


DS 760

## **Week 11 Topic: Ethics of Snowden's Actions**

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Lisa Monaco, Obama's adviser on homeland security and counterterrorism, said in a statement, "Mr. Snowden's dangerous decision to steal and disclose classified information had severe consequences for the security of our country and the people who work day in and day out to protect it. If he felt his actions were consistent with civil disobedience, then he should do what those who have taken issue with their own government do: challenge it, speak out, engage in a constructive act of protest, and— importantly accept the consequences of his actions." (Lahneman, 2016)

In response to the assignment, I agree with Lisa Monaco's view quoted above. Snowden violated both his legal and ethical obligations in how he handled his disagreement with PRISM.


It's important to take a step back and look at the situation using the sociotechnical perspective to see precisely what is at stake, and why it is crucial. The government must protect its citizens, interests, and future. Over time, we have seen people working as part of this effort, pushed to the sidelines. Some by circumstance (Herbert Yardley) and others through a more coordinated action of others (Thomas Drake). In either case, the end effect is disclosure of protected information about National Security programs.

To further complicate this analysis, there is political pendulum effect that differentiates the level of support over time for various National Security programs. Varying support results in an accordion impact. Programs expand and reduce constraints after times of trial only to experience a resource contraction and increased restrictions during the prolonged absence of crisis.

Thirdly, to further complicate this analysis, there is a technical reality. In this actuality, information needs to be collected and processed in ways that are evolving faster than both the legal and ethical systems can efficiently adjudicate. The complexity of this operational reality requires a protective arrangement that insulates people, processes, and technology from the cyclicity described earlier. With the stage set, we are equipped to take on a rational, objective viewpoint and apply the sociotechnical analysis.

Using the sociotechnical perspective, we can see that Snowden's actions violated both the ethical and legal constructs. He had a means to communicate issues through his internal chain as well as direct access to an ombudsman. He had an obligation to protect secrets as part his professional community. He took neither internal courses of action but instead choose to download and release information that he had a professional obligation to protect.

Looking beyond this perspective, we can also analyze the impact of Snowden's actions. Snowden's actions have not changed the legal structure that governs his former professional community. They haven't shifted the ethical guidelines or altered the government's obligation, within that community, to protect it's citizens, interest, and future. Thus, using the sociotechnical



model from a rational, objective perspective, we can conclude that Snowden's actions reflect poorly on himself. Under this lens, he failed to carry out his legal, professional, and ethical obligations at great expense to his (former) country.



## References

Lahneman, W.J., 2016, IC Data Mining in the Post-Snowden Era, International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence, retrieved from <https://github.com/ricklentz/DS760/blob/master/Snowden.pdf> on November 19th, 2017