

H-Net Reviews

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David P. Fidler, ed. *The Snowden Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. xxi + 349 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-01737-6; \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-01731-4.



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Edward Snowden has become something of a cult figure in some circles. Views of Snowden and his actions are polarized: some see him as a hero for privacy, others as a scoundrel or traitor. Snowden himself appears to be now suffering the strains and remorse felt by many defectors, but this is irrelevant, both because the Russians are unlikely to let him go and because Snowden the person is overshadowed by the massive amounts of information he released about the National Security Agency's (NSA) espionage activities. *The Snowden Reader* avoids the conundrum of pronouncing on Snowden's guilt, naiveté, or excellence by assembling a collection of supporting documents from the tens of thousands of pages Snowden took and from statements by the United States and a few other governments on his revelations. Relying on these documents is both a strength and a shortcoming.

Editor David P. Fidler's introductory essay is excellent and provides a succinct account of the events and issues. The introduction is worth reading on its own and manages to be evenhanded and perceptive in its discussion of the contentious balance between technology, privacy, and national security, but the book suffers from two major difficulties, each relating to the primary documents it had available at the time it was written. First, Snowden's revelations were incomplete. He did

not know (or at least he did not say) what we know now: that European governments engage in the same behavior as the United States. The recent revelations that Germany's foreign intelligence agency (the BND) spied on American officials and agencies, along with officials and agencies from other governments (including their European neighbors), puts the complaints of German chancellor Angela Merkel and other Germans in a new perspective. The United States was one of the most aggressive in signals intelligence collection, but it was not alone, and those with experience in this business know that France, Italy, and others were spying on their people, like the American and German governments.

Not recognizing the espionage activities of other nations is an important lacuna. US oversight processes are described and criticized, with particular attention to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, but the fact that most other nations lack any oversight of intelligence activities at all is not mentioned. In France, for example, there is no judicial or legislative review and oversight of spying is confined to a handful of executive branch officials; this allows France to be among the most active in spying. The same is true for many other nations, including Snowden's refuge, Russia. The omission is noteworthy because the next chapter in the affaire Snowden will be

holding other governments to account. The real lesson of Snowden's leaks is that there is no privacy for anyone who uses communications devices and all governments are as guilty as their resources allow them to be.

Second, in addition to Snowden's revelations being incomplete, those incomplete revelations are themselves distorted. Snowden's cache was carefully controlled so that only documents that supported a narrative hostile to the United States were released. The book reflects this. Snowden had information on foreign intelligence activities directed against the United States. His handlers deliberately chose not to release these documents, and reporters who covered the story (and who were by no means favorable to NSA) complained on being hobbled and manipulated by Snowden's handlers.[1] The sample of documents published in *The Snowden Reader* is skewed by this selectivity, and while the book strives to be even-handed, it cannot avoid suffering in its necessary dependence on the fundamental dishonesty that mars many discussions of Snowden and his trove. This is a major problem for researchers, but one for which we cannot hold the author accountable. Nor can we blame Snowden for this state of affairs, as it appears that he lost control of his cache of materials early in his stay in Russia.

One puzzling omission in the book is an account of Snowden's April 2014 conversation on surveillance with Vladimir Putin for Russian television when Snowden asks Putin if Russia engages in massive surveillance. Putin replies, of course not, Russia is a nation that follows the rule of law. This is complete nonsense. Russia has a system of domestic communications surveillance better

even than China's and is as skilled and as active as NSA in foreign espionage.[2] Snowden knows this and we can only guess at the pressures to which he was subjected in order to make him call the show with this question. It is not a happy episode, but it is an important part of an alternative narrative that may better explain the Snowden episode than the publicly sanctioned tale of heroic flight.

The book accurately reflects most public material on Snowden, but the material that has been released has been slanted to fit a political agenda. This is not the fault of the book, but it means that while *The Snowden Reader* is accurate as far as it goes, it does not go far enough. NSA could be closed and turned into an amusement park and you, the citizens of Europe and of other nations, would have no more privacy than you do now. How we control the proliferation of cyber espionage and signals intelligence that the Internet has created and that most nations engage in is a new problem for international relations, one that will not be easily addressed, but one that will require completeness if there is to be any chance for progress. This is a good book, but it is not complete.

Note

[1]. This assessment is based on my conversations with reporters who had access to the Snowden material and US officials.

[2]. James Andrew Lewis, "Reference Note on Russian Communications Surveillance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 18, 2014, <https://csis.org/publication/reference-note-russian-communications-surveillance>.

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