

From the Snowden Files to the Snowden Commons: The Library as a Civic Hub

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PART ONE: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Citizen engagement in the "Post-Snowden" World

The massive disclosure of secret NSA documents by Edward Snowden has created an epochal opportunity for dialogue and debate, not only about the nature of state surveillance and the right to privacy in the digital age, but also about human rights and the future of democracy. We believe that the Snowden files represent a crucial part of the World Heritage of Contemporary Documentation: the essential texts citizens must have the right to access so they can fully participate in a democratic society, which is based on participatory and informed decision making. If this is, indeed, a "Post-Snowden" era, then we all must have the right to access the documents that initiated this new age.

Thus far, the Snowden files have inspired collaborations of experts, policy-makers, journalists, activists, artists and concerned citizens. We believe that these critical alliances demonstrate the potential of the Snowden files to mobilize a broad public engagement. New models of access and participation are needed. How can we support, build on and expand the existing initiatives to include the wider variety of people affected and concerned by these revelations and their implications, but who, at present, are not active?

Most citizens have difficulty imagining the scope of the the problem and how it is affecting their lives and communities. It would be comfortable to assume that the reason that the population at large has not shown wide and sustained outrage after the Snowden revelations, has not engaged with the released documents, and has not acted upon them, is simply apathy, hopelessness and a sense of defeat and resignation. We insist that the underacknowledged reason for this situation is that we have inadequate public institutions for sharing this information in a way that makes it genuinely accessible and understandable to everyone, public institutions providing spaces for many forms of collaboration and mobilization for collective action.

Today, just a few people actually access and engage with the Snowden files, which are often confusing or inscrutable to non-specialists. For this reason, we propose a renewed role for the public library as a place to host not only the revealed files, but also organize, curate and care for them so as to make control over and effective use of publicly relevant information more tangible. In a democratic civic society, access to the contemporary document heritage is enshrined in the mission of libraries. Furthermore, the public library's democratic potential as a safe and widely accessible space where people come together and exchange ideas can help us transform this dauntingly huge pool of *data* into tangible, public and actionable *information*. The public library thus assumes an active role of a platform where problems and solutions are recognized and articulated through the processes of citizen participation. The question why the revelations matter for each of us individually and for all of us collectively is then answered in a way that can lead to sustainable and concrete collective action.

From the right to privacy to participatory autonomy

So far, citizens have been trapped between two strategies for defending themselves from the forms of surveillance implied in the Snowden files, both of which tend to be difficult for common citizens to participate in because they require specialized technical or policy knowledge. On the one hand, individuals have been encouraged to use new digital privacy tools and techniques to create a wall between themselves and the watchers (but is this a solution for everyone?).

On the other, some activists, organizations and human rights advocates have sought to compel governments to better protect citizens' rights through lobbying, legal action and constitutional challenges (but what to do when the government is the watcher?). But there is a third option, one that complements and supports the other two while creating something new. We must re-create public spaces where citizens can learn about the threat they face and come up with common, workable solutions: a place to deliberate not only about how we are affected as individuals, but also as a society and as communities, different communities being affected in different ways, and what multiple perspectives different people and different communities take on surveillance. In this way we can build a solid and sustained public dialogue about security, surveillance, privacy and autonomy. We envision the public library as a space where social movements are structured through sharing interests, information, strategies, tactics and tools. We call upon librarians to facilitate the publics' reclamation of the information that impacts all of us.

Why? Because the "right to privacy" is not simply a personal matter of the individual; it is a societal challenge which requires society-level solutions. Further, human rights are not only something granted under constitutional and international law; they must be continuously demanded, negotiated, and constantly rebuilt from society's grassroots. For instance, while article 5 of the German Constitution guarantees the right of each person to "freely express and disseminate their opinions in speech, writing, and pictures and to inform themselves without hindrance from generally accessible sources", such a right must be activated by citizens to be meaningful, effective and transformative. To confront the new powers of surveillance we need to think broadly about building "zones of autonomy": autonomy of the individual, autonomy for communities, autonomy for society. The principle of autonomy translates the ideal of privacy into concrete goals grounded in human rights. Privacy and autonomy are essential components of a functional and vibrant democracy; without them critical citizenship is not possible. A library could be an autonomous zone proper, librarians its caretakers. We need to create and re-imagine public institutions to serve this purpose in the digital age, to make information widely accessible, truly common and operative.

The library to the rescue

Here is where the library comes in. In contrast to the variety of websites that now house the publicly-accessible documents in the Snowden files, and in contrast to journalism, which has its own set of institutional, editorial and financial pressures, the library provides:

- An open, free and accessible public institution for people to access and interpret the material, anonymously if they so choose
- A trusted public institution with a long history and legacy of protecting and advancing the right to information
- A physical space for multiple, diverse communities to access a common space, to learn from one another, and to develop and share rich, collaborative tools for accessing particular topics of interest (e.g. indexing enables people to easily find information on a particular issue, visualizations allow for a better understanding of links)
- A venue where experts, activists and advocates who have advanced data skills and specialist knowledge can interact with concerned members of the public
- Institutional sustainability and long-term access to the documents into the future
- Public ownership over data, which ensures citizens are legally protected and that information can serve the public interest
- Qualified staff skilled in providing access to information, who can facilitate the contextualization and indexing of data, who can provide education, and who can support all different kinds of interaction with the material, for instance scholarly research.
- A venue for experimentation, collaboration, creativity, possibility and concerted collective action

Where, other than the library, could migrants come together with hackers, could poor people (who cannot afford computers or internet access) come together with journalists, could researchers come together with students? We envision the library as a unique and vital space where multiple communities and individuals can work together on shared concerns, with the support and facilitation of librarians and other staff. In any case, such hopes will depend on robust public financial support for public libraries, such that they can become the hubs of citizenship, political engagement and autonomy in our troubled but promising digital age.

Security: Theirs and ours

The issue of safe, secure and legal access to sensitive information is crucial. Both librarians and citizens should make full use of their fundamental right of access to information without fear of legal sanctions or surveillance. No one should be able to spy on them reading the files, which is a risk with the use of online documents. Libraries could provide for anonymous access to the Snowden files, with little or no traces and strong data protection safeguards.

Furthermore, libraries would provide a precedent for handling the type of information such as Snowden files and allow for testing the participatory approaches to interacting with it and preserving it. Thereby, a solid argument could be made for adopting a new model of future leaks: not in the hands of one or a few, but in hands of the public proper.

We see this as an important first step towards a culture of civic autonomy and responsible open data. What would it take to turn the library into an institution that could handle and make accessible a much wider variety of leaked and sensitive data? What would it mean to see the library as the hub for a democratic “civic intelligence” movement that puts both “big data” and tools of mining and engaging with it in the hands of the public? A public in power, not in peril.

PART TWO: WHAT DO WE WANT TO DO?

How can we best integrate the Snowden Files into the library to achieve the goals we have outlined here? Our answer may seem counter-intuitive in this digital age of immaterial data and online communications: we want to publish a book!

We intend to publish, in multiple volumes, the already-released Snowden Files, and we are asking libraries to purchase a copy. We see this book not only as an opportunity to maintain the documents for posterity; we also want the physical books themselves to catalyze community dialogue, debate and activism.

We understand ourselves both as creating a useful and important artifact and archive, but also as making an important intervention in the cultural and political climate of our times.

Why a physical book? There are a few reasons:

- It allows members of the public and researchers to safely, securely, privately and anonymously access the Files in the library without fear of surveillance.
- It will allow current and future researchers and users to cite and reference the Snowden Files with more certainty than online sources provide
- Many libraries are obligated to purchase new books, securing a wide distribution
- It will secure the Files as a physical record for future generations
- Having multiple copies of the book distributed to thousands of libraries provides security against efforts by security services or others to destroy, tamper with or compromise the authenticity of the Snowden Files.
- It will allow wider access to the files, which, while they can be found online, are currently scattered across multiple websites and sometimes difficult to access
- A comprehensive map of keywords and themes in the book to make the document navigable
- The book format will allow for additional contextual, editorial and expository information to be published alongside the Files, rendering them more accessible to non-specialists
- The Snowden Files are a crucial part of the World Heritage of Contemporary Documentation. As such, we see them as worthy of being honoured in a physical document
- Though we live in a digital culture, we also recognize that books have long been a key medium of social debate and an artifact around which people gather. The book does not replace the online life of the Snowden Files, it augments and complements it.

But we see the publication and distribution of the book as only the first step. We have envisioned this book also as a catalyst or a material that librarians and other stakeholders can use to bring people together to debate, discuss and act on these key issues. As we move forward with publication, we will also be developing and suggesting a range of activities and uses.

These might include

- The publication of a regular (eg. quarterly, biannually) complimentary periodical which would provide analysis, updates and supplementary material to elucidate and animate various aspects of the Snowden Files
- A digital platform (or multiple digital platforms) to allow readers/users to share ideas, concerns, analysis, interpretations and disagreements - platforms that would allow users to communicate "in the margins" of the text and thereby connect their local issues to global problems
- Materials so that citizens can form reading groups or study circles, and also to connect those groups locally, nationally and internationally
- Invitations to create hackathons and public meetings to help index, interpret and respond to the leaks.

In short, we see the book and the library as a means to bring the digital world down to the local level, to demystify and democratize complex but important information, and to transform the Snowden Files into the *Snowden Commons*. "Commons" are resources shared by communities and which in turn help those communities sustain themselves; think of a river which provides food and water for a village, but that the village also cares for, cleans and watches over. The idea of the *Snowden Commons* implies that the data contained in the files is a shared resource through which we, as individuals and communities, gain agency and empowerment in a democratic society. But, because they are a commons, we must care for and maintain them, activate them and interpret them. We see this project as one step in this direction.

Note: Please watch the video of a public panel discussion about the "Snowden Files as Commons" recorded at SLOW POLITICS on November 15 2014:
<http://vimeo.com/album/3135535/video/112157789>

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