OPINION

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ed Snowden: A quintessential hacker

There aren't many people to look up to in the public eye nowadays, but Edward Snowden is one. The 29-year-old former analyst is responsible for leaking details of the NSA's massive citizen surveillance programs, including PRISM, a secret program collecting masses of personal data from all channels of digital communication. Snowden did not wait to be discovered, but instead revealed himself in a thoughtful and inspiring video interview with *The Guardian*.

Individuals like Snowden, Bradley Manning, and Daniel Ellsberg (of the Pentagon papers) help the U.S. look in the mirror. The video of journalists and children gunned down callously in Iraq is the mirror. So is the PRISM program. We have to protect those who put the mirror in front of us, and not let the government reward the honest actions of these civilians with a lifetime of humiliations, imprisonment, and terror. If there's even a bone of regard for constitutional law left in the Obama administration, the correct action would be to award Snowden the National Medal of Freedom, rather than chase him into solitary confinement in subhumane conditions, a la Manning.

The MIT community is uniquely positioned to play a special role in this case, and others like it. The long-standing — but potentially fading — hacker culture of MIT, former home of Daniel Ellsberg, stands for individual freedom and privacy. Snowden is the quintessential hacker, refusing to give in to an unjust status quo, and using technical prowess restore the government's accountability to the people by placing these documents in the public domain. The technically savvy community needs no explanation of the unbounded scope and perils of deregulated digital surveillance. It likewise needs no reminder of the potential for gathering public support for decent causes through the web, and this power must be harnessed to protect people like Snowden.

The unfortunate but realistic reaction in our "post-privacy" age is that these materials would be shrugged off with indifference. People already happily unload their lives onto venues like Facebook with no regard for privacy, and some might accept the premise that if the government were to look through their stuff, well, "it's only" private emails, chats, photos, etc. The old "I got nothing to hide" argument gravely underestimates the potential of government surveillance to skew reality to imply wrongdoing. As Snowden points out, one only has to fall under suspicion to be monitored and potentially painted as a criminal. Accepting this would mean having total faith in the government's collection and handling of private data. But we ought to trust the government even less for engaging in unethical activity behind our backs, rather than entrusting that whatever information they might come by, can be handled responsibly.

We need not worry about history. As the recent *Guardian* editorial points out, history will fall on the side of Snowden. But we have to fight to make sure his life and the lives of others like him are not turned into hell in the meantime, by standing up against oppressive and invasive government surveillance. MIT is a fine place to do so.

Yarden Katz G

Tilting at windmills

Edward Snowden is Don Quixote, not Daniel Ellsberg

By Keith Yost
STAFF COLUMNIST

As *Washington Post* staff listened to the fantastical stories being woven by Edward Snowden, our leaker du jour, I can't help but wonder why they didn't greet his tales with a healthy dose of skepticism. Surely the memory of Bradley Manning, the private who cried wolf, couldn't have been distant in their minds. For all the grand claims of U.S. malfeasance that Manning made, when his stolen database of secret diplomatic cables was finally out for all to see, there was very little that appeared out of the ordinary. Now the confused youth sits in a maximum security prison, discredited among all but a few small groups that still misguidedly regard him as a cause célèbre.

Maybe *WashPo* was caught up in the scandal-mania that has characterized President Obama's second term. Maybe journalistic competition pressured them to attempt an out-crazying of Glenn Greenwald, *The Guardian*'s resident paranoiac. Whatever the circumstances, they're regretting their decision to rush Snowden's claims to the newsstand and are already backtracking on key points.

Snowden's boasts strain credulity — he asserts that he could wiretap anyone, from federal judges to the president himself, that the NSA can "quite literally can watch your ideas form as you type," and that several tech giants, including Google, Microsoft, and Facebook have knowingly given the NSA direct access to their servers where, seemingly at a whim, even low level NSA agents and contractors can read through a citizen's email or listen in on their chats.

Of the two NSA programs that Snowden has outed to back up his allegations, one can be taken at face value. The NSA is most certainly in the business of collecting telephone metadata, i.e. what numbers called what numbers when and for how long (though not the names of the callers or the content of what was said). But the NSA's collection of metadata is neither illegal, unexpected, or (depending on your point of view) objectionable. It is authorized by FISA court orders, and those court orders stem from straightforward interpretations of long-standing legal precedent a la *Smith v. Maryland* (1979). In layman's terms, the police need a warrant to listen in on your phone calls. They don't need a warrant to observe you walking into a telephone booth.

> **I can't help but wonder why they didn't greet his tales with a healthy dose of skepticism.**

The other NSA program, PRISM, has been greatly exaggerated, and after the hyperbole is stripped away, it is not nearly enough to support Snowden's contentions. Snowden claims it is a massive NSA dragnet that captures and reads all of the email, chat, and other services provided by America's largest web companies. But his story does not check out.

The first red flag is the program's price tag, a measly $20 million dollars per year. $20 million dollars is what Google pays for maybe two or three weeks of electricity. It's orders of magnitude below any rational estimate of what it would cost to trawl the internet communications of a nation.

The second red flag is the flat, unequivocal denials from the web companies listed by Snowden. One could presume they were lying to protect their bottom line, but what then would be the motive for DropBox, who, according to Snowden's powerpoint slides, is not currently participating but merely being approached by the NSA to join? Surely their bottom line would be improved by coming forward and telling their customers that they bravely fought, like David versus Goliath, against an oppressive surveillance state. Did *WashPo* assume everyone was lying to them when they contacted Google et al. for their responses to the story? Or were they so rushed in getting things to print that they didn't even take a couple hours to get the companies' reactions on the record?

If the web companies are not "knowingly participating," as WashPo wrote (and later quietly deleted), then the "PRISM-as-a-massive-surveillance-tool" theory has a third red flag: significant technical challenges. A great deal of the communications supposedly intercepted by PRISM are encrypted. In basic terms: Google generates a set of ciphers, one for me, and another for the person I am sending my email to. My computer encrypts my message with my cipher, Google receives it, decrypts it, and then re-encrypts it with the cipher that the email's recipient uses before sending it back out again. When I send an email through Gmail, only me, Google, and the person I'm emailing get to see the unencrypted content. Anyone

Yost, Page 5

CORRECTIONS

An article in last Friday's issue of *The Tech* on MIT's highest compensated employees previously had an incorrect headline. Susan Hockfield was not the highest compensated individual at MIT in 2010. She was the highest compensated only for 2011, receiving $1,199,877. In 2010, Seth Alexander was the highest compensated, receiving $1,316,463 compared to Hockfield's second-place $1,006,969.

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