

Snowden denounces global mass surveillance at SXSW festival

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National Security Agency (NSA) whistle-blower Edward Snowden gave a brief interview Monday via teleconference to a crowd assembled at the South by Southwest festival (SXSW) in Austin, Texas. The event was hosted by two attorneys from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Ben Wizner and Chris Sogohian, who led the discussion and made extended remarks.

Documents leaked by Snowden over the past nine months have exposed the existence of a vast state spying apparatus that operates surveillance programs gathering every type of data imaginable, including cell phone locations, video chat streams, emails, text messages, Internet browsing habits and much more. Snowden's courageous actions in bringing to light these massive and flagrantly illegal operations have made him a hero to millions and his appearance was highly anticipated.

The event itself was politically significant—a live broadcast to a US audience made by someone who is being hunted by the US government and has been indicted on espionage charges, demonized by politicians and the media, and threatened with death by intelligence officials. Snowden was greeted with enthusiastic applause as his face appeared on screen against a backdrop of the US Constitution.

During the telecast, one of the hosts noted that Snowden's connection was bounced between seven "proxies" to thwart any attempt to locate him.

In his remarks, Snowden denounced the surveillance operations, describing the past decade as a "global free-fire zone for governments." He categorically defended his actions. "The global mass surveillance occurring in all of these countries, they are setting fire to the future of the Internet," Snowden said.

"Would I do it again? Absolutely. Regardless of what

happens to me, this is something we had a right to," Snowden said. He added that, "the reality is now we've reached a point where the majority of US telephone conversations are being recorded, metadata being stored, for years and years."

"We also have the FISA court," he continued, "a secret rubber-stamp court, only supposed to approve wiretap applications. At the same time, a secret court shouldn't be interpreting the Constitution when only the NSA's lawyers are presenting the case.

"We all are at risk of unfair, unjustified interference in our private lives. If we don't resolve these issues, if we allow the NSA to continue unrestrained, every other government will take that as a green light to do the same."

Reflecting on his motivation for leaking the data, Snowden commented, "I saw that the Constitution has been violated on a massive scale." This evoked loud applause.

"The interpretation of the Constitution had been changed in secret from no unreasonable search and seizure to just go ahead and seize it, and that's something the public ought to know about," Snowden said.

He continued: "The problem is that the overseers aren't interested in oversight. We've got committees that are championing for the NSA, not holding them to account. [Director of National Intelligence] James Clapper tells a lie that they all know is a lie, allowing the American people to believe it's the truth.

"We can't have officials like James Clapper who can lie to everyone in the country, the Congress, and face no criticism, not even a strongly worded letter."

Some of Snowden's remarks reflected a limited political understanding of the full significance of the spying programs and the international campaign being

waged against him by the US government. Snowden and the interview hosts from the ACLU speculated that more rigorous regulation, watchdog groups, and technical innovations would be effective means to rein in the surveillance programs and reduce the threat they pose to innocent people.

“We need more public oversight... some way for trusted public figures to advocate for us. We need a watchdog that watches Congress, because if we’re not informed, we can’t consent to these (government) policies,” Snowden said.

At one point, he called for a “more constitutional, more carefully overseen intelligence model.”

These statements reflect illusions that the present political system can be reformed and the surveillance agencies can be held accountable within the framework of the existing political and economic system.

The illegal operations of the US surveillance state are not mere aberrations. Rather, they are part of systematic preparations by the ruling elite in anticipation of mass social struggles. Under conditions of deep economic crisis and unprecedented levels of social inequality, the capitalist elite is preparing to suppress political opposition by force.

The very fact that Snowden’s exposures have evoked virtually no opposition to government spying operations from any section of the political or media establishment demonstrates how deeply the drive to dictatorship is rooted in the existing economic, social and political order.

The totalitarian surveillance operations are, moreover, not limited to the US, but are being carried out by capitalist governments all over the world.

At another point, Snowden suggested that the mass spying programs detracted from US government efforts to prevent terrorist attacks. This indicated that Snowden gives a certain credence to government claims that its spying programs are motivated by a desire to protect the American people from terrorist threats. In fact, the virtually unlimited scale of the spying programs, sweeping up private information on hundreds of millions of people, including political leaders of nominal US allies and international organizations such as the United Nations, makes it clear that these programs have virtually nothing to do with a supposed “war on terrorism.”

They are directed against the democratic rights of the

people and carried out in the interests of a ruling class petrified at the prospect of the emergence of a movement of the working class against poverty, inequality and war.

At one point, ACLU lawyer Chris Sogohian acknowledged that his organization’s recommendations to improve privacy would still leave individuals and groups that are specifically targeted by the NSA with no real way to protect themselves. “If the government wants to get at your communications, the encryption won’t stop them. They will hack your computer. If you are a target of the NSA, you are beyond saving,” he said.

The hostility of the US establishment towards Snowden has not abated. Last week, Representative Mike Pompeo of Kansas called on SXSW organizers to rescind the invitation in a letter denouncing Snowden.

The congressman wrote: “When I served in the Army along the Iron Curtain, we had a word for a person who absconds with information and provides it to another nation: traitor. We also had a name for a person who chooses to reveal secrets he had personally promised to protect: common criminal. Mr. Snowden is both a traitor and a common criminal.”

As American Civil Liberties Union attorney Ben Wizner observed in response to these comments, “If he [Snowden] were here in the US, he’d be in a solitary cell.”



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