Title
Cover Your Webcam: Unencrypting Laura Poitras’s Citizenfour

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Laura, at this stage, I can offer nothing more than my word. I am a senior government employee in the intelligence community. I hope you understand that contacting you is extremely high risk...

So it begins. Settling into a seat in the darkness to watch Citizenfour, you feel as if you should look over your shoulder, scan the room to see who else is there, and ascertain whether you are being followed. When the film’s closing credits roll nearly two hours later, you realize that any modicum of privacy you once thought you had does not really exist, that you should learn digital encryption techniques immediately and cover your webcam with a Post-it. When I met with the film’s director, Laura Poitras, to discuss this third film in her post-9/11 trilogy, one of the first things she said to me was, “Glad to see you’ve got your webcam covered.”

Citizenfour creeps through the shadowy labyrinths of state- and corporate-controlled digital networks and details the encrypted exchanges and closed-door meetings that culminated in one of the most significant acts of whistleblowing in US history: Edward Snowden’s revelation of details about the National Security Agency’s mass surveillance program. Though some were not surprised by the news, when the Snowden story broke in June 2013, eighteen months before the film’s release, it directed a collective focus onto the dark side of the digital economy and made citizens starkly aware that their beloved smartphones, iPads, and PCs were being used not only to find romance and tweet revolutions, but also to spy on them.

Given the news media frenzy around the Snowden affair, the series of articles Glenn Greenwald has published in the Guardian, Snowden’s online video appearances, and the release of two books (Luke Hardin’s The Snowden Files and Greenwald’s No Place to Hide), it would be easy to approach Citizenfour with a bit of ennui. “What else is there possibly to reveal? A lot, as it turns out. For the first time, Citizenfour makes public an important audiovisual record, including transcripts of encrypted online communication between Poitras, Snowden, and Greenwald as well as segments from twenty hours of footage videotaped over eight days of face-to-face meetings in The Mira hotel room in Hong Kong.

Also, for the first time, filmmaker Laura Poitras’s unique role in these events becomes palpable and poignant. After being detained and interrogated dozens of times at US airports and having her equipment confiscated, Poitras learned digital encryption techniques to thwart future interceptions of her work. By the time Snowden first contacted her in January 2013, she was encryption-savvy and thus able to communicate and build a rapport with him online for five months. During this period, Poitras not only maintained contact with Snowden but also managed to convince Greenwald to meet with Snowden in Hong Kong. And she had the foresight to record and encrypt everything.

Citizenfour is a subtle and textured film about whistleblowing and surveillance, one that moves between the infrastructural and the personal, the juridical and the anarchic, the sensational and the indecipherable. As Citizenfour straddles these polarities, its narrative encompasses information gathered across international locations, through multiple modes of communication, and from a range of perspectives. The filmmaker sought to minimize her own presence in the film, explaining, “I did not want to make a personal essay film. It can be limiting.” Instead, Poitras clings to principles of cinéma vérité, preferring to “document the encounter,” as she puts it, to lurk and listen on the sidelines in order to open up spaces, characters, and relationships and allow them to unfold. As Poitras explained, to work in this way, “You have to be okay with not knowing where things are going.”

Over its nearly two-hour running time, the film shifts from unencrypted messages typed on-screen to ominous NSA facilities twinkling in the night, from legal arguments in a federal courtroom in San Francisco to heated conversations in a Hong Kong hotel room, from leaked NSA PowerPoint slides to...
Snowden slicking his hair back in the mirror. Such oscillations not only highlight Poitras's masterful coverage as a documentarian, but also help to relay the multiple ironies of the Snowden affair—that an inside man could become one of the US’s biggest threats and that he would end up, after his revelations, living freely in an even more authoritarian state, Russia.

Renowned for her ability to convey historical complexities through carefully chosen characters—Iraqi Dr. Riyadh al-Adhadh in My Country My Country (2006) for instance, or Yemeni taxi driver Abu Jandal in The Oath (2010)—Poitras continues in that practice, privileging Snowden’s voice and experience in Citizenfour and even naming the project after his digital persona. The audience is first introduced to this figure in the film’s setup as Poitras reads in voice-over one of the first messages she received from Snowden:

For now, know that every border you cross, every purchase you make, every call you dial, every cell phone tower you pass, friend you keep . . . [every] site you visit [and] subject line you type . . . is in the hands of a system whose reach is unlimited but whose safeguards are not. . . . In the end if you publish the source material, I will likely be immediately implicated. . . . I ask only that you ensure this information makes it home to the American public. . . .

Thank you, and be careful. Citizen Four.

The segment not only activates one of Citizenfour’s primary narrative patterns—the decoding of (un)encrypted files by uttering them on the soundtrack or animating them in typographic displays on-screen—but also introduces the narrative’s primary objective: to chronicle events leading up to and following Snowden’s revelations. Yet this gesture of turning the whistleblower’s encrypted messages into the filmmaker’s spoken words has other effects as well. It accentuates the unusual relationship that formed between Poitras and Snowden, and enables viewers to imagine the filmmaker re-reading these messages dozens of times, parsing their words in an effort to ascertain their veracity, motives, and source. Poitras characterized her five months of encrypted communication with Snowden as a “dangerous . . . period of unknowns,” indicating this was the time she felt “most isolated” and when “the risks were high” as she had not yet seen the NSA documents he claimed to possess. As an independent filmmaker with an NSA profile, Poitras did not want to “put everything on the line” on her own, and felt compelled to get Greenwald involved so they could break the story together. In fact, Snowden had attempted to contact Greenwald before reaching out to Poitras, but was unsuccessful because Greenwald was unfamiliar with the use of digital encryption.

As Citizenfour progresses, scrambled emails evolve into trusted dialogues. Internet chats build into solidarities. Face-to-face conversations turn into mutual understandings, political affinities, and shared goals. To create a backdrop for the triangular working relationship shown on-screen, Poitras paints a broader picture of mass surveillance weaving together key issues, players, and sites. A roll call of Snowden’s predecessors and compatriots undergirds the proceedings, as Citizenfour features cameos by legendary NSA whistleblower William Binney, who exposed the NSA’s Stellar Wind and Trailblazer programs, and hacker and co-founder of Tor, Jacob Applebaum, as he speaks with a group of Occupy activists.3 NSA Directors Keith Alexander and James Clapper make appearances, too, flagrantly lying on camera during US congressional hearings.

Commercial television outlets cover and amplify the Snowden revelations, as Greenwald/Poitras make them public and the film channel-surfs the results. TV news anchors from Wolf Blitzer to Andrea Mitchell, from Matt Lauer to Piers Morgan, all clamor to cover the Snowden story. Everyone wants a piece of it. One of the critiques of their coverage comes from Snowden. “I feel the modern media has a big focus on personalities,” he says, insisting he should not be the story. Snowden is clear: the NSA’s mass surveillance program is the story.

In addition to developing the topic of surveillance through individuals and institutions, Poitras spotlights NSA infrastructure at multiple junctures. Several ominous exterior wide shots expose NSA facilities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, some taken by artist Trevor Paglen, famous for his work on the secret sites and mysterious mindsets of the US security regime.5 Poitras herself shot the footage in Bluffdale, Utah during the construction of a massive NSA data center, beginning in October 2011 and returning several times to capture the gradual development of this one million square foot structure (costing US taxpayers $1.5 billion) before it was enclosed and off-limits. In one striking sequence, as Poitras’s camera settles on a landscape perspective of the structure in the making, a thick flock of birds swirls in frame left and, then, as if choreographed to mimic the dispersive flows of information, flutter off in a scattering of directions. The birds serve as a fitting metaphorical commentary on the digital tracking to be undertaken from this new NSA installation. Mass surveillance, the film suggests, is not only about high-speed networks and metadata, but is also wedged into the built environment in secret places off the beaten path.

The heart of Citizenfour, though, takes shape in Snowden’s Hong Kong high-rise hotel. In early June 2013, Greenwald,
Snowden, Poitras, and the Guardian’s veteran reporter Ewen MacAskill arrived there upon Snowden’s explicit instructions. As the audience enters Snowden’s hotel room, there is a fleeting glimpse of Poitras in the mirror, already there, as she sets up her camera. Retreating to the edges of the cramped room, Poitras captures some of the most lucid and riveting discussions of free speech, privacy, state surveillance, and journalism possibly ever to appear on a film screen. With her camera fixed on dynamic exchanges among Snowden, Greenwald, and MacAskill, Poitras perspicaciously captures the deliberative, collaborative, and affective dimensions of this historic act of whistleblowing, in contrast to what the commercial news media want to reduce to one man’s actions.

To be sure, Snowden delivers some unforgettable monologues during these sequences about his intentions and the unfolding situation. Some short snippets:

“It comes down to state power versus peoples’ ability to meaningfully oppose that power.”
“I’m more willing to risk imprisonment than I am willing to risk the containment of my intellectual freedom and those around me.”
“These are public issues. These are not my issues.”

At times, Snowden’s commentaries are so crystalline in quality that viewers are left wondering whether any US elected official could speak as trenchantly about these matters. Most policymakers have developed a willful blindness to First and Fourth Amendment infringements in the midst of the war on terror, passing the Patriot Acts and allowing “sneaking and peeking,” unlawful detention, interrogation, torture, and targeted killing to continue. One effect of these segments, then, is to spotlight the giant vacuum of progressive governmental leadership in this area.

Yet what is equally powerful about these hotel room sequences are the intricate interdependencies they depict among the whistleblower, the journalist, and the filmmaker. Snowden delivers details about NSA programs. Greenwald and MacAskill ask questions and take notes. And Poitras records their exchanges. What emerges is an understanding of how their high-stakes partnership evolved and how this relationship, which could have been protected by “journalists’ privilege”— journalists’ legal right not to reveal or testify about confidential information or sources—turned into a full-fledged exposé disclosing the identities of all involved.

At one point Snowden explains, “I don’t want to decide what should be public and what shouldn’t—that’s why I’m running them [NSA documents] through journalists.” (In the current political environment, journalists’ ability to do such work is increasingly under attack, as evident, for instance, in New York Times reporter James Risen’s case.) Poitras indicated that it was a “huge relief” when they were all finally able to meet in person. Only cooped up in a hotel room could they talk openly and determine how to move forward. Their transition from encrypted messages to face-to-face encounters results in a marathon of probing questions, ricocheting dialogues, and solidifying alliances, even friendships. When Greenwald asks whether Snowden’s family is aware of the situation, Snowden says they know absolutely nothing. He then stares intently at Greenwald and Poitras and says, “I trust you to be responsible on this.”

Poitras seemed to be the closest to Snowden, presumably because the two had built a rapport by communicating online for several months. Yet the filmmaker’s distinctive ability to get close to her subjects is not unique to Citizenfour and is evident in her other films as well. As Poitras explains, “I like to work with people that I can spend time with. I like to surrender to that.” In several scenes, as she lingers alone in the room with Snowden, a different tempo and tone emerge. During these moments, the rapid-fire urgency of their strategizing sessions is dissipated by daily regimen. Her camera keeps rolling as Snowden washes his face, brushes his teeth, lounges on his bed, chats online with his girlfriend Lindsay, or gazes quietly out the window. The filmmaker uses these opportunities to investigate how Snowden is emotionally grappling with the conditions, asking, “How do you feel?” or “Are you nervous?” At one point, Snowden responds, “It’s an unusual feeling. . . . not knowing what’s going to happen day to day. . . . It’s scary, but at the same time it’s liberating.”

Ultimately, Citizenfour’s hotel room scenes convey what is lost when human existence is reduced to digital traces and metadata, when surveillance technologies and NSA workers profile every bit of behavior, movements, and moods, and flatten the nuances and fullness of thoughts, words, gestures, political opinions, and debates. By choosing to employ the long
take of cinema vérité, Poitras privileges the performativity and temporality of speaking, questioning, writing, witnessing, and whistleblowing. Deliberately, she mobilizes these acts as vital responses to a state surveillance apparatus that is on the fast track to reducing, controlling, and ignoring them.

While *Citizenfour* pays homage to the whistleblower, the film is also a testament to the power of documentary filmmaking at a time when state tentacles probe unrestricted into the digital nooks and crannies of citizens’ lives. Because surveillance now occurs from the top down and bottom up (as countersurveillance), practices of contextualization and interpretation take on ever-increasing importance. Rather than seek to offer a digital inventory of everything, like the NSA, documentary filmmakers instead record, assemble, sort, and arrange audiovisual information in selective ways and to particular ends and effects. More and more, the critical question of surveillance is not *who* is watching, since watching is occurring all the time; rather, it is *how* to contextualize, organize, interpret, and analyze audiovisual recordings and digital profiles once they are generated. As Big Brother meets big data, the value of media analytics (which ranges from hermeneutics to pattern recognition) is tantamount to the value of recording or archiving.\(^6\) Indisputably, the way information is read is as important as the fact that it exists.

Toward the end of *Citizenfour*, Poitras eloquently confronts how communication and media analytics change in an era of mass surveillance. After Snowden has sought asylum in Moscow, he meets Greenwald and Poitras there. They are...
once again in a hotel room, but the rules of the game have changed. Gone are the wide eyes, thoughtful explanations, and tactical conversations. Assuming that the room is bugged, Greenwald communicates with a tired-looking Snowden by scribbling cryptic notes on pieces of paper, handing them over, and watching the surprised reactions on Snowden’s face.

The viewer must strain to catch the words on paper: “One Key thing—ALL drone strikes are done through Ramstein Air base in Germany—German govt has always denied this—will be a huge controversy.” Unable to keep totally quiet, Snowden whispers with bewilderment, “No way!!” On a follow-up scrap of paper Greenwald writes, “There are 1.2 m people on various stages of their watch list,” to which Snowden blurs out loud, “That’s fucking ridiculous!”

As both shake their heads in disbelief, Greenwald tears the notes into tiny pieces and sweeps the indecipherable pile into the trash. Just as important as the information conveyed is the manner in which their communication takes shape. The candid exchanges they enjoyed in Hong Kong have mutated: voice is now displaced into drawing and miming. Free speech and privacy, the film’s logic suggests, must be pursued opportunistically at every turn and take whatever form is possible. The specter of mass surveillance necessitates inventive and encrypted communication, at every level; it compels both primitive and complex forms of interaction.

Though some critics have described *Citizenfour*’s structure as relatively straightforward, the film is one of the first documentary feature films to be born in digital encryption. Not only did the relationships and events upon which this film is based begin as digitally encrypted messages, once *Citizenfour* was in production Poitras had to devise elaborate methods for encrypting and securing all of her footage and materials, particularly given her history of detentions in connection with her film work. While past documentary filmmakers have certainly gone to great lengths to protect their footage from confiscation and informants from harm, Poitras is the first to admit that *Citizenfour* could not have come into being without digital encryption. This practice not only becomes a core aspect of the film’s production but also is woven into its content and form.

As *Citizenfour* exposes state-led mass surveillance programs, it just as significantly models how to make a documentary on a politically volatile topic in the face of programs of intensified state monitoring, detentions, and interceptions. Using encryption as both tool and icon, Poitras implicitly suggests that the expository potentials of documentary cinema are increasingly bound up with the carefully coordinated labor of scrambling and descrambling, encrypting and unencrypting. “Everyone should learn encryption,” she told me. What good is the video camera without Tor, SecureDrop, GPG, TrueCrypt, Off-the-Record, and GNU Linux, all free software projects Poitras used to produce *Citizenfour* safely? And what
good—or whose—is the webcam if it can be remotely controlled by the state to spy on people?

Ultimately, Citizenfour is as much a tactical media intervention as it is a documentary feature. Tactical media, according to Rita Raley, should be thought about as a “disturbance” or “virtuosic performance” rather than as an “extrinsic product.” Differentiating tactical media from other kinds of political maneuvers, Raley explains that “for tactical media there is a certain power in the spontaneous eruption, the momentary evasion of protocological control structures, the creation of temporary autonomous zones, that surely play their part in making possible the opening for political transformations.” Citizenfour’s virtuosic performance involves the deployment of digital encryption to convene key players in a hotel room and orchestrate a media disturbance of epic proportions. By enacting a “momentary evasion of protocological control structures” and creating “temporary autonomous zones,” the film models for the audience precisely how encrypted encounters and secret meetings can snowball into a full-throttle critique of state power.

Snowden recognized early on that the NSA’s scrutiny of Poitras made her uniquely positioned to tell this story: “Your victimization by the NSA system means that you are well aware of the threat that unrestricted, secret abilities pose for democracies.” He recognized her as an ideal contact: “This is a story that few but you can tell.” But what story? Poitras’s film remains as invested in the unpredictability of its own outcomes as it is in the rarity of its primary source. In the end, it is Citizenfour’s uncanny ability to counter the uncertainty of Snowden’s fate with the penetrating conviction of his thoughts and actions that makes this film such a profound work and Poitras such a vital and powerful filmmaker.

Notes

1. This and other quotations are from the author’s interview with Laura Poitras that took place in Los Angeles on October 14, 2014. Thanks to Laura Poitras; Nancy Willen, Acme Public Relations; Karen Larsen, Larsen Associated; Laura Kim, Participant Media; and the film’s distributor Radius for their assistance. Thanks also to B. Ruby Rich for helping to arrange this interview and providing sharp editorial input, and to Regina Longo for editorial assistance with illustrations.


4. For further details see Trevor Paglen’s website at www.paglen.com.


11. Ibid., 27.