

Pulitzer Prize awarded for Snowden exposures of NSA spying

Patrick Martin
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Columbia University has given the most prestigious award in journalism, the Pulitzer Prize gold medal for public service, to the newspapers that published articles based on documents leaked by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden.

The *Washington Post* won for articles written by Barton Gellman and filmmaker Laura Poitras, while the British *Guardian* won for articles written by Glenn Greenwald, Ewan MacAskill and Poitras. All four journalists made extensive use of the material provided by Snowden, and Greenwald, Poitras and MacAskill met with Snowden in Hong Kong to begin the process of exposing illegal and unconstitutional spying by the NSA.

The citation from Columbia is a political slap in the face to the Obama administration and the US and British intelligence apparatuses. The US government is seeking to extradite Snowden for trial, imprisonment and possible execution as a traitor. Both it and the British government have harassed and sought to intimidate the journalists honored by the awards.

The public service medal is awarded “for a distinguished example of meritorious public service by a newspaper or news site.” It went to the *Washington Post* “for its revelation of widespread secret surveillance by the National Security Agency, marked by authoritative and insightful reports that helped the public understand how the disclosures fit into the larger framework of national security,” and to the *Guardian US* “for its revelation of widespread secret surveillance by the National Security Agency, helping through aggressive reporting to spark a debate about the relationship between the government and the public over issues of security and privacy.”

A similar gold medal was awarded to the *New York Times* in 1972 for its publication of the Pentagon

Papers, leaked by another whistleblower from within the national security apparatus, former Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg.

Edward Snowden issued a statement Monday, through the Freedom of the Press Foundation, congratulating the two newspapers and calling the award a “vindication for everyone who believes that the public has a role in government.”

He continued: “We owe it to the efforts of the brave reporters and their colleagues who kept working in the face of extraordinary intimidation, including the forced destruction of journalistic materials, the inappropriate use of terrorism laws, and so many other means of pressure to get them to stop what the world now recognizes was work of vital public importance.

“This decision reminds us that what no individual conscience can change, a free press can. My efforts would have been meaningless without the dedication, passion, and skill of these newspapers, and they have my gratitude and respect for their extraordinary service to our society. Their work has given us a better future and a more accountable democracy.”

The same four journalists received the George Polk Award for national security reporting, awarded last Friday at a Manhattan hotel. Greenwald and Poitras, both US citizens, returned to the United States to receive the Polk Award, their first visit home since they co-authored the reports on NSA spying and surveillance. Greenwald now lives in Brazil and Poitras in Berlin, to avoid US government interference in their journalistic work.

Both said they had not been stopped entering the country, and both spoke at the Polk Award ceremonies paying tribute to Snowden. “This award is really for Edward Snowden,” said Poitras. Greenwald added that “what he did, coming forward, was absolutely the right

thing to do and merits gratitude and not indictments and decades of imprisonment.”

In his Polk acceptance speech, MacAskill pointed out that the *Guardian* has faced much harsher government attack in Britain than the *Guardian US* or *Post* have yet faced in the United States. At one point, British intelligence agents visited the *Guardian* offices to supervise the destruction of computer hard drives in a heavy-handed effort at intimidation.

Greenwald has not yet made a public comment on the Pulitzer prize, but Poitras said of the award, “I think this is amazing news. It’s a testament to Snowden’s courage, a vindication of his courage and his desire to let the public know what the government is doing.”

Poitras and Snowden also received the Ridenhour prize, named after the Vietnam veteran who worked with Seymour Hersh to expose the My Lai massacre.

Editors of the two newspapers issued statements praising both the journalists and Edward Snowden.

Alan Rusbridger, the editor-in-chief of the *Guardian*, said, “We are particularly grateful for our colleagues across the world who supported the *Guardian* in circumstances which threatened to stifle our reporting. And we share this honor, not only with our colleagues at the *Washington Post*, but also with Edward Snowden, who risked so much in the cause of the public service which has today been acknowledged by the award of this prestigious prize.”

Janine Gibson, the editor of *Guardian US*, said winning in the public service category was important. Referring to the Columbia citation, she added, “I think those words say something about what Edward Snowden did, and what the reporters and editors did, in the face of a lot of rhetoric and opposition.”

Washington Post Executive Editor Martin Baron said the reporting exposed a national policy “with profound implications for American citizens’ constitutional rights” and the rights of individuals around the world. “Disclosing the massive expansion of the NSA’s surveillance network absolutely was a public service,” he said. “In constructing a surveillance system of breathtaking scope and intrusiveness, our government also sharply eroded individual privacy. All of this was done in secret, without public debate, and with clear weaknesses in oversight.”

He added that without Snowden’s disclosures, “we never would have known how far this country had

shifted away from the rights of the individual in favor of state power.”



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