democracy would have. It’s not advocacy. We have documents that
substantiate it."

Poitras possesses a new skill set that is particularly vital — and far from the journalistic norm — in an era of pervasive government spying: she knows, as well as any computer-security expert, how to protect against surveillance. As Snowden mentioned, “In the wake of this year’s disclosure, it should be clear that unencrypted journalist-source communication is unforgivably reckless.” A new generation of sources, like Snowden or Pfc. Bradley Manning, has access to not just a few secrets but thousands of them, because of their ability to scrape classified networks. They do not necessarily live in and operate through the established Washington networks — Snowden was in Hawaii, and Manning sent hundreds of thousands of documents to WikiLeaks from a base in Iraq. And they share their secrets not with the largest media outlets or reporters but with the ones who share their political outlook and have the know-how to receive the leaks undetected.

In our encrypted chat, Snowden explained why he went to Poitras with his secrets: “Laura and Glenn are among the few who reported fearlessly on controversial topics throughout this period, even in the face of withering personal criticism, [which] 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.”

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Snowden’s revelations are now the center of Poitras’s surveillance documentary, but Poitras also finds herself in a strange, looking-glass dynamic, because she cannot avoid being a character in her own film. She did not appear in or narrate her previous films, and she says that probably won’t change with this one, but she realizes that she has to be represented in some way, and is struggling with how to do that.

She is also assessing her legal vulnerability. Poitras and Greenwald are not facing any charges, at least not yet. They do not plan to stay away from America forever, but they have no immediate plans to return. One member of Congress has already likened what they’ve done to a form of treason, and they are well aware of the Obama administration’s unprecedented pursuit of not just leakers but of journalists who receive the leaks. While I was with them, they talked about the possibility of returning. Greenwald said that the government would be unwise to arrest them, because of the bad publicity it would create. It also wouldn’t stop the flow of information... .

There are lots of people angry with them and lots of governments, as well as private entities, that would not mind taking possession of the thousands of N.S.A. documents they still control. They have published only a handful — a top-secret, headline-grabbing, Congressional-hearing-inciting handful — and seem unlikely to...
publish everything, in the style of WikiLeaks. They are holding onto more secrets than they are exposing, at least for now.

“We have this window into this world, and we’re still trying to understand it,” Poitras said in one of our last conversations. “We’re not trying to keep it a secret, but piece the puzzle together. That’s a project that is going to take time. Our intention is to release what’s in the public interest but also to try to get a handle on what this world is, and then try to communicate that.”

The deepest paradox, of course, is that their effort to understand and expose government surveillance may have condemned them to a lifetime of it.

“Our lives will never be the same,” Poitras said. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to live someplace and feel like I have my privacy. That might be just completely gone.”

‘We Steal Secrets’ Misses the Leak for the Leakers

The Nation  |  June 18, 2013

Just as the Assange saga consumes too much of Alex Gibney’s film, so today’s Snowden obsession deflects attention away from our sprawling surveillance state.

Here’s a recipe for diluting the debate about our surveillance state: start talking about the foibles of the leakers and whistleblowers.

Consider the case of Edward Snowden, who worked as a contractor for the National Security Agency and leaked secret documents revealing that the NSA has a vast surveillance operation that collects phone and e-mail data on Americans as well as foreigners. The NSA dragnet is far more extensive than has been proven before. The documents raise a major question: Is the NSA undermining our democracy and violating our right to privacy? The character question—who is Edward Snowden, hero or traitor?—serves as a distraction from this urgent discussion. The legislators and journalists who focus on Snowden’s background (high school dropout? narcissistic millennial? pole-dancing girlfriend?) are either missing the point or trying to make us miss it.

Enter Alex Gibney’s new documentary, We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks, which could not have
come at a better moment—it opened in America just as the NSA scandal opened worldwide. The film focuses on two men: Julian Assange, who founded WikiLeaks, and Pfc. Bradley Manning, who leaked hundreds of thousands of government documents to it. Amid a torrent of stories, tweets and video clips about Snowden’s revelations, we need an intellectual frame to understand the morality and legality of our sprawling surveillance state and the secrecy on which it depends. Gibney would seem to be the man for the job. He is the Academy Award–winning director of two of the best political documentaries of recent time: Taxi to the Dark Side, about the torture and murder of Afghans and Iraqis in US custody, and Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room, about the scandalous collapse of a house-of-cards energy company.

Unfortunately, just as today’s debate is already being diluted by focusing on Snowden’s psychology and motives, We Steal Secrets gets sidetracked by character issues. Although We Steal Secrets criticizes the Obama administration for excessive secrecy and its crackdown on leakers, a fair amount of the film’s fury is directed at Assange, who currently resides in a small room in the Ecuadorean embassy in London, where he is trying to avoid extradition to Sweden to answer sexual assault allegations. The debate that the film has stirred up consists mainly of an exchange of invective between Gibney and Assange, in which Gibney and his allies compare the WikiLeaks creator to a cult leader, while Assange and his allies accuse the director of mounting a smear campaign that benefits the US government. The upshot is that we have gotten neither the film nor the debate we need.

We Steal Secrets includes extensive footage of Assange shot by other filmmakers; Gibney met him for six hours to negotiate an interview, but they could not agree on the terms. What happened in that session is a bombshell. “Julian wanted money,” Gibney says in the film. “He said the market rate for an interview with him was $1 million. When I declined, he offered an alternative: perhaps I would spy in my other interviews and report back to him, but I couldn’t do that either.” WikiLeaks, which of course leaked an extensively annotated transcript of the film, replied that “Julian Assange did not say the market rate for an interview with him was $1 million”; as for the spying charge, the organization claims Assange suggested only that he would be interested in hearing whatever Gibney learned about government investigations against WikiLeaks.

Cue the character debate. Jesselyn Radack, a lawyer at the Government Accountability Project and a prominent supporter of WikiLeaks, has written that Gibney “perpetuates the usual smears that the government levels against whistleblowers and their allies: that they are vengeful, unstable, or out for fame and profit.” On Twitter, Radack attacked Gibney and former NSA director Michael Hayden, one of the film’s talking heads: “Hayden, you little fucker, you’re fooling no one by being Gibney’s transparency bitch….” WikiLeaks—which the film contends has been reduced to just Assange and a handful of followers—has pointedly criticized the film’s exploration of the gender identity crisis of Manning, now on trial in a military court. WikiLeaks stated in its annotated transcript, “This crude gay caricature is a version of a classic attack
on whistleblowers, once used on Daniel Ellsberg: to distract from acts of conscience by focusing on sexuality, character, psychology and alleged ‘issues,’ rather than conscience, motive and morality.”

Gibney subsequently went defcon against Assange. In an interview with a journalist who had defended the film and received angry tweets and messages from Assange’s supporters, Gibney remarked: “I guess that is their way of trying to stamp out criticism…. It’s the tactics of Scientology.” The Scientology comparison—which might be a new iteration of Godwin’s Law, in which the first person in a debate who makes a comparison to the Nazis or Hitler is deemed the loser and the debate over—has also been made by one of the film’s executive producers, Jemima Khan, the glamorous British writer and campaigner. Khan was originally a supporter of Assange—to the point of helping to post a £200,000 bail for him in the United Kingdom after Swedish authorities tried to extradite him—but they have since fallen out. In a 2,500-word story published by the New Statesman earlier this year, Khan lamented that the supporters of WikiLeaks exude a “blinkered, cultish devotion” and that Assange might be turning into “an Australian L. Ron Hubbard.”

The Khan piece set off its own morality play within a morality play. It drew attention to the fact that Gibney’s documentary was backed by someone who suffered a financial loss when Assange jumped bail by fleeing to the Ecuadorean embassy, and who now accuses Assange of being the Colonel Kurtz of whistleblowing. Khan’s story prompted a 1,000-word response in the same publication from the writer John Pilger, who had also contributed to Assange’s bail but continues to support him. Pilger’s article sparked a 1,600-word retort from Gibney. And Pilger issued a reply to that. After more than 5,000 words of furious polemics, the fire finally burned out.

Key players in this drama have become Ahabs obsessed with their Moby-Dicks, losing sight of the government secrecy and surveillance that are the central issues to which attention must be paid. WikiLeaks and its embassy-confined leader are no longer the forces they used to be; they are diminished and tarnished, spending their time annotating a film they don’t like. The biggest leaks of the moment, courtesy of Edward Snowden—exposing a secret court order that compelled Verizon to give the phone records of millions of Americans to the NSA, as well as a highly classified program, PRISM, under which the NSA pulls data from major Internet companies like Google, Yahoo and Microsoft—were slipped to journalists writing for The Guardian and The Washington Post. These days, the question of whether Julian Assange is the new L. Ron Hubbard is a minor and distracting one.

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Let’s think about our era. President Obama, a constitutional law professor who vowed to preside over the most transparent government ever, has overseen an unprecedented crackdown on leakers, whistleblowers, hackers and journalists. Manning is at Fort Meade on trial for his life—the rest of which could be spent in
prison if he is found guilty. John Kiriakou, a former CIA agent who criticized the agency's torture program, is serving a jail sentence. Aaron Swartz, a hacker who downloaded a trove of academic papers that were behind a private sector paywall, committed suicide after prosecutors filed charges that could have put him in prison for thirty-five years. Journalists for the Associated Press, The New York Times and Fox News have been subjected to startling levels of government surveillance, including the seizure of their phone records. And we have just learned that government surveillance of our phone and Internet activities is far broader than most of us suspected or had been led to believe. President Obama offers no apologies or regrets; it is all legal, he says.

The strength of We Steal Secrets—its focus on Assange and Manning—is also its weakness. Gibney tells us more about these men than many of us knew, particularly regarding Manning and his gender-conformity issues. But does this illuminate the bigger story of the surveillance state or muddy it? A soldier says Manning, small and effeminate, was bullied by drill sergeants. Once in Iraq, the film explains, Manning felt isolated and called a friend back home and cried like a child, saying, “I won’t make it, I can’t make it, I can’t do this.” He was talking to his army buddies about undergoing hormone replacement therapy. He even e-mailed a picture of himself dressed as a woman to his master sergeant. In a fit of frustration, he also punched another soldier in the face—a big mistake, because she was bigger than he was and put him in a headlock.

This is colorful in a BuzzFeed way, and it seems to support a theory that Manning leaked the documents in part because he needed to vent his sexual torment. Gibney said as much in an interview with the Daily Beast: “He was lonely and very needy. And I think he had an identity crisis. He had this idea that he was in the wrong body and wanted to become a woman, and these issues are not just prurient. I think it raises big issues about who whistleblowers are, because they are alienated people who don’t get along with people around them, which motivates them to do what they do.”

Really? I spent a lot of time in war zones and had a hard time finding a soldier who did not have an identity or alienation problem of some sort—a marriage breaking down, the agony of separation from children, the guilt of seeing a fellow soldier killed, a home being foreclosed on back in the States. Being gay in the military is extremely hard. Not being sure of your gender—that’s even harder, I suppose. Seeing your best friend killed in front of you during combat and blaming yourself for not preventing it, or killing an Afghan child by mistake and washing the blood from your hands afterward—that’s not easy to deal with, either. Crying and punching another soldier in anger—these things happen all the time on military bases, and far worse. It’s possible that Manning’s identity crisis was no more destabilizing or significant than the existential crises many soldiers go through at some point, especially if they undergo multiple deployments in active combat. I think it’s also possible that Manning’s personal struggle may have given him a clearer understanding of the plight of vulnerable people who are crushed or ignored by powerful institutions. But
while the film does an artful job of using transcripts of Manning’s chats with the hacker Adrian Lamo to show how he was motivated by his outrage at the conduct of US forces, Gibney leads us to wonder whether less noble motivations were involved, too.

In the film, Assange is also put under a behavioral microscope, and what emerges is even less pretty. Assange, we learn, is arrogant, narcissistic, intolerant, secretive, hypocritical and perhaps a rapist. He created a pathbreaking portal for publishing government and corporate secrets but ruined it by, among other things, using it as a political shield to avoid answering investigators’ questions about sexual assault allegations from two women in Sweden. Much of this, and perhaps all of it, could be true. Yet it has been amply aired in other venues. Since the first major WikiLeaks scoop in 2010—its publication of a video, leaked by Manning, that showed a US helicopter gunship killing civilians—Assange has been on the front pages and gossip pages of news outlets across the globe. It makes for a colorful story, but Gibney hasn’t broken ground on the “who is Assange?” question as much as he has tended it in a way that, by the film’s end, makes us quite angry with the WikiLeaks founder.

There is nothing wrong with doing a deep dive on Assange or Manning; they have become public figures. And Gibney’s film tells us a lot about a surveillance state out of control. Yet it’s unfortunate that one of the most famous documentarians of our times has created a film that explores the alleged pathologies of these leakers and whistleblowers in a way that diverts our attention from the oppressive policies that turned them into outlaws. Though the film mentions on five occasions the condoms that Assange did or did not use while having intercourse with the Swedish women, Attorney General Eric Holder is referred to just once, with a banal video clip of him at a press briefing. The audience winds up knowing far more about Assange’s sexual practices than about the attorney general who oversees a vast apparatus of surveillance and prosecution. Which of these men should we know more about?

One of the greatest problems in our political discourse today is the dominant focus on personalities rather than systems. While Assange and Manning have colorful backstories, who they are and what they have done (or not done) in their private lives is not the most important thing. The system of secrecy that necessitates and criminalizes their actions should be the star and the villain of a film about these issues. Gibney has not made that film, but the good news is that we might not have to wait long to see it: documentarian Laura Poitras, one of the journalists Snowden confided in, is working on a film about the American surveillance state.
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