

Edward Snowden: The Disclosures, People Involved, Religion, Legal Consequences, and Russia

Edward Snowden

Edward Joseph Snowden was born on June 21, 1983, in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, United States. He is an American former intelligence contractor who became internationally known in 2013 after providing classified U.S. government documents concerning electronic surveillance to journalists.

Snowden worked for the CIA and later as an NSA contractor. In 2013, he copied a large collection of classified documents and provided them to journalists for investigation and publication.

What Snowden Revealed

The documents disclosed information about U.S. electronic-surveillance programs, including telephone metadata collection, Internet surveillance, PRISM, XKeyscore, and other intelligence-collection systems.

The disclosures also showed surveillance involving foreign governments, international communications networks, and intelligence agencies in allied countries. Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) was among the agencies whose activities became part of the public discussion.

The documents did not establish that every American's telephone calls were being recorded or that every person's messages were being read. Different programs collected different types of information under different legal authorities.

The disclosures nevertheless provided the public with classified documentation concerning the scale and technical methods of government surveillance.

Why Snowden Took the Information

Snowden said that he believed the public had a right to know about the surveillance programs and secret interpretations of surveillance law.

He described his actions as whistleblowing. The U.S. government's legal position was different: Snowden was charged with unauthorized disclosure of classified information and theft of government property.

The factual distinction is important. Snowden **did take classified government information without authorization and disclose it**, while his stated reason for doing so was to expose surveillance practices that he believed required greater public scrutiny.

The Journalists

The principal journalists associated with the initial Snowden disclosures included:

Glenn Greenwald

Glenn Greenwald was born in Queens, New York City, and is an American journalist and lawyer. He was one of the principal journalists who communicated with Snowden and reported the documents.

Greenwald has publicly described himself as **Jewish**, while also explaining that he did not grow up practicing organized religion. His Jewish identity and family background are matters he has discussed publicly.

His religious background should be kept separate from his professional involvement with Snowden. There is no evidence that his Jewish identity explains or establishes a connection to the Snowden disclosures.

Laura Poitras

Laura Poitras was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and is an American filmmaker and journalist. Snowden contacted her during the period in which he was trying to establish secure communications with journalists.

Poitras traveled to Hong Kong with Greenwald and Ewen MacAskill and was present when Snowden revealed his identity publicly.

Ewen MacAskill

Ewen MacAskill was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and is a British journalist associated with *The Guardian*. He traveled to Hong Kong with Greenwald and Poitras and participated in the reporting of Snowden's documents.

Barton Gellman

Barton Gellman is an American journalist who worked with *The Washington Post* on the Snowden disclosures. His reporting was responsible for some of the newspaper's major stories concerning the NSA.

Gellman's religious or ancestral background should not be stated as fact without a reliable source specifically documenting it.

The four journalists—Greenwald, Poitras, MacAskill, and Gellman—were recognized for their reporting on the Snowden documents.

Other People Who Became Involved

The Snowden story involved additional people beyond the four principal journalists.

William Fitzgerald

William Fitzgerald was a Google policy employee living in Hong Kong in 2013. After Snowden's identity became public, Fitzgerald contacted Greenwald and offered assistance.

He helped connect Snowden with lawyers who could provide legal assistance and protection.

Robert Tibbo and Jonathan Man

Human-rights lawyers Robert Tibbo and Jonathan Man became involved in helping Snowden while he was in Hong Kong.

They helped arrange protection for Snowden and **connected him with refugee families** who sheltered him while he was attempting to determine where he could safely travel.

These individuals were not members of Snowden's original journalism team.

Was Anyone Russian?

Snowden was **American-born**, not Russian-born.

Greenwald, Poitras, and Gellman were also American-born. Ewen MacAskill was born in Scotland.

Snowden's eventual residence in Russia should therefore be distinguished from his birthplace and original nationality.

There is also no established evidence in the documented chronology showing that the original disclosure was organized by the Russian government. Snowden had already obtained the documents and begun working with journalists before he traveled to Russia.

Why Snowden Went to Russia

Snowden left the United States and traveled to Hong Kong before the first major disclosures became public.

After the U.S. government sought his arrest, Snowden left Hong Kong and traveled toward Russia. Russia was initially part of his intended route rather than necessarily the final country where he expected to remain.

His U.S. passport was revoked while he was traveling, leaving him unable to continue normally to another country. He eventually remained in Russia and sought legal protection there.

Russian Asylum

Russia granted Snowden **temporary asylum in 2013**. The original asylum arrangement lasted for one year.

When that period ended in 2014, Snowden received a Russian residence permit instead. This changed the legal basis of his continued stay in Russia.

The progression was:

2013 — Temporary asylum

Russia granted Snowden temporary asylum after he arrived in the country.

2014 — Three-year residence permit

After the original asylum period ended, Russian authorities granted him a residence permit allowing him to remain in Russia.

2017 — Residence extended

His Russian residence status was subsequently extended.

2020 — Permanent residency

In October 2020, Russia granted Snowden **unlimited permanent residency**. This was a Russian immigration-status decision, rather than Putin personally granting him citizenship at that time.

Putin and Russian Citizenship

The next major change occurred in 2022.

On September 26, 2022, **Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree granting Edward Snowden Russian citizenship**. Snowden was among dozens of foreign nationals included in the citizenship decree.

This was different from his 2020 permanent residency.

The sequence is therefore:

2013: Russian temporary asylum

2014: Russian residence permit

2017: Residence status extended

2020: Permanent Russian residency

2022: Putin signs decree granting Russian citizenship

2022: Snowden subsequently received his Russian passport

Snowden had previously said that he intended to seek Russian citizenship without giving up his American citizenship.

Did Snowden Become Russian?

Snowden remained American-born and was an American citizen before obtaining Russian citizenship.

After receiving Russian citizenship, he became a person with Russian citizenship in addition to his existing American nationality, although the precise status of his U.S. citizenship is a separate legal question.

His Russian citizenship therefore does not change the fact that he was born in the United States or that the disclosures originally concerned classified U.S. government information.

The United States Criminal Case

The United States charged Snowden in June 2013 in connection with his disclosure of classified information.

The charges included violations involving unauthorized disclosure of national-defense information, unauthorized disclosure of classified communications intelligence, and theft of government property.

Snowden has not returned to the United States to face those charges.

Were the Journalists Punished?

The principal journalists who published the Snowden disclosures were not prosecuted for publishing those materials.

Greenwald, Poitras, MacAskill, and Gellman instead received major journalism recognition for their reporting.

This should be distinguished from the government's separate investigations into other classified-information leaks.

James Rosen

James Rosen was an American journalist born in New York City and was a Fox News correspondent.

Rosen became involved in a **separate classified-information investigation** involving government contractor Stephen Jin-Woo Kim and information concerning North Korea.

Investigators sought information about Rosen's communications as part of that investigation.

Rosen was therefore relevant to the broader history of government investigations involving journalists and classified leaks, but **he was not one of Snowden's principal journalists**.

Rosen has also publicly described himself as Jewish and discussed his Jewish heritage.

His religious background, like Greenwald's, is a separate personal fact and does not establish a connection between Judaism and the Snowden disclosures.

Foreign Governments and Intelligence Agencies

One of the significant aspects of the Snowden disclosures was that the surveillance programs did not concern only domestic U.S. communications.

The documents revealed intelligence collection involving foreign governments, foreign officials, international communications networks, and allied intelligence agencies.

This included information about the British intelligence agency GCHQ.

The intelligence relationships were complex. Intelligence agencies could cooperate with foreign governments and intelligence services while simultaneously collecting intelligence about foreign governments, including countries considered allies.

Therefore, the disclosures should not be characterized simply as surveillance being either "for" or "against" foreign governments.

Russia and the Snowden Disclosures

The chronology matters when evaluating Russia's role.

Snowden obtained the classified documents while working as an NSA contractor in the United States.

He contacted journalists and provided documents to them before traveling to Russia.

The first major Snowden stories were published while he was in Hong Kong.

Only afterward did Snowden travel from Hong Kong toward Russia.

Consequently, Snowden's later Russian asylum, permanent residency, and citizenship are documented parts of the later history of the case, but those facts alone do not establish that Russia organized the original acquisition or publication of the NSA documents.

Important People and Their Backgrounds

Person	Born	Role in the Snowden story	Publicly documented religious information
Edward Snowden	North Carolina, U.S.	Source of classified documents	No need to infer religious identity
Glenn Greenwald	New York, U.S.	Principal journalist	Has publicly identified as Jewish
Laura Poitras	Boston, U.S.	Journalist/filmmaker; worked directly with Snowden	Religious affiliation not established here
Ewen	Glasgow,	<i>Guardian</i> journalist	Religious affiliation not

Person	Born	Role in the Snowden story	Publicly documented religious information
MacAskill	Scotland		established here
Barton Gellman	New York, U.S.	<i>Washington Post</i> journalist	Religious affiliation not established here
James Rosen	New York, U.S.	Separate classified-leak investigation	Has publicly described himself as Jewish
William Fitzgerald	—	Helped Snowden obtain assistance in Hong Kong	Not relevant to the documented chronology
Robert Tibbo	—	Lawyer who helped Snowden in Hong Kong	Not relevant to the documented chronology
Jonathan Man	—	Lawyer who helped Snowden in Hong Kong	Not relevant to the documented chronology

Overall Chronology

Before 2013: Snowden worked in the U.S. intelligence and government-contracting world.

2013: He copied classified documents concerning U.S. surveillance.

May 2013: Snowden traveled to **Hong Kong**.

June 2013: The first major stories based on his documents were published.

June 2013: The United States charged Snowden and sought his arrest.

June 2013: Snowden left Hong Kong and traveled toward **Russia**.

August 2013: Russia granted him temporary asylum.

2014: His temporary asylum ended and he received a Russian residence permit.

2017: His residence status was extended.

2020: Russia granted Snowden permanent residency.

2022: Vladimir Putin signed a decree granting Snowden Russian citizenship.

The Central Distinctions

Several parts of the Snowden story should be kept separate:

Snowden's identity: American-born former intelligence contractor.

The disclosures: Classified information concerning U.S. and allied surveillance programs.

The journalists: Greenwald, Poitras, MacAskill, and Gellman were the principal journalists associated with the initial reporting.

Additional assistance: William Fitzgerald and lawyers Robert Tibbo and Jonathan Man became involved in helping Snowden after his identity became public.

Religious backgrounds: Greenwald has publicly identified as Jewish; Rosen has publicly discussed his Jewish heritage. This is personal background information and does not establish a connection between their religious identities and the Snowden disclosures.

James Rosen: A separate classified-leak investigation, not a Snowden journalist.

Russia: Snowden traveled there after leaving Hong Kong and ultimately received temporary asylum, residence rights, permanent residency, and later citizenship.

Putin: Putin personally signed the 2022 decree granting Snowden Russian citizenship. Snowden's 2020 permanent residency was a separate immigration-status development.

Legal consequences: Snowden faced U.S. criminal charges; the principal journalists who published his disclosures were not prosecuted for publishing the Snowden material.

Current Russian status: Snowden's original one-year asylum is no longer the basis of his stay. His later permanent residency and Russian citizenship superseded that original temporary asylum arrangement.

There were a number of **activists, civil-liberties organizations, journalists, lawyers, and public figures who supported Edward Snowden**, particularly after his 2013 disclosures.

Prominent individual supporters

- **Glenn Greenwald** — journalist who worked directly with Snowden on publishing the NSA documents. He was one of the principal journalists responsible for the initial reporting.
- **Laura Poitras** — documentary filmmaker and journalist who was contacted anonymously by Snowden in January 2013 and became one of the central people involved in documenting the disclosures.
- **Barton Gellman** — *Washington Post* journalist who received and reported on Snowden's documents.
- **Daniel Ellsberg** — Pentagon Papers whistleblower who publicly supported Snowden and signed the pardon campaign.
- **Steve Wozniak** — Apple co-founder who supported the campaign to pardon Snowden.
- **Ai Weiwei** — **Chinese artist** and human-rights activist who joined Amnesty International's campaign supporting Snowden.
- **George Soros** — supported the 2016 Pardon Snowden campaign.
- **Mark Ruffalo, Danny Glover, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Joyce Carol Oates, Cheryl Strayed, and Teju Cole** — among the artists and writers listed as supporters of the pardon campaign.

Organizations

The most prominent organizations supporting Snowden included:

- **ACLU — American Civil Liberties Union**
- **Amnesty International**

- **Human Rights Watch**
- **Electronic Frontier Foundation / EFF**
- **Demand Progress**
- **CREDO Action**
- **Center for Constitutional Rights**
- **Access Now**
- **Privacy International**
- **Government Accountability Project**
- **Restore the Fourth**
- **RootsAction**

The organizations were not all involved in exactly the same way. Some focused on **privacy and surveillance reform**, while others focused specifically on **whistleblower rights, human rights, or obtaining a pardon for Snowden**.

The major 2016–2017 pardon campaign

The **Pardon Snowden** campaign is particularly significant because it brought together ACLU, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. In January 2017, the campaign delivered **1,101,252 signatures** to the White House asking President Obama to pardon Snowden. The signatures came from supporters in **110 countries**.

One useful distinction for your research is that **Greenwald and Poitras weren't simply later activists who joined a Snowden campaign**. They were directly involved in the original journalism surrounding the disclosures: Snowden contacted Poitras before the public revelations, and Greenwald became one of the principal reporters publishing the material.











