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Edward Snowden: The Privacy Dilemma

The 2013 revelations by Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, significantly altered the global conversation on privacy, security, and government oversight. These disclosures brought to light the extensive and covert surveillance activities of the NSA, raising critical questions about the balance between national security and individual privacy rights. This paper aims to dissect the Snowden affair, examining Snowden's background and the motivations behind his momentous decision. It will also delve into the legal and ethical dimensions of his actions, scrutinizing the intricate dynamics between government secrecy and the public's right to know. Drawing from diverse sources, including NBC News, The Guardian, The Intercept, The New York Times, and BBC News, this analysis seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of one of the most controversial and impactful events in recent history.

In 2013, Edward Snowden, working as an NSA contractor, made the unprecedented decision to disclose classified NSA documents to the media. These documents detailed extensive global surveillance programs, notably PRISM and TEMPORA (BBC, 2013; The Guardian,

2013). PRISM allowed the NSA access to user data from major internet companies, effectively bypassing standard legal processes, while TEMPORA involved the mass collection of internet traffic through tapping into the cables that form the backbone of global internet infrastructure. The ramifications of these revelations were profound and far-reaching. Snowden's actions not only brought to light the technical capabilities and global reach of the NSA but also ignited a worldwide discussion on the ethical and privacy implications of government surveillance. The public and policymakers alike were compelled to confront the realities of the digital age, where personal data could be easily accessed and analyzed by government agencies under the guise of national security. Despite the significant public outcry and debate spurred by these revelations, a study conducted in 2019 highlighted that the impact on curtailing government surveillance practices was limited (Galli, 2019). This study suggested that while there was an increase in public awareness and a call for more robust privacy protections, the fundamental structures and practices of governmental surveillance remained largely unchanged. This situation illustrates the complex challenge of balancing the demands of national security with the preservation of individual rights and liberties. It raises critical questions about the oversight and accountability of intelligence agencies and the extent to which privacy should be sacrificed in the name of security.

Edward Snowden's decision to leak classified NSA documents led to his being charged under the Espionage Act for unauthorized communication of national defense information and willful retention of the same (NBC News, 2014). These charges brought him into the center of a complex legal battle, which not only questioned the legality of his actions but also ignited a broader debate about the nature and scope of government surveillance. Legally, the crux of the matter lies in determining whether the public interest served by Snowden's disclosures outweighs

the breach of secrecy deemed necessary for national security. This legal dilemma is intertwined with ethical considerations. Ethically, Snowden's actions are viewed through two contrasting lenses. On one hand, there is the utilitarian argument, which supports mass surveillance as a necessary tool for societal security and argues that such surveillance is justified if it serves the greater good (Pujol, 2020). On the other hand, there is the deontological perspective, championed by thinkers like Brownlee (2016), which asserts the primacy of individual rights, including privacy and the right to be informed about government actions. This perspective views Snowden's actions as morally justified, as they align with the fundamental principles of transparency and accountability in a democratic society. This underscores the ongoing struggle to delineate the boundaries of governmental authority in the digital age. It brings to the forefront the need for a balanced approach that respects both the imperatives of national security and the sanctity of individual privacy. The debate sparked by Snowden's revelations goes beyond legal technicalities, challenging societies to reassess the ethical frameworks that underpin surveillance and privacy in an increasingly interconnected world.

The Edward Snowden case shed light on significant lapses in information security within the U.S. intelligence community, particularly highlighting deficiencies in contractor screening and data access controls (NBC News, 2014). This breach underscored the vulnerability of even the most secure government agencies to insider threats. Snowden's ability to access and disseminate highly classified information raised serious concerns about the efficacy of existing security protocols and the need for more robust measures to safeguard sensitive data. In response to these revelations, there was a call for the implementation of more stringent security measures. Enhanced vetting processes for contractors and employees in sensitive positions became a priority, aiming to ensure that only individuals with the utmost reliability and integrity had

access to classified information. Additionally, there was a push for improved monitoring of sensitive information. This involved not only keeping track of who accessed what data but also understanding the context and intent behind such access, thereby enabling early detection of potential insider threats. Furthermore, the case highlighted the importance of robust encryption practices in protecting information. Encrypting sensitive data adds an additional layer of security, making it more difficult for unauthorized individuals to access and understand the information, even if they manage to bypass other security measures. Subsequent to Snowden's disclosures, there were some policy changes aimed at reining in NSA surveillance activities. These changes were intended to address the public's concerns about privacy and to restore trust in government surveillance operations. However, the effectiveness of these policy reforms and their real impact on preventing future leaks and unauthorized disclosures remain contentious. Critics argue that while some changes have been made, they are not sufficient to fully address the privacy concerns raised by the Snowden leaks. The Snowden case thus highlights the ongoing challenges of safeguarding sensitive information in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. It underscores the need for a dynamic and multi-faceted approach to information security, one that continuously evolves to address emerging threats and vulnerabilities.

In conclusion, Edward Snowden's 2013 disclosures triggered a critical global discussion about the balance between national security and civil liberties. While Snowden violated laws protecting classified information, his actions brought to light surveillance operations with questionable legal and ethical grounds. The case of Snowden remains polarizing; he is viewed by some as a whistleblower and by others as a traitor. From a personal perspective, I consider Snowden's actions to be fundamentally essential in instigating a critical re-evaluation of privacy rights in an era increasingly dominated by digital surveillance. His leaks acted as a catalyst,

challenging both the public and policymakers to reconsider the boundaries of privacy and government oversight in the digital age. This re-examination is particularly relevant as technology continues to evolve at a rapid pace, often outstripping the development of corresponding legal and ethical frameworks. His revelations have had a lasting impact on how governments, citizens, and technology companies perceive and approach information security and privacy.

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