

## **Edward Snowden and the Wiki Leaks Scandal**

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### **Abstract**

The topic of this paper is about Edward Snowden and what he did to become the most wanted man in 2013. This paper describes his life as an early child all the way up to after high school as a young adult. It also talks about how he joined the military, acquired a job as a computer specialist for the NSA, and what that job entailed. This paper talks about what he stole, how he stole it, and his reasoning behind why he stole it. It also talks about how the information he stole was released to the public. The paper also talks about his journey after the release of the information and the measures he took to prevent being caught. The paper speaks about how the overall event could have been avoided and a lesson that could have been learned from the event. The paper concludes with an opinion on the overall situation and how it has/could affect United States information security.

## **Edward Snowden and the Wiki Leaks Scandal**

Edward Snowden, one of the most infamous whistleblowers in the United States, was born in Elizabeth City, North Carolina on June 21, 1983. He spent his early years in Wilmington, North Carolina before he moved with his family to Ellicott City, Maryland when he was only nine years old. Both of Edward's parents worked in the U.S. Government. His father, Lon, was an officer in the United States Coast Guard and his mother worked as a clerk in the Baltimore US District Court. Snowden also had a sister named Jessica who also eventually worked for the U.S. government as a lawyer at the Federal Judicial Center in Washington D.C. With his entire immediate family working for the U.S. Government, Snowden thought that he too would work for the government. According to Boehme and Miller (2017), "the people that knew Snowden when he was a child described him as being nice, shy, quiet, and this" (p. 7).

While Snowden was attending Arundel high school, he contracted mononucleosis, which made him miss the majority of his tenth-grade year. Although Snowden was a smart kid, he did not want to make up the time he missed, so he ended up taking a test to get his GED. After high school, Snowden then attended Anne Arundel Community College at the age of 16 with the hopes of getting a degree in computing. According to Higgins (2016), Snowden "never earned his degree, instead hanging out with friends who shared his passion for computers, video games, and Japanese anime" (p. 14). Ever since Snowden was a kid, he has had an interest in computers, so much interest that he started working for one of his college classmates who had his own technology business (Higgins, 2016).

During the Iraq War in 2003, according to Boehme and Miller (2017), Snowden decided to enlist in the U.S. Military with hopes of joining the elite special forces. Snowden's motivation

to join the military was due to patriotism and the urge to free the people of Iraq from their dictator, Saddam Hussein. Unfortunately for Snowden, his military career was brief because in 2004, he broke both of his legs in a training accident and was discharged from the military. After the military, according to Higgins (2016), Snowden acquired a job working a security guard for the University of Maryland by “passing a lie detector test and a rigorous background check” (p. 15). While working as a security guard, Snowden attended a job fair where he met someone from the CIA and in 2006, he earned a job working in computer networking in the global communications division at the headquarters in Langley (Higgins, 2016). Snowden did not have a college degree, but impressed his superiors with his computer skills that he was making a six-figure salary. The CIA also sent him to their school for technology specialists where he took classes for six months.

After being in classes for six months, the CIA sent Snowden to Geneva, Switzerland as telecommunications information systems officer where he worked for U.S. diplomats in cyber security. This is when Snowden first started to distrust the U.S. Government. In Geneva, according to Boehme and Miller (2017), Snowden learned about how the CIA “blackmailed a Swiss banker, threatening to reveal harmful personal information, to force him to reveal secret financial data” (p. 19). With Snowden having access to the CIA’s computer systems, he found troubling information about torture and wiretapping during the War in Iraq. After learning about this information, Snowden came to a realization that he was part of something that was “doing more harm than good” (Boehme & Miller, 2017; Higgins, 2016). Snowden was having thoughts of becoming a whistleblower but he did not want to release information that would compromise the identities of CIA agents or foreign recruits. According to Boehme and Miller (2017), Snowden resigned from the CIA in 2009, and according to Higgins (2016), he began working in

Japan for Dell as a contractor that did top-secret work for the NSA. Snowden's love for Japan made this an ideal job for him to work. He worked on the Yokota Air Base instructing U.S. and Japanese military personnel on how to protect their computers from hackers. While working in Japan, Boehme and Miller (2017) explain how he gained access to new information on drone attacks and targeted killings. He also became aware that the NSA had the ability to track everyone by tapping into their electronic devices (Higgins, 2016). It was in Japan where Snowden began to have thoughts of becoming a whistleblower.

While Snowden was still working for Dell, in March of 2012, they relocated him to their office in Honolulu, Hawaii. Here he worked for Dell for a while before moving to another NSA contractor, Booz Allen Hamilton. Here he learned of how the NSA was illegally spying on U.S. citizens. He came to the conclusion that the NSA operated with very little supervision from the public and decided to make the public aware of the situation (Higgins, 2016). In December of 2012, Snowden anonymously contacted Glenn Greenwald, who worked for the *Guardian*, and also contacted Laura Poitras, who was a documentary filmmaker (Boehme & Miller, 2017). He continued to communicate with them until he gained enough of their trust to reveal the stolen documents to them. He decided to meet with Greenwald and Poitras in Hong Kong for it's "tradition of allowing free speech" and because he thought that "U.S. intelligence agents would have a hard time operating in China" because of uneasy tensions with the United States (Higgins, 2016). Before he left for Hong Kong, "he emptied his bank accounts, put cash into a steel ammo box for his girlfriend, and erased and encrypted his old computer" (Tucker, 2019, para. 15).

They arrived in Hong Kong on June 2, and drove to the hotel where Snowden had told them to meet with him. According to Boehme and Miller (2017), because Greenwald and Poitras do not know what he looks like, "Snowden held a Rubik's Cube so they could identify him when

they met in the lobby” (p. 28). After gaining trust in one another, Snowden released gave them the files that he had stolen from the NSA.

Once Snowden had given Greenwald and Poitras the top-secret files, he advised that instead of releasing all the files at once, he should reveal them one at a time so that the public could fully understand what was going on. According to Gurnow (2014), “on Wednesday, June 5, the *Guardian* published ‘NSA collecting phone records of millions of Verizon customers daily’” (p. 44). History.com Editors (2018) stated that “the material exposed a government-run surveillance program that monitored the communications records of not just criminals and potential terrorists, but law-abiding citizens as well” (para. 2). Greenwald released another article a day later on June 6 about PRISM, which was an NSA top secret mass-surveillance program. After releasing the articles on the stolen information, a few days later on June 9, Snowden’s identity was revealed in one Greenwald’s articles and the video that Poitras had made. After his identity was released, Snowden did not know whether to stay in China or seek asylum in another country where he could not be extradited to the United States. After sending multiple asylum requests to different countries, he boarded a plane, accompanied by representative of WikiLeaks, Sarah Harrison. Snowden is hoping to fly from China to Ecuador where he would be free.

While traveling from China, with the hopes of making it to Ecuador, his plane landed in Russia at the Sheremetyevo Airport. While in the airport, Snowden learned that the United States had revoked his passport and charged him for the crimes he had committed against the United States. With his passport no longer valid, Russian officials would not let him leave the airport, so he stayed at the airport for a total of forty days figuring out what to do next. Being stuck in Russia without a passport, his only option was to seek asylum in Russia, so Snowden applied for

temporary asylum. On August 1, 2013, Russia allowed Snowden to stay in Russia for a year where he currently resides to this day.

Edward Snowden became one of the most infamous whistleblowers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by revealing top-secret NSA files and documents to the public. According to McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin (2017), he stated that “he had a duty ‘to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them’” and “the government’s violation of privacy had to be exposed regardless of legality” (para. 1). After he leaked the top-secret information that he stole, “the Justice Department charged Snowden with theft of government property, unauthorized communication of national defense information, and willful communication of classified communications intelligence information to an unauthorized person” (Higgins, 2016, p. 54-55) and according to Scheuerman (2014), Snowden was charged with violations against the Espionage Act of 1917 by Attorney General Eric Holder (para. 8). Snowden did indeed break the law but there are some people out there that believe that what he did could be classified as hero and other people believe what he did was traitorous.

The event with Edward Snowden took place in 2013 when he released top-secret documents for United States public to see. He stole those documents while he was working for Booz Allen Hamilton, a contractor for the NSA. He was able to steal the documents because, with his job, was given access to the NSA’s network. Once he got into the network, he could see and view everything that was on the network at the time. It was said that Snowden took 50,000 documents and viewed approximately 1.7 million (Higgins, 2016). Even though he took a good number of documents, if he had a different motive at why he did what he did, he could have caused serious damage to U.S. national security and could have potentially made million of dollars if he sold that information to the right buyer. This event could have been avoided totally

if he was only granted access to the files that he needed to complete his job. A lesson that can be learned from this incident is for the NSA to only allow top-secret files to be opened by people with a top-secret security clearance.

Edward Snowden will go down in history for what he did while working for the NSA and their contractors. I believe that what Snowden did, even though it was technically illegal, was the right thing to do. I believe that what he did could be considered as heroic, although it may not seem like it. According to Opt (2015), a hero can be described as “a person who sacrifices or risks his/her own self and needs to achieve the selfless goal of protecting humanity against a threat that will harm or destroy humanity” (para. 17). What Snowden did protected humanity indirectly by keeping human rights privacy private. Although this incident brought light to a problem of government surveillance and exposed top-secret programs, there is a very likely possibility that there are similar programs that the government is using similar programs today. Only in certain situations where there are true threats to national security, would I say that it would be okay to use these said programs. There is always the possibility that something this high-tech could fall into the wrong hands or be used for the wrong reason.



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