BBC’s Panorama attacks Edward Snowden

Robert Stevens
14 October 2015

Last week the BBC’s flagship documentary show Panorama broadcast what it described as the first British TV interview with US whistleblower Edward Snowden.

In May 2013, Snowden flew to Hong Kong after leaving his job as a National Security Agency (NSA) contractor in Hawaii. The following month he facilitated the publication of thousands of classified NSA documents, making public the existence of an international surveillance apparatus more powerful than any in history. He then travelled to Russia, where he was subsequently granted asylum.

After the growing international support for Snowden, particularly among young people, viewers could reasonably expect in an “interview” to hear Snowden speak at some length. What they got instead was a 29-minute long programme, in which Snowden was often denounced and an “interview” which allotted him under five minutes of air time.

Edward Snowden: Spies and the Law was a travesty of journalism, which repeated the lies and propaganda of the US military-intelligence complex that the whistleblower’s actions were “criminal” and that in leaking the documents he was facilitating terrorism.

As well as smearing Snowden, the aim of the documentary was to head off opposition to upcoming UK government legislation, in which even more spying powers are being handed over to an already vast and all-embracing intelligence apparatus.

The first minutes of the programme were devoted to BBC reporter and presenter Peter Taylor, who specialises in terrorism-related reporting and has acquired extensive contacts with the secret services, divulging exactly how the secret meeting with Snowden was arranged as Panorama cameras provide details of the Moscow hotel they met in.

Taylor frames the episode by noting in his narration that “opinion is sharply divided on what he [Snowden] has done,” with the camera cutting to footage of General Michael Hayden, the former NSA and Central Intelligence Agency director. Hayden tells Taylor that Snowden “betrayed his workmates, he’s betrayed his institution and he’s betrayed the secret service of his homeland.”

Snowden, says Taylor, has raised the “debate over national security and privacy to a new level, framing the agenda for this autumn’s parliamentary debate over new legislation regulating the intrusive powers of the intelligence agencies.”

The reality is that the government plans to give the UK’s intelligence chiefs even more powers. In a June statement to parliament, Home Secretary Theresa May said that new legislation had to be in place by December 2016. It is “not possible to debate the balance between privacy and security—including the rights and wrongs of intrusive powers and the oversight arrangements that govern them—without also considering the threats that we face as a country,” she insisted.

Citing “terrorism—from overseas and homegrown in the UK—but also industrial, military and state espionage,” she added, “In the face of such threats, we have a duty to ensure that the agencies whose job it is to keep us safe have the powers they need to do the job.”

The government also plans to bring in new legislation dubbed the Snoopers’ Charter. This would compel Internet Service Providers and mobile phone companies to store the records for 12 months of each user’s browsing activity (including social media), email correspondence, voice calls, internet gaming, and mobile phone messaging services.

Panorama noted the scale of the data that is swept up by the dragnet of the UK intelligence agencies. It cited the comment of an Internet expert, Dr. Joss Wright, who showed one of the fibre-optic cables that carry Internet traffic across the Atlantic. He stated that, as of last year, it is estimated that the cables carried the equivalent of 650,000 DVDs worth of data transiting the UK every hour (the equivalent of 15.6 million DVDs over 24 hours).

Britain’s GCHQ intelligence operation, via its operation at Bude in Cornwall, vacuums up all the communications data entering and leaving the UK.

© World Socialist Web Site

In the documentary Snowden states, “GCHQ is to all intents and purposes a subsidiary of the NSA. They [the NSA] provide technology, they provide tasking and direction as to what they [GCHQ] should go after.”

Snowden gave more details on GCHQ programmes codenamed “The Smurfs,” after the TV cartoon show. Separate “Smurf” programmes are dedicated to accessing everything on smartphones. They have the ability to track the location of a user and can switch a phone on or off and use its microphone to record at any time. As Snowden told Taylor, “They want to own your phone instead of you.”

The last half of the programme was based on spreading the false claim that Snowden’s revelations have facilitated terrorism. Taylor narrates, “The agencies say that Snowden’s revelations have caused huge damage and in particular alerted terrorists, criminals and paedophile rings to ways in which their communications are being intercepted.”

He then bluntly declares, “The so-called Islamic State is a beneficiary.”

This theme is continued with comments by Mark Rowley, the Assistant Commissioner of London’s Metropolitan Police. He states, “We see the Islamic State, for example, putting out advice on how to cooperate securely. That change of emphasis for them I am sure is caused to some degree by Snowden.”

Taylor interviews Mark Giuliano, Deputy Director of the FBI, who states that Snowden is a “traitor” who has “given a roadmap to many foreign services and terrorist groups as to how we operate.”

In response to Taylor’s loaded question, “How do you think terrorist groups regard Edward Snowden,” Giuliano replies, “Probably as a hero.”

Taylor puts these claims to Snowden, who refutes them saying, “Whenever we hear these claims of ‘damage’ from government officials, universally they’ve occurred without any evidence.”

He adds, “There has never been a single case of an individual that has been harmed by these disclosures. There has never been a specific case of a terrorist that got away or an attack that occurred.”

This does not stop Taylor from then asking Snowden, “Aren’t you a traitor?”

Snowden replies that he is not, asking, “If I was a traitor who did I betray? I gave all my information to American journalists and free society generally.”

Taylor persists with the accusation, “What you betrayed, I suggest, is the American people because you betrayed the intelligence agencies whose prime responsibility is to protect the American people.”

Snowden counters, “An argument could be made that I betrayed the government in order to protect the people.”

Panorama then presents an entirely one-sided view of the increasing use of encryption by Internet users and the “problem” this causes the intelligence operations of governments. Coming down on the side of the authorities, Taylor says, “Edward Snowden isn’t responsible for the increasing use of encryption but he may have accelerated the process.”

Taylor adopts an overtly hostile tone, berating Snowden in the following exchange:

Snowden: “There is an assumption in the question that encryption is a problem, er …”

Taylor: (interrupting) “Well it is for governments. It is for agencies who want to access critical data that they can’t get because it’s encrypted.”

Taylor is then shown reading out a list of “charges” under the US Espionage Act, before asking Snowden, “Are you not guilty as charged?”

Taylor responds to a statement by Snowden that he is prepared to reach a plea bargain with the US government, by asking, “But you will be prepared to face a jail sentence would you?”

Snowden said he would, before saying that his only regret is that he did not act sooner in making the documents available to the public.

Many watching the Panorama programme would have asked themselves at this point, why should Edward Snowden have to go to prison? He is being hounded and persecuted for the “crime” of uncovering the extent of the massive, indiscriminate and illegal state surveillance of the world’s population, operated primarily by the US, UK and their allies. The real criminals are those who authorised and built these programmes.

With the aid of a supine media, exemplified by Panorama, not only has nobody ever been held to account and prosecuted for this, but now the same governments are enacting even more draconian, anti-democratic laws and handing extra powers to their unaccountable intelligence apparatuses.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site