

# Cryptic Overtures and a Clandestine Meeting Gave Birth to a Blockbuster Story

By CHARLIE SAVAGE and MARK MAZZETTI  
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WASHINGTON — The source had instructed his media contacts to come to Hong Kong, visit a particular out-of-the-way corner of a certain hotel, and ask — loudly — for directions to another part of the hotel. If all seemed well, the source would walk past holding a Rubik's Cube.



Philippe Lopez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The United States Consulate in Hong Kong on Monday. Edward J. Snowden asked his media contacts to meet in that city to go over a trove of classified material he was releasing.

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Glenn Greenwald, who has written about the leaks by Edward Snowden

So three people — Glenn Greenwald, a civil-liberties writer who recently moved his blog to The Guardian; Laura Poitras, a documentary filmmaker who specializes in surveillance; and Ewen MacAskill, a Guardian reporter — flew from New York to Hong Kong about 12 days ago. They followed the directions. A man with a Rubik's Cube appeared.

It was Edward J. Snowden, who looked even younger than his 29 years — an appearance, Mr. Greenwald recalled in an interview from Hong Kong on Monday, that shocked him because he had been expecting, given the classified surveillance programs the man had access to, someone far more senior. Mr. Snowden has now turned over archives of “thousands” of documents, according to Mr. Greenwald, and “dozens” are newsworthy.

Mr. Snowden's ability to burrow deep into America's national security apparatus and emerge clutching some of its most closely guarded secrets is partly a story of the post-Sept. 11 era, when the government's expanding surveillance Leviathan and complex computer systems have given network specialists with technical skills tremendous power.

While some lawmakers in Washington accuse Mr. Snowden of treason, he casts himself as a truth teller. Like Pfc. Bradley Manning and Daniel Ellsberg, whom he says he admires for disclosing troves of government secrets, Mr. Snowden explained his actions in a Guardian interview by saying the American people have a right to know about government abuses that were kept hidden from them.

He portrayed himself as carefully selecting what to release, seeking to avoid the attacks that accused Private Manning of recklessness. Private Manning, who confessed to leaking hundreds of thousands of classified documents made public by WikiLeaks, faces a possible life sentence in a court-martial.

“He has no regret of any kind, no sense of, ‘Wow, what have I done here? I can't go back,’ ” Mr. Greenwald said of Mr. Snowden. “He is so convinced that he did the right thing.”

He added: “It's not like it's delusional — he's completely rational. He completely understands that more likely than

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





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for The Guardian, left a hotel room in Hong Kong on Monday.

not, he's going to end up like Bradley Manning or worse. Yet he has tranquillity."

It is not clear how Mr. Snowden extracted the secret documents, and the portrait of his transformation from a trusted [National Security Agency](#) contractor to a leaker is still impressionistic.

Last year, he donated money to the campaign of Ron Paul, the Republican presidential candidate who was long critical of government's growing reach. People who knew Mr. Snowden as a teenager said he was enthralled by computers. Joyce Kinsey, who lived across from his apartment in Maryland a decade ago, said she would often see him through the window working at his computer at night.

"He was always on his computer over there — always," she said. "He was just a quiet kid, really quiet."

Mr. Snowden, who grew up in North Carolina, did not finish high school and sporadically attended classes at Anne Arundel Community College in Arnold, Md. Military records show he enlisted in the Army Reserve as a Special Forces recruit in May 2004 and was discharged less than four months later, reportedly after breaking his legs in a training accident.

Somewhere along the way, he acquired a top-secret clearance, which, with his computer expertise, was a ticket for admission to the national security establishment. For more than a decade, American intelligence agencies have been desperate for tech-savvy individuals who can run ever more complex computer networks — and who can pass rigorous and intrusive background checks.

Mr. Snowden bounced between jobs both inside the government and as a contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency in Switzerland and for the National Security Agency in Japan, Maryland and Hawaii, according to his account. Eventually working for nearly \$200,000 a year in classified facilities as a computer systems administrator, he had access to enormous amounts of secret information.

In a [video interview](#) conducted by Mr. Greenwald and taped by Ms. Poitras, Mr. Snowden recounted seeing "disturbing" things on a "frequent basis" and asking questions about what he saw as abuses, only to find that no one cared. Over time, he said, he decided his comfortable life was helping build up an "architecture of oppression."

Mr. Snowden told The Guardian that it was during his time in Geneva working as a computer technician for the C.I.A. that he first thought about spilling government secrets. But he said he had held off, in part because he hoped that Senator Barack Obama's election as president in 2008 might reverse the growth of the surveillance state.

But the fact that Mr. Obama embraced many of the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies "hardened" him, and he told The Guardian that he had decided one could not wait for others to act. "I had been looking for leaders, but I realized that leadership is about being the first to act," he said.

Mr. Snowden, Mr. Greenwald said, had first reached out to Ms. Poitras in January. Her work has focused on national-security issues like surveillance, including a [short documentary she made for The New York Times Op-Ed page in August](#). She and Mr. Greenwald, along with Mr. Ellsberg, are also helping with a new organization devoted to whistle-blowers and transparency, the [Freedom of the Press Foundation](#).

The next month, Mr. Greenwald said, Mr. Snowden contacted him with an enigmatic e-mail identifying himself as a reader and saying he wanted to communicate about a potential story using encryption. Mr. Greenwald wrote back that he did not have such software. Mr. Snowden later sent him a homemade video with step-by-step instructions for installing it, which Mr. Greenwald watched but never completed.

Frustrated, Mr. Snowden is said to have told Ms. Poitras that he had a major story about the National Security Agency that required both technical and legal expertise, proposing that they work together with Mr. Greenwald. Ms. Poitras, who did not respond to an interview request, [told Salon on Monday](#) that she had contacted Barton Gellman, a former Washington Post reporter, around that time for his opinion of the whether the purported source seemed legitimate.

In early March, Mr. Greenwald said, Ms. Poitras called and said she needed to meet in person. At a New York hotel, she shared e-mails from Mr. Snowden recounting, in Mr. Greenwald's words, that "he had come to see the surveillance state as out of control and an abuse, and that he felt ready to risk his own life and liberty to expose it." At that point, neither knew his name yet.

In late April or early May, he and Mr. Snowden began to talk over an encrypted chat program.

"He sort of said, 'My plan is, at some point, go somewhere far away, and I want you to come there and interview me and get the documents and go over them,'" Mr. Greenwald said.

About a week later, he said, Mr. Snowden sent a sample of about 20 documents, including slides for a presentation about a program called Prism under which the N.S.A. was collecting information about foreigners overseas from Internet companies like Google. Then, about two weeks ago, Mr. Snowden indicated that he was ready to meet.

Separately, in mid-May Mr. Snowden reached out to Mr. Gellman. Mr. Greenwald said Ms. Poitras had decided "it would be good to have The Washington Post invested in the leak, so it wasn't just us — to tie in official Washington in the leak" — and picked Mr. Gellman. Mr. Snowden sent Mr. Gellman the same sample set of documents. In an [account of his involvement](#), Mr. Gellman said Mr. Snowden had called himself "Verax" — truth teller in Latin — a pseudonym used by both a 17th- and a 19th-century British writer, one of whom died in the Tower of London, and the other much honored.

In the last week of May, Mr. Greenwald flew from Brazil, where he lives, to New York to meet with editors of The Guardian and review the preliminary documents. The next day, he, Ms. Poitras and Mr. MacAskill left for Hong Kong.

After the Rubik's Cube meeting, the three followed Mr. Snowden to his hotel room and spent six hours "going over his life from start to finish, sort of like I was conducting a deposition," recalled Mr. Greenwald, who formerly practiced law. By the end, he was persuaded that Mr. Snowden was who he claimed to be.

John Schindler, a former N.S.A. counterintelligence officer and now a professor at the Naval War College, said that in the post-Sept. 11 age, the computer "systems administrators" had access to enormous amounts of classified information.

"They can be a critical security gap because they see everything," he said. "They're like code clerks were in the 20th century. If a smart systems administrator went rogue, you'd be in trouble."

*Christopher Drew and Richard A. Oppel Jr. contributed reporting from New York, and Theo Emery from Ellicott City, Md.*

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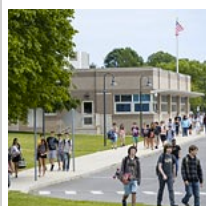
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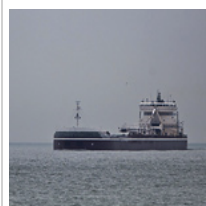
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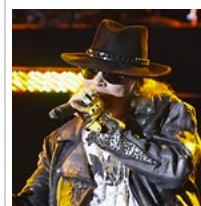
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