

Transcription of video

Title of video: Edward Snowden at Talk Journalism 2018

Link to full video: <https://youtu.be/vNzbz8zYNSY>

Length: 29:13

Hosts: Avinash Kalla and Prateek Kasliwal

With: Edward Snowden

Location: Jaipur, India

Date of event: 17 Aug 2018

NOTE: This transcription has been created from a publicly available video so as to enhance accessibility to the subject matter for the purpose of commentary, criticism, news reporting, research, teaching &/or scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

[Music]: [00:00]

Hosts: [0:18] A very warm welcome to everyone here. And it's quite a ... honor and a privilege to have a man who doesn't need any introduction from my side or anyone. I won't waste time in introducing him. Can we have Mr Edward Snowden here please.

Live from Jaipur, I'm here with my friend Prateek. We are both going to put you questions and in the audience we have young journalism students from almost 20 universities in the country, and some journalists as well. That's the audience set up we have right now.

The very first question, you know, before we get on with it, is that these are all bunch of youngsters who don't mind sharing anything and everything. You know, they feel absolutely all right with sharing all information that they have. Privacy is no concern for them.

How do ... in a scenario like this, when they open up on everything, how big is an issue is privacy?

ES: [1:20] Where did that argument originate from?

And the answer is Nazi Germany. Right? The Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels did this, because he was trying to change the conversation away from

“What are your rights, and what evidence must the government show to sort of violate them, to intrude into your private life?”

and instead say:

“Why do you need your rights? How can you justify your rights?”

“Isn't it strange that you're invoking your rights? Isn't that unusual?”

But in a free society, this is the opposite of the way it's supposed to work. You don't need to explain why you have a right. You don't need to explain why it's valuable, why you need it. Right?

It's for the government to explain why you don't deserve it. They go to a court. They show that you're a criminal.

This is increasingly falling out of favor because governments and companies think it's inefficient. It's too much work. Life would be easier, your life would be more convenient for them, life would be more profitable for them, if we didn't have any rights at all.

But privacy isn't about something to hide. Privacy is about something to protect. And that is the very concept of liberty. It is the idea that there can be some part of you, of your life, of your ideas, that belong to *you* - not to society, and *you* get to make the decisions about who you share that with.

Hosts: [3:03] Since when you first came out with the revelation, 'til that point in time, not everybody was too aware that they are being looked into. But now, what has changed over these five years now we know we are looked into, But what is it that we could do to safeguard it? And rules are being made that we share informations mandatory.

ES: [3:27] You're talking about where mass surveillance comes from.

Of course no government is going to say:

"We decided you don't have rights anymore. We did it secretly. We changed the rules. Maybe we'll pass a law, maybe we won't, but the new practice is to monitor everyone, everywhere, because they might be criminal."

Instead, you get them saying they're doing you a favor - to protect your life, to protect your home, to protect your money, to protect the public budget. They're passing a new program that's *not* a surveillance program, it's an identity program.

The framework for mass surveillance today would look a lot like the [Aadhaar](#) system, right?

[Aadhaar - (English: Foundation) s a 12-digit unique identity number that can be obtained by residents of India, based on their biometric and demographic data.]

And, yeah. So I mean, this is how it works right? People in India have been hearing for years and years and years, these incredible statements out of the chiefs over at [UIDAI](#) [Unique Information Authority of India] - every time they're criticized ...

There was recently this controversy about Google phones pushing the phone number for UIDAI into everybody's phone, right? And somehow, Google puts out a statement goes:

"Oh, it was our fault. It was inadvertent. It was a mistake. We have 95% of the market share ..."

Maybe that's not the exact number please check the facts on that, but they have an extraordinary amount of the market share of India ... You know, everyone in India is using a ... an Android phone, a Google phone - unless they're rich enough to afford an iPhone. And when you have that kind of position it's been difficult to make a change that

affects the phones of everybody in a country, right? And yet somehow, *somehow*, they managed to push this phone number to everybody.

Now, UIDAI was not ... they were not concerned that this happened. They said:

"Oh, the phone numbers wrong. It wasn't us. It was Google's fault. It was somebody else ... We don't know what happened. But you shouldn't use this to attack the system, you know. It's wrong. It's saving you money, it's protecting people from being cheated by - you know - people stealing benefits.

And that's all you need to worry about. Anybody who doesn't agree with the system, they're vested interests, they're scare mongering. Don't listen to them."

Right? But when we when we start to look at this, it gets a little bit strange. You know, the number one thing they always say, in every public statement is:

"Your data is safe. Your data hasn't been breached."

Their biometrics are secure, right? But nobody actually said otherwise. The idea isn't that you can, you know, go on the internet and access anybody's Aadhaar information directly. It's that it's being *leaked*.

And of course, this is how we get scandals like we've seen, where officials from within UIDAI are having their personal details, their private details, leaked by people looking up their Aadhaar numbers.

The phone number that was pushed by Google to all of these handsets - through an incredible mystery, no one knows how it happened, right? Google just woke up in the morning and said they wanted to do this.

That doesn't sound convincing to me, but the UIDAI people said:

"Oh, it's the wrong number. It's not even our number to begin with."

But it's the number that's printed on the back of your card. If the people who are providing the card, if the people who are creating a mandatory enrollment system that it's forcing identity on people throughout the country - to the point where there have been stories in India, that you cannot have a child and get a birth certificate for that child, unless you provide your Aadhaar number - clearly something in this system is not working.

Clearly people have concerns that are not unreasonable, but eminently reasonable. And if this is the case, if the public generally is concerned, if there is an unrelenting train of scandals about this system, it seems that if this were a system that were concerned about the public's trust, they would respond to these in a reasonable way.

They would look at the criticisms. They would address the systems... of the criticisms. They would reform the system, instead of saying:

"Any criticism of us is illegitimate. It's scare-mongering, and we just need to move forward now."

Any time we're talking about protecting cheating on social benefits, right, it sounds like a good thing. But if that were all that Aadhaar did, no one have arguments against it, right? No one would be complaining.

The problem is, and perhaps the biggest crime behind this system, is that it's being used for things that are unrelated to what the government is paying for. In India right now, a telecommunications company, a bank - that doesn't know what Aadhaar is - it's not paying for it, right? If you want to open an account, [buy a] train ticket, are demanding an Aadhaar number.

And not just a number. They're demanding that you show them the physical card, right? This is creating a systemization of society, of the public. And this was not the stated intention of the program - you'll see people at UIDAI saying this is not what the program is for.

But if that's actually happening, how to address it, right? if the Aadhaar system is to survive, and work in public's favor, the very first thing that should happen before this program entrenches itself any further in society, is there should be criminal penalties assigned to any company that asks for your Aadhaar number for a service that the government is not paying for.

If it is not directly funded by a social benefit, and the company asks for it, they should not only be fined, right? Someone should go to jail for that. Because if not, we all know what's going to happen. Eventually you're not going to be able to go to the store, you're not gonna be able to sign up for a service, you're not going to be able to do anything in society, without showing a number.

You will be tracked, you'll be monitored, you will be recorded in a hundred different ways (and not by UADAI). By the Aadhaar number that they created, then is abused by every other company, every other group in society.

There's only one way to prevent this, and that's to reform the system before it goes bad. And unfortunately it's already started to go bad.

Hosts: [10:47] My question is to you, that since you're very much aware as to what is transpiring in India, so the recent development that privacy has been made as a fundamental right in India by the Supreme Court,

So in today's world, when data collection and data mining is going on, do you think securing privacy is a Herculean task for the citizen.

ES:[11:09] The question is who should be doing it, right? Do we want to create a society in which ordinary people, who have jobs, who have commitments, who have families to take care of, whose hours are spoken for, have to - all of them, each individually - become specialists in protecting their privacy? In fighting a kind of technological battle against the richest and most powerful companies in your country, and in the world, as well as governments both within India - state and national, as well as foreign governments that are trying to spy on you, as well?

Or, should the government, these corporations, and their policies, be designed by law to protect policy? Should the criminal code be set such that the incentives of violating

someone's privacy (or even narrowing someone's privacy unnecessarily) costs them more than it gains them.

We have to ask ourselves - why do we have a privacy problem today?

And the answer, of course, is because it benefits the people who are violating it. Think about if you had a neighbor, who every time you left your house, they followed you around with a notebook, wrote down everything you did, and kept a record of it. And they did this for everyone in the neighborhood. When you confronted them ... in your house ...

Now this is what is happening, due to the electronics of the system today. The only difference is we don't see it. It happens invisibly, instead of seeing the person with the notepad.

The only way to change this is to work on two fronts:

- We need to use both technology to enforce our rights, through things like strong encryption - that companies and governments can't interfere with - so we protect our rights on the **technical** level.
- And then also, on a **legal** level, we need to make sure that our rights are enforced - and enforced meaningfully. If our rights are violated there should be a penalty for that violation.

And then finally, and this is perhaps the most important thing for the people in this room today, we have to know about it.

When we think about the Aadhaar system, and where the scandals started - when we realized in places like India, that all of this information that they say is absolutely secure in their database is available to anybody over whatsapp (if you provide the number to someone who's working UIDAI, who's working at Aadhaar and wants to make a little bit of money on the side) - we need journalists, we need investigation, we need people like D S Nakara [reference to the famous [D S Nakara v Union of India](#) case] who are willing to risk something, willing to dare to be criticized by the government, willing to face police investigations and things like that, to tell the public what they need to know.

Because if we lose that, it doesn't matter if India is a democracy on paper, it ceases to become one in fact. Because every democratic government gets its legitimacy from a single concept, and this is that people understand what the government is doing, and they consent to doing that.

If the government's activities are happening without our knowledge, without our consent, without our agreement, they're not legitimate. It's not democratic.

Hosts: [15:13] You just mentioned that you know you need journalists and people who can come out and take the government on. But this whole digital surveillance happening, and the government looking at it - how can freedom of press stem the tide of surveillance?

ES: [15:28] Yeah. So this is ... this is [laughing ironically] ...

This is a difficult challenge because it's very much an unfair fight.

- On one side you have governments with spy agencies and armies.
- On the other side you have companies with their billions.
- And on the public side you have a few journalists, working at newspapers that don't have very much money.

Right? But what they do have is the truth, and that's something that can't be changed, right? We need journalists in a free society, not to simply write down what the government says, or what a company says, and report that.

That's not reporting. That's not investigation. That ... that's note-taking, right?

Instead we need them to look critically at the activities of the most powerful members of society. We need them to work adversarially against these people, and go: "Are they really telling the truth?"

And then find out what the truth is, and then tell the public that. Because this is how they become more powerful. Newspapers, fundamentally, should be a public service.

But it's important to remember that newspapers can't work without sources - people inside these organizations, governments, and companies who are willing to talk to journalists. Tell them where the truth is, and where the lies are, and do this safely.

If we don't have this - which is a real possibility in India, without the efforts of group like groups like Amnesty International, that are trying to create new whistleblower protections - we will run out of sources of information when the public needs them the most.

Hosts: [17:32] To the earlier question, that journalists and cyber experts all over the world are facing brow beating from the government, so how this organization of Freedom of Press Foundation could actually come to safeguard their interest, and rescue them from that?

ES: [17:50] So this ... I'm the president of a group called the [Freedom of the Press Foundation](#). We take for granted a lot of times, that newspapers will continue to happen, that we will have reporters, that we will always have looked ... people looking for the truth, right? But this is a hard job. It doesn't pay very well, and it's very risky. And there's no guarantee that this will continue.

We see country after country facing a kind of new slide toward authoritarianism - even in the freest countries in the world. In the United States we have Donald Trump as President, right? And we see the world moving towards - step-by-step - a sort of Chinese model. And this is a dangerous thing. So the question of course is how do we prevent that?

No small organization, like mine, is going to save the world. But if we work together, step-by-step, and we know what our values are, we can create a kind of solidarity to protect the values that matter the most to us.

Now we have to use new tools. We have to understand the technology better than our adversaries. But this can't be an expert fight, right? We can't think about: "Are we going to be able to out-fox the spies?" Right?

Instead we have to think about: What is the future of our society? What is the future of our government? What is the future of this world going to be based on?

And either that's going to be based on social power from people like sitting in this room, who know what they believe in, and are willing to stand up for it, are we willing to risk something, are willing to dare to do the right thing - despite the consequences.

If we do this, if we make sure that those who interfere with the works of journalists are punished, and if we make sure those journalists who stand up and do reveal the truth at great cost - who are suddenly facing retaliation - do not face it alone, we can create a system of incentives. Right?

A blanket of safety that protects all of us, by not focusing on individuals, but focusing on movements. By protecting values, by protecting rights, we can make sure that the next generation doesn't just enjoy the rights that we ourselves inherited (that are coming under attack now), they actually enjoy *more* rights, *new* rights.

If we don't stand up, if we don't protect each other, and if we do not keep fighting and striving and protecting the right to seek the truth and report it, those rights will vanish.

Hosts: [21:04] Alright, then. Now, you say it's in going on, and there are Whistleblower Acts that are coming out, you know, in India - as you mentioned briefly about Amnesty. They are trying to, you know, put the voice forward and say that there should be a Whistleblower Act.

But that is all going into a waiting game. But the government's more active, everybody more spying, you know. Where do you see whistleblowers heading?

ES: [21:31] So this is ... fundamentally a question about the public's right to know, against the government's desire to hide.

We talked specifically about the government in this case. But more generally it applies to corporations and other private groups as well. But the argument here goes:

- The public needs to know what's going on in government.
- But the government feels that if the public knew everything it was doing, its programs would no longer be effective.

If we know how the public is being spied on, terrorists would know how the public is being spied on - and by proxy, how they're being spied on, and this would make things more dangerous for the world.

But the reality is, if you look at the history of terrorist activity in the last 30 years, in the last 50 years, no one understands privacy ... not privacy ... no one understands surveillance, better than terrorists.

Osama bin Laden, for example stopped using a cell phone - not when he saw some recent story in the newspaper. He stopped using it in 1998. And the question, of course, is why?

The White House, at the time, said it was because "“Oh, newspapers were reporting too much information.” But there were investigations into this, and was found to be false.

The actual reason he stopped using his cell phone was because he was at a terrorist training camp, and he made a call from his satellite phone on one day, and then a few hours later a missile struck the hill he had made a call from.

Terrorists may be evil, but they are not stupid, right? Terrorists will always know more than the public.

And so this brings up the real question. When we see government's trying to deny the public access to information, when they try to punish whistleblowers and dry up the kind of journalistic sources that reporting relies on,

- Are they really acting in the interest of public safety?
- Or are they more concerned about political stability?
- Are they really worried about security from criticism, rather than safety against attacks.

Hosts: [24:09] Blowing off gadgets could be one way, but it's difficult to do, you know? I remember somebody asking me the question that what does Edward Snowden do when he's off his gadgets?

ES: [28:19] Right, right. [Laughs] So this is a question that's difficult for me to answer, because I am an expert, right?

So when we talk about how can you use technical services, I can say do this, do that. But it's very complex. It's very difficult. I can spend my whole life doing this. It's my profession, right?

But it's not fair to ask an ordinary person to have to live like they are Edward Snowden, right? I can't return home to my country because I'm persecuted by my government for telling the truth about mass surveillance violating the rights - not only of Americans, but of Indians, and everyone else around the world.

But we should not live in a world where ordinary citizens have to live and act every day as if they're hunted by the world's most powerful sort of secret police.

Instead, we need to think about what does a world look like where you don't have to hide from gadgets that you bought and paid for, right?

And this is the problem. If you buy a phone, and the government is pushing their phone numbers into your phone, if the government is trying to push identity cards into your phone, that you have to show everywhere you go, every time you try to register for some service ... You pay for the phone, but really someone else owns it. Someone else is deciding who uses it, how it's done, how it's tracked, who that information is available to ...

Does that sound right to you? And of course the answer is "NO."

If you are paying for a system, if you are trusting the system, if you - like so many young people in the audience - are opening up about yourself and sharing some information, *you* should be the one making the decisions. Not these other groups.

We shouldn't hide from our gadgets. There is an old saying that goes:

"In a free society, when the people are afraid of government, there is tyranny.

When the government is afraid of the people, there is liberty."

The question we need to be asking today is: which of those two expressions is closer to what we see today?

Hosts: [26:51] Years ago you were a software technology professional. How do you see yourself today? And where is it heading now?

You know, you are on Freedom for Press, and what lies next, you know, because there's ... there's every time a suspicion that - what is the next move? Whenever Putin meets Trump there is a there is a thing that, okay, what happens next to Edward Snowden?

ES: [27:17] So I think this gets a little bit to the question that I get asked a lot, which is am I safe, right? And, of course, I'm not. But if I were looking to live a safe life, I would still be sitting in Hawaii - in paradise - with the woman that I love, in a big house, making a lot of money for very little work, spying on all of you.

But they're always going to be moments in our life where we recognize we have a choice between doing the safe thing, and the right thing.

And sometimes the only moral decision is to break the law.

I'm still a technologist, today. I'm more of an activist than I ever expected to be, but the way I would describe it is: I used to work for the government, and now I work for the public. Let's work together, and let's change the world.

Hosts: [28:19] Do you miss America?

ES: [28:22] Of course. You know, it's ... it's my home. I want to go back. And I intend to go back. But I will go back when my country is free, when the trials are fair, and when telling the truth is not considered a crime.

Hosts: [28:40] All right, good. Thanks a lot for your time. It was a pleasure talking with you.

ES: [28:44] Thank you so much.

[Music] [Music] [Music]