

Press Release

Background Global Media Forum: Video statement by Glenn Greenwald

JUNE 2014

Hello everyone and thank you so much to the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum for inviting me to record an address. I was hoping to be able to appear there in person, but unfortunately my scheduling did not permit that. I know it's a great conference and I hope to be able to attend in person, hopefully next year.

When I was back in Hong Kong and began working on the documents that our source Edward Snowden provided to us, we spent a great deal of time in Hong Kong obviously talking about the debate that was likely to ensue about surveillance and privacy. But back in Hong Kong we spent at least as much time talking about the debate that likely would be triggered relating to journalism. That was because I knew that these documents, these revelations, would have as much of an impact on how people thought about journalism as they did on any other topic. I think the last year has really proven that to be true as there has been a greater focus on the threat posed by surveillance to individual privacy, which is an obvious linkage.

There has been a debate focused on the threat posed to democracy by allowing states to construct a secret surveillance system. And I think that's fairly obvious, too. How can we be said to have a healthy functioning democracy if the most consequential acts of our governments are being done without the knowledge of our citizenry - not only the details of what they're doing, but even the broad contours. This is an incredibly profoundly consequential system of surveillance that has been constructed without any knowledge on the part of the citizenries of what we call democracies. And I think there's been a lot of focus on that as well.

But there also has been a really important debate that has arisen over journalism as a result of the revelations. I think that's true in two different ways. The first is: There has really been a debate that

has been triggered about the proper role of journalism vis-à-vis the state and those who wield the greatest amount of power. That was a debate that we were hoping to trigger and I think has been triggered as a result of these revelations.

Ever since the September 11th attack in the United States – I would say before that as well, but it's certainly been intensified and accelerated – there has been an extraordinarily close relationship between American media outlets and the U.S. government. I think this framework has been replicated throughout the West. The run-up to the Iraq war is the most notorious example, where the United States government was able to convince huge numbers of Americans and Westerners throughout the world of patently false claims involving Saddam Hussein in Iraq – not only because the U.S. government was willing to disseminate falsehoods, but because leading American newspaper outlets, led by *The New York Times*, endorsed those falsehoods, mindlessly published them on their front pages without much skepticism or investigation. I think this was the result of this very disturbing tendency where media outlets have become increasingly accommodating of and deferential to those who wield great political power. One of the things we hoped to achieve with the reporting we have done is to reanimate the idea that the proper relationship between journalists and those who wield power is adversarial in nature, one that works not toward the same ends, with the same perspective, but toward different ends, with different perspectives, and that namely the role of journalists, above all else, is to provide investigative checks and genuine limits on the way in which people who exercise power can wield that power. I think the debate that has arisen as a result of these revelations has been very healthy in that regard over what journalists should be doing when they come into possession of secrets showing that government leaders are doing all sorts of consequential things that the public is unaware of.

But there is a second aspect to the debate about journalism that has been triggered by the surveillance revelations that I think is just as important, which is that, as I said, there's been lots of talk about the threat posed to privacy and the threat posed to democracy by state surveillance, but there's been relatively little attention paid to the threat posed to a free press by state surveillance. How can you engage in free journalism and in an unfettered news-gathering process when the government is collecting the list of everybody who is communicating with everybody else? Leave aside the very invasive content surveillance of reading people's emails and listening to their telephone conversations that are taking place around the world. When a government is collecting massive amounts of metadata, billions of telephone and email events every single day and therefore knows everybody who is communicating with everyone else, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for sources to come forward to journalists with the confidence and security that they can do so in secret, that they can do so without being detected. And this has posed a very genuine threat to a free press.

I think there are a lot of different impacts and reforms that will come from the revelations over the last year, but I think one of the most important is that we now understand as journalists and any other profession that needs confidentiality – whether it be doctors or psychiatrists or human rights workers or lawyers and certainly journalists – of the need to use technologies to protect the confidentiality of our communications, especially with sources, which means having media organizations, have people in-house, who can train journalists and editors and others on the very potent tools of encryption and other means of keeping what we do on the Internet secure. And that can really revitalize the process of journalism and the news-gathering process in a climate where pervasive state surveillance seems to be something that will be with us for quite a long time.

So those are just a couple of the really significant debates over journalism that I think have been triggered by the revelations of the last year and I think it has a profound effect around the world about how journalism is viewed and understood, not by just we as journalists, but by the public more generally. So thank you very much for the opportunity to talk briefly, though I hope informatively, about a couple of these issues.