

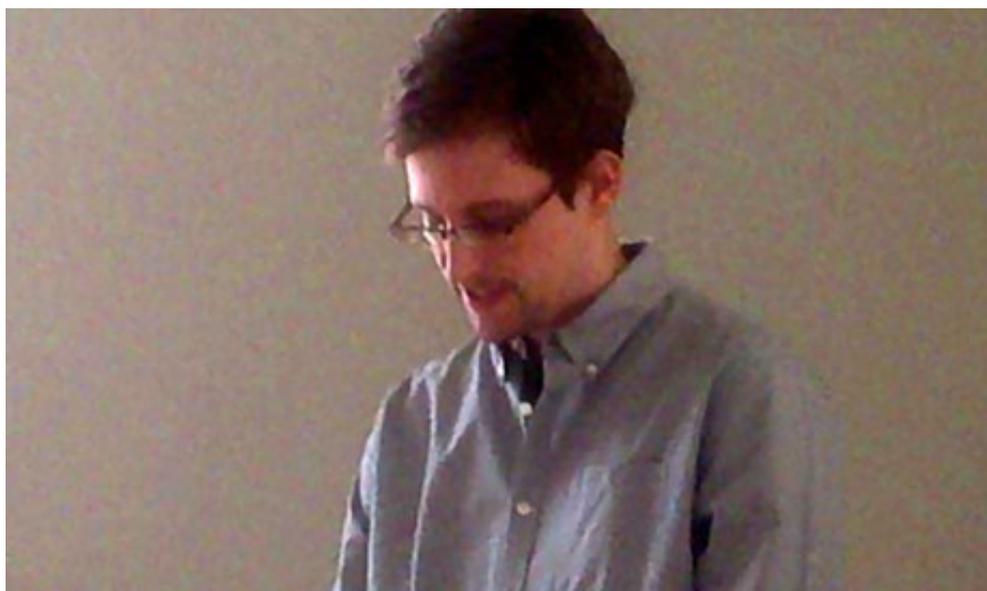
Edward Snowden's not the story. The fate of the internet is

The press has lost the plot over the Snowden revelations. The fact is that the net is finished as a global network and that US firms' cloud services cannot be trusted



John Naughton

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While the press concentrates on the furore surrounding Edward Snowden's search for political asylum, it has forgotten the importance of his revelations. Photograph: Tatyana Lokshina/AP

Repeat after me: Edward Snowden is not the story. The story is what he has revealed about the hidden wiring of our networked world. This insight seems to have escaped most of the world's mainstream media, for reasons that escape me but would not have surprised Evelyn Waugh, whose contempt for journalists was one of his few endearing characteristics. The obvious explanations are: incorrigible ignorance; the imperative to personalise stories; or gullibility in swallowing US government spin, which brands

Snowden as a spy rather than a whistleblower.

In a way, it doesn't matter why the media lost the scent. What matters is that they did. So as a public service, let us summarise what Snowden has achieved thus far.

Without him, we would not know how the National Security Agency (NSA) had been able to access the emails, Facebook accounts and videos of citizens across the world; or how it had secretly acquired the phone records of millions of Americans; or how, through a secret court, it has been able to bend nine US internet companies to its demands for access to their users' data.

Similarly, without Snowden, we would not be debating whether the US government should have turned surveillance into a huge, privatised business, offering data-mining contracts to private contractors such as Booz Allen Hamilton and, in the process, high-level security clearance to thousands of people who shouldn't have it. Nor would there be – finally – a serious debate between Europe (excluding the UK, which in these matters is just an overseas franchise of the US) and the United States about where the proper balance between freedom and security lies.

These are pretty significant outcomes and they're just the first-order consequences of Snowden's activities. As far as most of our mass media are concerned, though, they have gone largely unremarked. Instead, we have been fed a constant stream of journalistic pap – speculation about Snowden's travel plans, asylum requests, state of mind, physical appearance, etc. The "human interest" angle has trumped the real story, which is what the NSA revelations tell us about how our networked world actually works and the direction in which it is heading.

As an antidote, here are some of the things we should be thinking about as a result of what we have learned so far.

The first is that the days of the internet as a truly global network are numbered. It was always a possibility that the system would eventually be Balkanised, ie divided into a number of geographical or jurisdiction-determined subnets as societies such as China, Russia, Iran and other Islamic states decided that they needed to control how their citizens communicated. Now, Balkanisation is a certainty.

Second, the issue of internet governance is about to become *very* contentious. Given what we now know about how the US and its satraps have been abusing their privileged position in the global infrastructure, the idea that the western powers can be allowed to continue to control it has become untenable.

Third, as Evgeny Morozov has pointed out, the Obama administration's "internet

freedom agenda" has been exposed as patronising cant. "Today," he writes, "the rhetoric of the 'internet freedom agenda' looks as trustworthy as George Bush's 'freedom agenda' after Abu Ghraib."

That's all at nation-state level. But the Snowden revelations also have implications for you and me.

They tell us, for example, that no US-based internet company can be trusted to protect our privacy or data. The fact is that Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft are all integral components of the US cyber-surveillance system. Nothing, but nothing, that is stored in their "cloud" services can be guaranteed to be safe from surveillance or from illicit downloading by employees of the consultancies employed by the NSA. That means that if you're thinking of outsourcing your troublesome IT operations to, say, Google or Microsoft, then think again.

And if you think that that sounds like the paranoid fantasising of a newspaper columnist, then consider what Neelie Kroes, vice-president of the European Commission, had to say on the matter recently. "If businesses or governments think they might be spied on," she said, "they will have less reason to trust the cloud, and it will be cloud providers who ultimately miss out. Why would you pay someone else to hold your commercial or other secrets, if you suspect or know they are being shared against your wishes? Front or back door – it doesn't matter – any smart person doesn't want the information shared at all. Customers will act rationally and providers will miss out on a great opportunity."

Spot on. So when your chief information officer proposes to use the Amazon or Google cloud as a data-store for your company's confidential documents, tell him where to file the proposal. In the shredder.

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