

## How Laura Poitras Helped Snowden Spill His Secrets

By Edward Snowden  
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This past January, Laura Poitras received a curious e-mail from an anonymous stranger, prompting her to receive an encryption key. For almost two years, Poitras had been working on a documentary about surveillance, and she occasionally received queries from strangers. She replied to this one and sent her public key — allowing him or her to send an encrypted e-mail that only Poitras could open, with her private key — but she didn't think much would come of it.

**Q. & A. Edward Snowden Speaks to Peter Maass**  
Peter Maass: Why did you turn to Poitras and Greenwald?

The stranger responded with instructions for creating an even more secure system to protect their exchanges. Promising sensitive information, the stranger told Poitras to select long pass phrases that could withstand a brute-force attack by networked computers. "Assume that your adversary is capable of a trillion guesses per second," the stranger wrote.

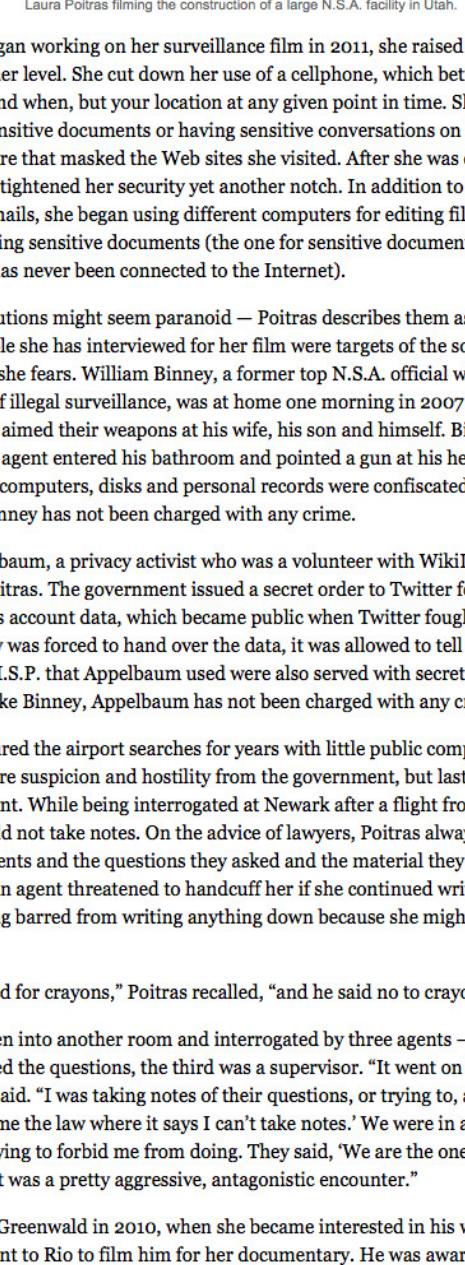
Before long, Poitras received an encrypted message that outlined a number of secret surveillance programs run by the government. She had heard of one of them but not others. After describing each program, the stranger wrote some version of the phrase, "This can prove."

Seconds after she decrypted and read the e-mail, Poitras disconnected from the Internet and removed the message from her computer. "I thought, 'Oh, if this is true, my life just changed,'" she told me last month. "It was staggering, what he claimed to know and be able to provide. I just knew that I had to change everything."

Poitras remained wary of whoever it was she was communicating with. She worried especially that a government agent might be trying to trick her into disclosing information about the people she interviewed for her documentary, including Julian Assange, the editor of WikiLeaks. "I called him out," Poitras recalled. "I said either you have this information and you are taking huge risks or you are trying to entrap me and the people I know, or you're crazy."

The answers were reassuring but not definitive. Poitras did not know the stranger's name, sex or employer (C.I.A., N.S.A., Pentagon?). In early June, she finally got the answers. Along with her reporting partner, Glenn Greenwald, a former lawyer and a columnist for The Guardian, Poitras flew to Hong Kong and met the N.S.A. contractor Edward J. Snowden, who gave them thousands of classified documents, setting off a major controversy over the extent and legality of government surveillance. Poitras was right; among other things, her life would never be the same.

**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 two dogs and one cat, and the place has the feel of a now-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 shrill battles with the dogs.**



Glenn Greenwald, a writer for The Guardian, at home in Rio de Janeiro.

Greenwald does most of his work in 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 in the portuguese language that sounds like 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 255,000 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 session, 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 work 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 both said, was a battle that they were threat to fundamental American liberties.

Two days later, Poitras and I followed 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. Once in a while she would stop what she was doing to look at the newsroom. The editor in chief stopped his hands over his head and said, "We're not going to break out laughing at some shared joke or absurd memory." The Snowden story, they both said, was a battle that they were threat to fundamental American liberties.

Two days after that, we went to the newsroom of The Guardian in London, where some of our time was spent talking in the hallway they were staying above, a Spanish hotel. The mood was frenzied, playful and full of energy. The editor in chief was walking around, holding the whole thing an older layer of seniority, Poitras has shared the joyous 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 Keyes Soto 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 who she is or where she is from."

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