

# New York Film Festival 2014 #5: Edward Snowden Documentary Citizenfour Debuts

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**CITIZENFOUR** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL**

What if someone made a behind-the-scenes documentary film while Woodward and Bernstein were breaking Watergate? What if Deep Throat went on camera and made his case to the world? That's the exciting promise of the new movie Citizenfour by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Laura Poitras.

Poitras of course was approached by whistleblower Edward Snowden (along with journalist Glenn Greenwald) about sharing a cache of classified documents that revealed wholesale spying on the American people and its allies, uncovered direct lies made by government officials to Congress and ended Snowden's life as he knew it forever.

Poitras and Greenwald collaborated and made the most of the unprecedented leak, delivering revelation after revelation that ultimately led to a Pulitzer Prize for The Guardian and The Washington Post, as well as investigations both by Congress and other governments around the world.

At the same time, Poitras was filming their initial meetings with Snowden in Hong Kong, not to mention the newsrooms as Greenwald and other journalists tensely filed their stories. It was hilarious to see them get ready to deliver the embarrassing revelation that the US government had eavesdropped in on the private cell phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. They're waiting for a possible comment by Merkel via some spokesperson before printing the story. So Snowden asks by text, why not just call her directly?

The result of this behind-the-scenes documentary is a compelling story that serves both as a primer on the scandal and a profile of Snowden. At the very least, it might inspire an entire new generation of young people to take up investigative journalism just like Watergate and the movie All The President's Men did nearly 40 years ago. There's usually no money in it, people will denounce you as a traitor and you'll be wary of entering or leaving the country. But gosh does it look like fun.

Here's the trailer for the film.

The heart of the film are the hotel room scenes with Snowden in Hong Kong. It is truly fascinating to observe him up close after he'd made his fateful decision but before the world -- or even his longtime girlfriend -- knew about it. It's funny but unnerving to see Snowden's knowledgeable paranoia over how easily they can be tracked down electronically. (He unplugs the room phone because it's a VOIP phone, he drapes a sheet over his head when on a laptop so no glimpse of their surroundings can be captured by the built-in camera and they all get a little freaked out when a fire alarm goes off inexplicably.)

For the first time, we get to see and hear from Snowden in depth, calmly and thoughtfully explaining why he did what he did and how he hopes to keep the story from becoming about him rather than the massive violation of the Constitution and lack of oversight in the intelligence community he was helping expose. He's smart, calm, wry, self-possessed and elucidates issues with clarity.

The discussion he and Greenwald have about if and when Snowden would reveal his identity (Are they doing the government's job for it? Will it be more powerful if he steps forward rather than waiting to be exposed?) is compelling and a perfect example of the competing interests they were juggling all the time. As the stories begin to hit the papers and the intensity mounts, watching Snowden transform from an unknown guy in his 20s who felt these actions needed to be exposed into a hunted man whose face is suddenly beamed all over the world brings home how his privacy is gone forever.

Poitras and her editors deliver all this and more in a taut 114 minutes, including the increasing surveillance of the journalists, the sort of thing that they've dealt with long before they met Snowden. (Poitras is invariably pulled aside and harassed at length every time she enters or leaves the country.)

The film begins tellingly with a depiction of how an anonymous Snowden first reached out to Poitras. That leads to regular albeit encrypted online communication and finally that face to face meeting in Hong Kong. Then slowly and remarkably, their communication is cut off. Snowden becomes a man without a country, forced to leave Hong Kong and ultimately stranded in Russia, not exactly the first place a person who values personal freedom would choose to reside. (The Obama administration made certain countries like Venezuela and Iceland would not provide him a haven safe from extradition. NOTE TO SELF: make sure you're already in the country you want to spend the rest of your life in before unmasking your identity in a leaks scandal.)

Direct meetings with Snowden and his allies became phone calls and then they are back once again to encrypted texts. At one point while underground, Snowden said it was too risky to film himself via camera as Poitras had asked. He was even afraid to speak out loud for fear it would attract the authorities and endanger his hosts.

That loss of a visual record leaves a hole in the film. But it's a vivid reminder of the loss of privacy all citizens face. As computer security expert Jacob Appelbaum notes during a forum covered in the movie, when people say that privacy is dead, what they mean by privacy is liberty and freedom; this shouldn't be an acceptable state of affairs, he insists. At the end, Snowden is seen from outside his home in Russia, joined by his girlfriend but kept distant and cut off from the world in so many ways.

Contacts with Greenwald and Poitras are surely a lifeline and the movie ends with a great kicker. Greenwald and Snowden discuss a new whistleblower who has come forward. Greenwald avoids stating certain crucial details out loud or on camera (surely Snowden's home is bugged, for one thing) and he scribbles this and that telling bit of info on paper for Snowden to read. They discuss safety measures and some of the data this new leaker is sharing, including a revelation that Germany's denials about its level of involvement in the US drones program are lies. Another bombshell: the US government has more than 1.2 million American citizens on various levels of a watch list. Snowden helpfully puts that number into immediate context: that's more than the population of some entire countries.

Later, Snowden's eyes widen as Greenwald flashes more words he's been scribbling down on that piece of paper. Then of course, Greenwald rips it up and presumably Snowden burns them to ashes later.

The idea that more will follow in Snowden's wake -- people who have knowledge of illegal and unconstitutional actions by the government stepping forward in a sober and responsible manner -- is surely sustaining to Snowden. (Those who tried to raise similar issues before Snowden through proper channels were repeatedly muffled and gagged and vilified, discredited before they could take their case public. Hence the action he took.) But the final emotion the film leaves you with is not elation but unease and discomfort. The music of Nine Inch Nails underscores numerous passages and the journalists involved surely hope you'll wonder: while you're watching this film, who's watching you?

Here's the TED talk Glenn Greenwald delivered on privacy at the TEDGlobal 2014 conference Tuesday, October 7.