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Snowden Assignment

Snowden, Yes or No?

Edward Snowden, currently thirty-three years old is living his life in exile in Russia where he was granted political asylum. Snowden is often cast in one of two ways, a traitor, whistleblower and criminal or as a respected patriot. Unfortunately, if he were to return to the United States there is a great chance that he would be sentenced to life in prison. Therefore, staying away has become his most useful tactic. Throughout the video the themes I noticed most prominently were the ideals of power and the illusions the government thrusts upon us, the evils that present themselves when Snowden did what he deemed as right, injustice versus justice, and the overall concept of obligation.

Power is a very unique concept, and as demonstrated throughout this video Snowden came across questionable material, and whether to release it to the public rested in his hands. Journalists are often instructed to cross lines only if they can look at themselves in the mirror the next day. Although Snowden was not a journalist, I feel the concepts are similar. He was put in a challenging moral and ethical dilemma and did what he felt was right for the people. Snowden’s justification for leaking the information to the Guardian was because of the dangers it posed to democracy if he were to have stayed mute. America is no stranger to secrets, and I think it has a large deal to do with the United States government doing as it wishes with the information it obtains without informing the public. There is some information, such as daily threats that are “easily” fixable and should not be shared. The average person and general public would be unable to function otherwise due to the constant fear of the unknown. However, the government often takes it upon themselves to carry out actions that may not be ethically sound, such as this wiretapping incident, because it is behind closed curtains. Edward Snowden made a judgment call, the consequences were unknown but he felt that heavy curtain needed some light to expose what’s behind.

In addition, Edward Snowden is often depicted as an individual that is against the country and against the government. He denied these accusations, and explained how he was sitting in his office and realized that the people should choose these decisions, they should decide whether it should be done or not. Exposing this highly classified material was not a decision made in a day nor carried out quickly, it took a few months and lots of sneaking around to expose the truth. In the video, Jeffery Tubin said that Snowden deserves to be in prison, Feinstein said he committed an act of treason and he is not a whistleblower, Lindsey Graham wants justice, Scott McConnell, the editor of the American Conservative, said if Barack Obama wants to do something smart he should thank Snowden and offer him a job as a White House technical advisor, Daniel Ellsberg said there was no more important leak then Snowden’s, it was more important than the Pentagon Papers, and Rushkoff said Snowden is a hero because he realized that, “Our very humanity was being compromised by the blind implementation of machines in the name of making us safe.” It is interesting to me that everyone has such a strong opinion of what they would do in this situation, however the fascinating concept of power is that you wont have the opportunity to be in his Snowden’s shoes, so what people say are just meaningless words. Everyone from the average person, to experts, syndicated columnists, haters and supporters, they can all hypothesize as to the course of actions they would have taken, but we never know what they would choose to do if the information fell in their lap, I know I wouldn’t.

The government has authority over information that is deemed classified from the public unless you receive a clearance. However, common concerns brought to light throughout the film are what should be a secret, what should be exposed, and where are the limits too much. Geoffrey Stone said, “Snowden is a traitor because he violated the law. He should be tried and then will be convicted, he is a criminal, whether one admires him is a different story. He deserves punishment, Snowden claimed, “I’m just an ordinary guy” if that is true then he should not have made this decision without any authorization to reveal classified information where he had no expertise of value of information to national security, whether positive in long run or not, it was still illegal.” I understand where Stone is coming from, his anger and genuine concern for others, because what if the backlash of this decision was catastrophic and jeopardized other countries and their inhabitants. I sway back and forth on what I would have done, and what I think of Snowden’s actions. I think the majority of people can understand both sides even if their viewpoints don’t align with them. I think Snowden did the right thing, it took a lot of courage due to the dangerous path he had to take in finding someone to hear him out, to publish it, and now the repercussions for his actions are that he is forced to live in another country unless he wants to sit in front of a jury. A different perspective from Stone’s is that of Christopher Hedge. He says, “Free press will be gone if people like Snowden do not continue to expose government violations. The Guardian filtered all the information. He is not just some individual releasing information over the Internet.” Reporters try to expose activities by the ones in power that are criminal or unconstitutional in nature. Snowden had the documents vetted by publication teams, and technically it can be considered criminal, but set against larger crimes committed by states like the criminals who roam around on wall street, or those that torture others at black sites, and targeted assassinations, those are the real criminals.

On a different note, I found it interesting when Geoffrey Stone said that the Bush NSA program involved wire tapping, and the Supreme Court of the United States stated it was in fact a violation of the fourth amendment. However, the Obama program that involved phone numbers not illegal wiretapping, did not violate the fourth amendment even though there was still wire-tapping. The National Advisory Council

Metadata commented suggesting the law should change to include metadata, and Stone agreed stating is was problematic and should be prohibited. The fourth amendment roughly states that people are entitled to be secure within their persons, houses, etc., and are protected from unreasonable search and seizures. In my opinion, more than the majority of citizens in America are completely innocent; therefore why the government is taking it upon themselves to delve into people’s lives where they show no present or future dangers is beyond my knowledge apparently. This seems like a very black and white issue, whereas the government is using their power to be nosy and commit illegal acts because who is going to question the powerful machine; more people than they like to think.

Obligation is an interesting concept; is a reporter required to disclose something as valuable as their confidential sources that may compromise national security because the government needs to satisfy their curiosity. In the film Hedges says, “We used to be able to protect sources and assure them that they would not be investigated for sharing information. But, in the corporate coup de eta era where the government is demanding a “we must know all” attitude, the protection of anonymity is fleeting. I think this is a crime. The public is constantly looking for new stories, the motives for the unknown occurrences, the inside scoop, and the only way the majority of this information is exposed is through anonymous sources. Similar to the police departments who use confidential informants, keeping their identity secret is the only thing protecting them on the streets. If they are found out, the next event occurring in their lives is anguish and most likely death. These anonymous sources reporters rely on cannot be exposed because they risk losing their jobs, being shunned from their communities, their families, just because many people think they are right in sharing a wrongdoing, the consequences are unknowable and the judgment’s can be unrelenting. The government is able to control information at its source, but once information is out they have no ability to retract it, according to the first amendment’s assurance of freedom of the press according to Stone.

Furthermore, Edward Snowden did not wade into the waters, he plummeted in the deep end, head first. The judgment call was especially risky since the programs he revealed were on going and potentially serious. Before anything could be digested and the threats to national security weighed, Snowden released the documents. This video brought to light how what is in the best interest of the government, may be very dangerous. Everything the government does in confidence should not always be that way. The Obama administration especially is very transparent; it relies heavily on its secretive aspects. I acknowledge that secrecy is critical at times, but there needs to be guidelines that determine when it is and when it is not needed. I commend Edward Snowden’s actions; I think that this information was crucial for the public to know. I do think that he did get lucky, especially since this information was still premature and the lives at risk played a slight role if any. The violation of privacy is a serious issue, and I think there’s a part of all of the people that disagree with Snowden’s tactics that are also thankful, I know I am.