Review of Edward Snowden’s
*Permanent Record* (2019)

Keywords: Surveillance, Snowden, Record, Internet history, History of technology, Social media

To the world Edward Joseph Snowden is mostly known for the disclosure of the unethical practices of the American intelligence community in 2013. Media reports, interviews and an Oscar-winning documentary *Citizen Four* followed suit. In these accounts we find very little of the person behind the curtain, as their main focus lies on the information that whistle-blower Snowden shares with the world. This in turn can be compared to the overly idolizing portrait in Oliver Stone’s film *Snowden*, featuring Joseph Gordon Levitt as Edward Snowden. Here we instead see Snowden as a hero for freedom of speech, standing up for what is right and for the values of the American dream. In Edward Snowden’s autobiography *Permanent Record*, released internationally in several languages in 2019, we find a combination between these two opposites that makes the story of his life and deeds more multifaceted and human.

*Permanent Record*, like all biographies, consists of many narratives of many kinds of lives comprised in one volume. It includes a reflection on the author’s childhood and how it affected his future as whistleblower. The book also contains

---

1 Joel Gordon Hultsjö is a second-year student at the Master’s program in ALM at Uppsala University and works part time as amanuensis at the Department of ALM. His research interests include surveillance capitalism, public digital infrastructure and information security in the archive sector. Email: joel.gordon94@hotmail.com.
a contemporary account of political development of the internet community during the last 30 years. Finally, Snowden describes the development from analogue to digital tools within technology history in general and in the intelligence community specifically.

**Personal narrative**

Like most traditional autobiographies it starts with the main character’s childhood, but unlike many other biographies, it ends by blowing a whistle to the whole world. *Permanent Record* is thereby initially a personal narrative of how a young shy boy found meaning and friendships through taking apart his dad’s Nintendo 64 and learning to program in online forums in the early days of the internet. In these forums he gained a community and a sense of right and wrong, born out of the early digital anarchism of the American produced global internet. A context that would form the political and social aspects of his adult life.

The book is also the patriotic narrative of a family of war veterans and government servants that have served the United States with loyalty for centuries. A family that can trace its roots to the founding of the nation and the many wars it has endured, both foreign and domestic. But now the family’s youngest descendant, Edward, has come to realize that all these wars for the freedom and liberation of the oppressed peoples of the world were not as noble as he was taught to believe. Or as Snowden writes about his time at the CIA: “the previous ten years had been a cavalcade of American-made tragedy.”

It is worth mentioning that previous research relevant to Snowden’s narrative has been fueled by others. Much has been done in media or literary analysis in the forms of newspaper overviews which focuses on how different media outlets reported on Snowden’s revelations after he blew the whistle on his former employers in the American intelligence community (Qin, 2015 & Svensson, 2018). A more general overview can also be found in the Edward Snowden reader, released in 2015, and gives an overview of perspectives on the disclosures and affairs of Edward Snowden (Fidler, 2015). Besides generating a large amount of journalistic reports as whistleblower, with *Permanent Record* Snowden really enriches this body of literature with his own perspectives on the meaning of his deeds.
The political landscape of the internet

On a bigger scale, *Permanent Record* also contains the narrative of how the political landscape of the internet has changed during the past 40 years. Going from a safe haven for nerds and anti-institutional libertarians, to a place of fake news, advertising revenue and polarizing social media algorithms. A safe haven that forms the very basis of Edward Snowden’s political ideology. An ideology which can best be summarized in the phrase:

For one brief and beautiful stretch of time – a stretch that, fortunately for me, coincided almost exactly with my adolescence – the internet was mostly made of, by, and for the people (Snowden, 2019, p. 44).

The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City on the 11th of September 2001 can be seen as an epoch changing event that brought to an end to this ‘beautiful stretch of time’. The time often described as the optimistic period in the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, or an ‘End of History’ and the success of capitalism as Francis Fukuyama then famously put it. Snowden describes his own personal transformation at the start of the century as: “the anti-institutional hacker ethos instilled in me online, and the apolitical patriotism I’d inherited from my parents, both wiped from my system – and I’d been rebooted as a willing vehicle of vengeance” (Snowden, 2019, p. 8). The view on the internet also changed during the early 21th century: from a glorified vision of a new kind of democracy, as envisioned by many political theorists and scholars working in the 90s, the web became a harsher place. As Snowden describes when starting to work in the intelligence community with IT after he dropped out of the army due to an injury: “In the early 2000s the internet... offered a more authentic and complete incarnation of American ideals than even America itself” (Snowden, 2019, p. 106).

Snowden is not the only one describing the changing role of the internet in our societies. In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: the fight for a human future at the new frontier*, media scholar Shoshana Zuboff maps the development and expansion of what she calls Surveillance Capitalism. A concept to describe the new business model of markets dominated by internet companies that survive on
advertising and selling data harvested from their users (Zuboff, 2019, p. 33). Or as the Silicon Valley companies call it: monetization. The term for making something without an inherent financial value generate profit. The prime example of this is – according to Zuboff – Google, which started out as a company with the purpose to create good search engines in 1998 (Zuboff, 2019, p. 71). By late 2002, after barely surviving the dot-com bubble, the company had realized that they could not survive on selling ad space to specific companies. Instead, they found a business model based on sending user information directly to the companies that direct the ads back to the users themselves. This was the start of Surveillance Capitalism. To cite Zuboff, “Google is to Surveillance Capitalism what the Ford Motor Company and General Motors were to mass-production-based managerial capitalism” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 63).

The narrative, that is evident in the research by Zuboff and the autobiography of Snowden, of an internet community going from a platform for freedom of speech to a platform for commercial market transactions, can also be seen in more popular accounts such as the Netflix documentary The Social Dilemma. In it, former high-level developers of tech-companies like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest describe how they started out making ground-breaking technology that was supposed to bring people together. In the end, however, their innovations helped the Russian intelligence community affect American elections and created large profits for big technology companies on the back of outdated free-speech laws. Laws that allowed them a protection from scrutiny and government regulation. Besides being a wake-up call for the need of technology ethics in engineering university education, it can also be seen as a mainstream account of the things that Snowden warned of many years ago: the parasitic nature of governments and companies’ use of data collected in their free apps, wiretaps, and services.

**From Analogue to Digital**

*Permanent Record* is furthermore the narrative of how the intelligence community has transformed from spies lurking in every corner of the globe to computer engineers controlling drones on the other side of the planet. Going from clandestine meetings and “dead drops” to data, as Snowden puts it. A development that, according to Snowden,
came to full fruition in the global surveillance system STELLARWIND. A widely used system by the American intelligence community that embodies how “the [National Security] agency’s missions transformed, from using technology to defend America to control it by redefining citizen’s private Internet communications as potential signals intelligence” (Snowden, 2019, p. 177).

*Permanent Record* shows how the development from technology to programming is related to these changing intelligence operations. A development from analogue technology that could be repaired at home by an engineer or a passionate amateur, to complex digital technologies that cost much more to repair than it takes to simply produce a new one. In that way, the book is a modern micro-history of the internet and technology. Edward Snowden sees this development as the foundation for technological tyranny: the control of technology are in the hands of the few. As this narrative is shared in the form of autobiography, we see how Edward Snowden’s childhood can personify that change. Coming of age during the 80s and 90s in the western world, Snowden was part of the first generation to grow up online, just as many of his potential readers.

**Information Studies on Surveillance**

Early in the book Snowden writes a sentence which might reveal the choice for the title of the book, *Permanent Record*: “to digitize is to record it, in a format that will last forever” (Snowden, 2019, p. 14). A title that might easily be related to the legal-term *the right to be forgotten*, a part of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) within the European Union. A law that is binding for all EU states from May 2018 and includes legislation that actively tries to prevent personal information from EU citizens stored by, for example, Google to leave the EU (Schiedermair, 2015). Legislation that Snowden sees as a step in the right direction, but that in the end risks being an ineffective tool on a global internet that will not be constrained by EU-legislation. With the title *Permanent Record* Snowden is trying to declare the dawning of a new age where our every behaviour is stored online for all of eternity. Like a prophet from the movement of Singularity led by inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil, that believes that we will be able to upload our consciousness to the cloud in the future, Snowden proclaims that “we are the
first people in the history of the planet for whom this is true, the first people to be burdened with data immortality” (Snowden, 2019, p. 331). From the perspective of information or knowledge history, however, this statement is evidently false. No piece of information, whether it be digital in enormous server halls or analogue on a dusty archive shelf, is ever eternal. Rather, I would argue, what has changed in the digital era that Snowden represents is the amount of activity data – metadata – that is available, as well as our ability to easily record it through everyday technology. In that way, we do not deal with immortal data, but an abundance of it.

In his book, Snowden describes the digital storage utopia of the early days of the National Security Agency. It was based solely on the principle of creating a permanent record, to store as much data as possible for the day that it might serve a purpose. To create a perfect memory of the comings and goings of the citizens of the world. In a review of Permanent Record in the academic journal Archives and Manuscripts, Mark Brogan calls Snowden’s work in response to this digital storage utopia a “study in radical archives” (Brogan, 2020, p.2) Although referring to the mass data collection by the American intelligence community as an ‘archive’ is a bit far-fetched, Brogan is right in pointing out the book’s relevance to an archive setting. After all, issues concerning information security and stable digital infrastructures are increasingly relevant in today’s archival landscape (Brogan, 2020, p. 3).

In his afterword, Snowden also touches on the fact that some technology companies during recent years are trying to make changes to the way they act on the internet. Companies like Google and Apple have adopted strong encryption for its different devices and many website platforms have also switched to stronger encryption. The year 2016, Snowden states, “was a landmark in tech history, the first year since the invention of the Internet that more Web traffic was encrypted than unencrypted” (Snowden, 2019, p. 328).

Snowden’s view on the development of social media and Web 2.0 cannot be characterized as merely destructive and undemocratic. While he finds Facebook to be a real threat to the western liberal democracies, he also finds it to be a tool for democratic resistance in oppressive dictatorships. The example he uses is the Arab Spring, where social media was a tool to bypass the information suppression by various
oppressive regimes and created a platform for resistance. Here, technology was used for good. Even though he is right in stating that social media and alternative communications channels played a part in many of the protest movements that we now collectively call the Arab Spring, the weakest part of the book is when Snowden tries to delve into the field of political theory. Snowden makes broad statements when analyzing global conflict, without providing convincing argumentation. Especially the analysis and conclusions to support his argument that at the heart of global conflict lies a struggle between right-wing extremism and the foundation of liberal democracy rather than a fight between East and West or Islam and Christian nations, are bland and commonplace. This is not surprising of course, Snowden is in the end not a political leader or theorist, but a whistleblower, activist and expert on surveillance technology.

As noted in the beginning of this review, *Permanent Record* contains many narratives. What brings these narratives together is the common direct or indirect narrative of modern internet history. How it has transformed from something analogue, non-commercial, and a zone for amateurs to a digital, commercial, and monopolistic expert space for a few large internet companies. A dangerous place where your every move is being monitored in the hunt for terrorists, or in the hunt for bigger revenue this financial year. The reality, of course, is much more complex than this grand historical linear narrative that Snowden presents. But by showing us this development through his own micro history, Snowden gives a valuable contribution to the field of Internet History from a non-academic perspective.

References


Copyright: CC BY-NC-ND 3.0
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/