



Glenn Greenwald on Edward Snowden, Julian Assange & the Debacles of the Corporate Media

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Zain Raza (ZR): Welcome to The Source, a program dedicated to providing a platform to whistleblowers, investigative journalists and policy experts. My name is Zain Raza. Today we're joined by Glenn Greenwald, an investigative journalist and the co-founder of The Intercept. In 2013, Glenn reported and published the highly classified NSA leaks exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden. Glenn Greenwald, thanks for joining us again.

Glenn Greenwald (GG): Thank you for having me.

ZR: Let's start with Edward Snowden. According to your Instagram, you visited him last year. Can you talk about how he's doing and his current and future status in Russia?

GG: He's doing really well. Of course, everything is relative to what the expectation was when we were in Hong Kong working together which was that he would end up in US custody in a US Prison, probably a maximum security one for the next 50 years, if not the rest of his life, given that instead he's free in Russia to travel around, most importantly to participate in the debate that he helped to provoke. He lives there with his long-time girlfriend, his family can visit.

He's free in a much greater sense than we ever thought he would be although of course he can't leave Russia because the US government is still threatening to imprison him if he does. So, if you look at it in the context of what the expectations were when he did what he did, I think he's doing remarkably well and is very happy.

ZR: Public opinion in Germany is quite positive on Snowden's work. The whole NSA leaks showed how the German population is even getting surveilled on by the NSA. However, the German government has refused up until this day - we, acTVism Munich did an interview with him, but the German government has not done the same. So, how do you assess the reaction of the German government in terms of how they treated Snowden?

GG: I find it really despicable to be honest. There are a lot of governments throughout the world that benefited immensely from the bravery of Edward Snowden, not just there in Germany but here in Brazil where I live for example, there were incredible numbers of revelations showing how the US and its partners including Canada and the UK were spying on the industry of Brazil, the government of Brazil, the population of Brazil just like in Germany, just like in most of the other Western European countries. And yet not a single country had the principle or the courage to deal with it as required to do not just by ethics but convention, which was offer asylum to Edward Snowden, to protect him from persecution at home other than Russia.

And so, I do think it reflects very poorly on these governments to have cashed in on all the benefits that he offered them through his bravery including Angela Merkel who discovered all kinds of things about how she personally was being spied on but then decided that it wasn't worth turning around and exhibiting even a fraction of the bravery that he showed in order to protect him from the persecution to which he's been subjected.

ZR: Let's move on to the next question. Why is his work 6 years later almost still significant today and how can people personally support Edward Snowden?

GG: Well I think his work is significant because now we're understanding how important the revelations were. The mass surveillance that he exposed still continues and several different developments after [the] spying was revealed has in some sense accelerated the spying and even increased public support for it, I would say primarily due to all of the scare over ISIS and the related terrorist attacks in Western Europe like in Paris or in Brussels, in Germany, in the UK, and then probably even more so the fear that Western governments have successfully instilled in Western populations regarding Russia and the threat that it poses to Western democracies supposedly even though it has an economy smaller than Italy's, they kind of resuscitated and revived the Cold War script.

So this is combined to increase in a lot of ways the idea that we want and need governments spying in an indiscriminate way over the internet, but at the same time you have private internet companies like Facebook and Google and Apple trying to demonstrate to their users that they're committed to protecting the privacy of their users so they don't lose the next generation of internet users to social media companies that promise real privacy protection. You have individuals who are taking matters into their own hands by using greater degrees of encryption. And there are privacy tools far more than before.

So I think that even 5, 6 years after the revelations began, in one sense there has been an increased threat to internet privacy but on the other hand there has been a lot of opportunity created by the reporting to create a wall between us and governments. And on top of that, you now have an increasing awareness on the threat of private surveillance by the internet companies themselves. So I think the debate, the kind of war that Snowden helped to catalyse very much is still unfolding.

ZR: Let's switch to Julian Assange. It was revealed by accident or error that the US government is planning on charging him. Can you a) talk about the significance of his case in terms of press freedoms and b) how do you think the media and political establishment has treated him in comparison to other journalists that had been ill-treated by the Trump administration?

GG: There's been a long effort to try and prosecute Julian Assange and Wikileaks going back to the Obama administration that actually convened a grand jury that made clear they wanted to be able to prosecute and indict him for what they regarded as the crimes of reporting information about what the US government was doing in the dark, but ultimately concluded, the Obama administration did, that there was no way to do that without also prosecuting the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* or all the other news organisations that either worked with Wikileaks or that published the same secrets as it did or that published similar or even more sensitive secrets. How do you justify criminalising the act of publishing documents in the case of Wikileaks but then not prosecute the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the other ones.

So with that reason the Obama administration, although it wanted to and made clear it wished it could, but decided that it wouldn't prosecute Wikileaks. At the time, the US media seemed to be more on the side of Wikileaks because they realised the threat that that kind of a prosecution could and would pose to themselves. Everything changed in terms of how the US government views Wikileaks and in terms of how the media views Wikileaks after the 2016 election, because before, it was perceived that Wikileaks was exposing the war crimes of the Bush administration and had a lot of support on the left and among liberals as a result.

But once 2016 happened and most of their reporting during that year was harmful to the candidate favored by most of the media, which was Hillary Clinton, and therefore helped Donald Trump, he [Assange] lost almost all of his support on the left and even among the traditional media. And even though he gained some support on the right, it is still true that in a lot of ways Wikileaks is viewed as public enemy number one among the CIA, the justice department, the FBI, the NSA. Even with Trump at the helm, they still view Wikileaks as one of their main enemies because he's been stealing their secrets for years.

And then the media support for him has more or less evaporated now that they see him not so much as a neutral whistleblower or an anti-Republican whistleblower, but as a pro-Trump whistleblower or even as an arm of Russian intelligence, which is something they say with great regularity notwithstanding the fact that there is no evidence for it. So all that has changed how Wikileaks is perceived. The Trump administration has made clear that it is a top priority of theirs to prosecute and extradite Julian Assange and Wikileaks for the crime of - what they regard as the crime - publishing documents and it's going to be much harder to stop them [Trump adm.] this time because he [Assange] has very few allies across the political spectrum as opposed to 2011 when the Obama administration decided they couldn't do it.

ZR: Let's run some arguments that are usually voiced when it comes to Wikileaks. I'll state it, even though you addressed it. For example, one of the arguments is that he interfered in the political process, siding with the Trump administration. The second argument usually lies with they are hackers instead of publishers and that they actively work with whistleblowers instead of just when a whistleblower comes to you and they do their job as a journalist. And the last part of the argument is he has too much power as a single person and publisher. Could you address these three points please?

GG: Sure, half of them are lies and half of them make no sense. Let's start with the first one, which is the idea that he interferes in the political process. What journalist who covers an election doesn't interfere in the political process? Most American journalists were openly in favor of Hillary Clinton, constantly called Donald Trump a liar and a fascist every day they opened their mouth which is fully their right to do. The fact that they worked with the Clinton campaign, that they constantly dug up dirt on Trump, that they openly wanted the Democrats to win, doesn't in my mind make them any less dumb journalists.

If someone were to prosecute them for publishing documents, I wouldn't stand up and say *Oh well they were clearly in favor of one side or the other and therefore have lost their status as journalists*. Journalists don't require to remove themselves from the world or pretend to have no opinions in order to be journalists. Journalists have traditionally crusaded in favor of things that they thought were better for the world or against injustice.

The *New York Times* published Donald Trump's tax returns even though they had no idea who sent it to them, even though sending tax returns and publishing tax returns without someone's authorization is a crime. They clearly did it to harm the Trump candidacy but it was clearly an act of journalism even though they were interfering in the election. Journalists interfere in elections all the time, it's called reporting. And the idea that if you interfere in the election on the side of one candidate or another you lose your status as a journalist is going to send a lot of journalists to prison. So it's a very dangerous theory and it's one that actually makes no sense.

The idea that Wikileaks does more than merely work with whistleblowers, actually collaborate or conspire with them to steal documents, is something for which no evidence has ever been presented. When I said earlier that the Obama administration wanted to prosecute Wikileaks, that was exactly what they were hoping to be able to prove in order to distinguish Wikileaks from say the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*, meaning they were looking for evidence that Wikileaks didn't just receive documents from Chelsea Manning but actually collaborated with her prior to or during the hack in order to say that they were collaborators in a crime. And I know there were some efforts on the part of media figures in trying to depict us, the reporters that worked with Edward Snowden, as being his collaborators in the same way, but no evidence was found of that.

So, you can accuse Wikileaks all you want of collaborating with hackers or call them hackers, but until you have evidence that actually demonstrates that, all you're doing is fabricating and lying. And so it is not a very impressive theory to me in the absence of evidence. The only evidence we have is that Wikileaks does whatever a major media outlet does, which is receive information from sources and then reports on and publishes it.

I think the main attack on Wikileaks has been to say that they have too much power and along with that they work with the Russian government. But again, I mean, for decades the *New York Times* was the place where every major national security leak ended up. When Daniel Ellsberg gave the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times* that was the argument of the Nixon administration used to try and get the Supreme Court to censor them as why should the editor of the *New York Times* have so much power that he gets to decide which government secrets are published and which ones remain concealed. And the answer is: That's what a free press does.

We get information the powerful factions want hidden and we then make choices about what's in the public interest to publish and what isn't. That also is called journalism. So if we're going to accept the theory that Julian Assange has too much power because he gets to make decisions about what's published and what isn't, then again you're stripping away first amendment or free press protections from every working investigative journalist and I don't think that's something that any of us want to do.

ZR: You mentioned Russian interference. Let's examine this topic a bit further. The German mainstream media is quite sold on the fact that the Russians interfered in the US election and they base it on two things. The Intelligence Assessment Report of 2017 and the investigation which is being headed by former FBI director Robert Mueller. But I want to specifically focus on the findings of the investigation that Robert Mueller is conducting. Could you talk about this investigation, and has it proven that Russia colluded with the Trump administration?

GG: The Mueller investigation is about a year and a half old or a bit more than that. So far not a single indictment of an American citizen for conspiring with Russians in connection with the 2016 election has resulted from that investigation. So the question that led to the Mueller investigation, which was did Trump officials or other Americans criminally conspire with the Russians to interfere in the 2016 election... We don't know yet what the final answer of the Mueller probe is because it's not over, but what we do know is that no indictments have alleged let alone proven that any American, any Trump official actually did any of that.

It's alleged that Russian officials interfered in the election through hacking and through social media activity. It's alleged that Americans committed crimes unrelated to the 2016 election like Paul Manafort involved in money laundering and the like or people lying to investigators after the election was over.

But on the question that you ask me about, which is the question that was the reason there is a special council in the first place, namely did anybody in the Trump campaign actively conspire with the Russians to interfere in the 2016 election. Thus far, the Mueller probe has produced no indictments, no convictions and no evidence relating to let alone demonstrating any of that to be the case. I don't know what is going to happen in the future because I don't have a crystal ball but I do know that ABC News is ... Jonathan Karl who is the chief White House correspondent of ABC, just 4 days ago said that the Mueller report when it comes is highly likely to be anti-climatic, as he called it, because they haven't found any evidence and don't intend to allege any existence of this kind of this collusion that you just asked me about.

ZR: You talked about the media and I want to pick up on that. You frequently write stories about how the US media fail to back their stories up with evidence even though they made huge claims about Russian interference in the initial phase. These stories usually lack evidence, don't follow journalistic standards and in many cases they have to be redacted. This information however does not trickle down to the German media and they always cite the initial claims made by something like *Washington Post* or *CNN*, *MSNBC*. So could you list the most influential stories that fell apart and also talk about why?

GG: It's funny that you ask that because we're talking 36 hours after one of the biggest stories completely blew up in the face of the US media, which was *BuzzFeed* on Thursday night reported a blockbuster bombshell that Robert Mueller has obtained emails and testimony proving that Donald Trump directed his long-time lawyer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about the existence of a construction project in Moscow to build a Trump Hotel, or a Trump Tower. This was treated as one of the biggest stories of the entire saga, which it would have been had it been true, because it would have meant that Donald Trump actively encouraged lying to Congress on the concealment of crucial information.

Unfortunately for all the people who touted it, particularly for the people who reported it, Robert Mueller himself, who has been notoriously silent when it comes to media reports. He

has barely ever uttered a peep, which is why he kind of gets treated as having god-like power. He's sort of like the biblical God, who speaks once every 2,000 years from the mount, and so you'd just think that he has this power of impudence, of omnipotence, since he barely speaks... But in this case he came down from his mount to speak and said that actually the *BuzzFeed* report was false.

So, Robert Mueller himself said that the *Buzzfeed* story, the crucial parts of it, were "inaccurate", in his words, and so after spending thirty-six hours of hysterically claiming that this was the end of the Trump presidency, that he was likely to be impeached, that this proof that he obstructed justice, the whole story fell apart.

This happened over and over and over again, and it's funny because I'm working on and will probably publish later today, if not tomorrow, what I think are the top ten most humiliating media failures in the Trump/Russia story, and the hardest job that I have in writing this is there are so many excellent candidates, that it's really hard to take the ten most humiliating ones, but, you know, they found things like the *Washington Post* said that Russia invaded the US electric grid and had the power to shut off electricity to people in Winter, and the whole story turned out to be completely false.

Six months ago, *CNN* reported that they got an email proving that Donald Trump was offered advanced access to the Wikileaks archive of emails before it was actually published. And for a full day this was proof that Wikileaks was in bed with the Trump campaign, and then they had to sheepishly admit that their sources had misread the date on the email and in fact the email was sent *after* the entire archive was made public, it was just some random person from the public telling Donald Trump Jr. to go look at what everybody else had already seen, not special advanced access, as *CNN* had claimed. There had been instances where *CNN* had to fire its own reporters for claiming that a top Trump aide had an involvement with a Russian investment bank under investigation that in fact he had no involvement with whatsoever.

Maybe my personal favorite story is about four months ago. There was this mystery in Cuba, where a variety of US diplomats, what they call "US diplomats" but who are in fact of course spies, stationed in Havana, were suffering from headaches and other psychological conditions that everybody claimed was due to a very strange sonic noise that was heard outside of the embassy, that they speculated was an advanced sonic weapon using microwaves. And *MSNBC/NBC* went on the air and said they'd been told for certain that the people behind this sonic attack that was so sophisticated, that the Pentagon couldn't even understand the weapons that were used, were the Russians. But then just about a week ago it turned out that scientists analyzed the sounds that had been recorded that were the mysterious high-level super-duper sophisticated sonic weapons and matched them to the noises that are emitted by a well-known Caribbean cricket during mating season.

So, over and over and over again, it's the kind of reporting that basically led to the American public believing that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons, that he was in alliance with al-Qaeda and even that he participated in the planning of the 9/11 attacks. And over and over and over, these stories are falling apart because they are published with no evidence, simply because intelligence officials who are trained to lie, who are born to lie, tell these media officials to go say it, and they obediently go and say it.

And then it reverberates all around the world. And as you say - I watch this happen in Brazil as well - the initial fake reports get massive amounts of coverage. And then the retractions, although they are humiliating for the US journalists and the US media outlets, get almost no attention anywhere else. In fact, if you look at the people who tweet these fake stories, they get 30,000 to 40,000 re-tweets, they get double the twitter following counts as a result, and then when, in the cases when they post the retraction - and a lot of times they don't - maybe their retraction gets 50 or 100 re-tweets.

ZR: Let me continue with the next question: How does the media react to it and also what can the public do to hold the media accountable when they have such shortcomings and perhaps do not own up to their shortcomings?

GG: It's a really interesting dynamic because President Trump has made this one of his main themes, attacks on the US media. He frequently refers to them as "fake news" and "the lying media" and the like. The US media outlets are very, very adept, and acting with extreme levels of melodramatic outrage whenever they're called fake news, they declare these insults to be a grave threat to democracy, they have a kind of well-rehearsed script that they read from whenever they get insulted.

So they spend a lot of time expressing indignation and anger and rage and offense and insult whenever they're accused of spreading fake news. But they spend almost no time, unfortunately, asking themselves why those attacks resonate, why faith in media institutions has collapsed, why Donald Trump thinks it is a good strategy to turn the media into his enemy. And the reason is the United States is a country that went through the 2002, 2003 lies over, not just the Iraq war, but torture and renditioning, Guantanamo, they went through 2008 where all of the geniuses that they were told were such great custodians of the economy presided over an economic collapse that to this very day is causing a massive amount of suffering.

There is a general loss of faith in the ruling class institutions. Not just in the US but obviously in Western Europe as we see with Brexit, with the rise of extremist parties in Germany and in France, the yellow west movement that is kind of non-ideological but just sort of angry at the status quo. You see the same thing here in Brazil, where a far-right leader just got elected in a country that had previously been electing left-wing leaders, not because there's been a change in ideology, but because there has been a collapse of faith in the ruling class for good reasons.

And the ruling class seems to be responding, including the media class, by calling everybody names who expresses the satisfaction, but spending very little time engaging in self-critique or self-analysis. And until they start figuring out what it is that they're doing that's causing a lot of these political developments, I think [things] are only going to continue to get worse.

ZR: So how can the public play a role here in your perception? Should they just start boycotting the news or should they consume more of independent journalism? What can an individual do to make sure that the media is held accountable?

GG: I think the public *is* boycotting the media which is why there is a proliferation of news sites all over the internet, which in one way has an understandable impetus to it, which is they no longer believe these articles and media for good reason. On the other hand, they can drive them into the arms of outlets that are at least just as deceitful and have malicious intent.

And so I think the number one duty of a citizen is to make certain that no matter who it is that is telling you something, no matter how much you think they're trustworthy, no matter how politically aligned they are with you, that you not believe things until you see actual evidence for them. That if a government makes a claim, don't be satisfied to put your faith or trust in that political official as though they're a figure of the church unless they show you the documentary evidence that you can look at and evaluate and see for yourself.

When you read something online, don't believe it unless there is evidence presented for it. I think the most important thing is for citizens to develop and apply critical thought processes to everyone and everything. As long as they can continue to do that, the ability of people to deceive and mislead will gradually weaken.

ZR: To my last question: The political landscape is quite difficult in modern times for activists and journalists. On one hand you have Donald Trump for example in power where he is causing immediate suffering, for example separating children from their parents at the border or all these strikes that are happening in Iraq and Syria. But on the other hand you have this thing that we should be talking about more, which you argue, about the conditions that led to Donald Trump and what were the factors in the past that led to this. You also warn that another worse Donald Trump might come into power. So how should people that have limited time, and journalists and activists, how should they be balancing immediate suffering and long-term thinking?

GG: I think it's a hard question because the temptation is to say we don't really have the luxury of thinking long-term when we have a president doing a lot of horrible things you've just been describing. The reality though is that he won the election and he is going to be in office absent some extremely unexpected development for another two years. And it's not

just Donald Trump, it's people ideologically aligned with him around the world who are either winning or close to winning elections.

The UK is about to pull out of the EU for reasons similar to the reasons Trump won. Marine Le Pen and the Le Pen movement in France is strengthening especially as Macron, the one person who stopped her, is weakening further. Here in Brazil Jair Bolsonaro just won using similar themes.

So unless we start asking ourselves what is it about the ruling class philosophy of neoliberalism and militarism that is making so many people so desperate and angry that they are turning to extremists and charlatans and con artists and frauds as long as they're just positioned outside of the power structure. Until we start asking ourselves that question in a very honest and constructive way to figure out how to change it, we can stomp our feet all we want, we can call everybody racist who are supporting these people, or fascist, we can march in the street if we want.

But as long as we have democracy and support an ideology that is destroying the futures of tens of millions of people, they're going to continue to vote in ways that we don't like. And although it might be more satisfying to call people names or to denounce people using very harsh labels, it just doesn't seem to me very constructive. And so if the idea is to figure out how to stop this movement, then necessarily one has to evaluate the alternative and the flaws in that alternative and how to make it more appealing and more attractive.

ZR: Glenn Greenwald, investigative journalist and the co-founder of *The Intercept*, thank you so much for your time.

GG: Great to be with you. Thanks for having me again.

ZR: And thank you guys for joining us today. Don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel and to donate, because if you don't, we won't be able to produce independent and non-profit news and analyses. My name is Zain Raza. See you guys next time.

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