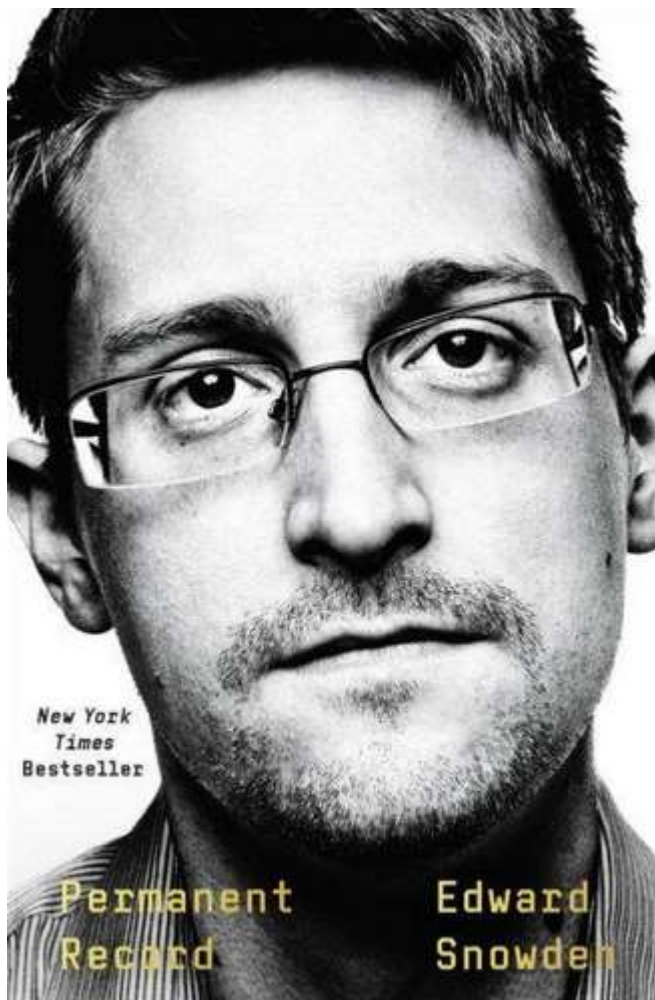


ON THE RECORD ALWAYS: Snowden explores the kind of world we are creating for subsequent generations

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“Permanent Record” by Edward Snowden. New York: Metropolitan Books (an imprint of Henry Holt & Co.), 2019, 352 pages, \$30 (hardcover).



“I don’t want to live in a world where everything I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to, every expression of creativity and love or friendship is recorded.” – Edward Snowden

“The freedom of a country can only be measured by its respect for the rights of its citizens, and it’s my conviction that these rights are in fact limitations of state power that define exactly where and when a government may not infringe into that domain of personal or individual freedoms that during the American Revolution was called ‘liberty’ and during the Internet Revolution is called ‘privacy.’ ” Edward Snowden explains near the beginning of “Permanent Record,” his recently released chronicle of both his life in general as well as the controversial activities that put him in the international spotlight.

“The attempts by elected officials to delegitimize journalism have been aided and abetted by a full-on assault on the principle of truth,” he continues. “What is real is being purposefully conflated with what is fake, through technologies that are capable of sealing that conflagration into unprecedented global confusion.”

So begins one of the most fascinating and cautionary journeys I have undertaken in quite some time. Most readers have no doubt heard about the exploits of Snowden, the whistleblower who almost single-handedly brought the clandestine and highly questionable activities of the National Security Agency to the forefront back in 2013. At the time, he worked for Booz Allen Hamilton, which was contracted by the NSA to help oversee and coordinate its ever-expanding and increasingly invasive information-gathering operations. Interestingly, on the day the current volume was published, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a civil lawsuit against the author, claiming he had breached nondisclosure agreements that were a part of his employment conditions.

Structurally, the book consists of 29 chapters arranged in three major sections. Part One, consisting of the initial 10 chapters, details his early life and provides significant insights into what formed his worldview (and that of many of his contemporaries). Part Two, which is comprised of chapters 11

through 18, details the progression of his career and goes into considerable depth regarding his involvement with the Central Intelligence Agency, right up until his resignation in 2009 and the four subsequent years he spent working for Dell. Part Three, chapters 19 through 29, deals with the chain of events that eventually led him to make public thousands of classified files documenting the government's extensive surveillance programs – programs that the public had no idea were being employed.

Snowden, who was born in 1983 in Elizabeth City, N.C., was a systems engineer who worked for both the CIA as well as the National Security Agency. After a bout of mononucleosis caused him to miss a significant portion of high school, he took the GED and enrolled in classes at Anne Arundel Community College before eventually enrolling in an online master's degree program at the University of Liverpool. The recipient of several prestigious awards and honors, he is currently president of the board of directors of the Freedom of the Press Foundation. By the way, his maternal grandfather is Rear Adm. Edward J. Barrett.

As is typically the case with most books written to provide the rationale for actions that have been deemed inappropriate, unethical or illegal by those in power, the most interesting revelations – at least to me – are those that shed light on the psychological and philosophical motivations that animated the ensuing behaviors. “Permanent Record” is certainly no exception to this informal pattern. (And as Snowden notes in “Hacking,” the fifth chapter, “Humans are hardwired to recognize patterns.”) The reader is essentially provided with a front-row seat to the people, places and circumstances that led Snowden to take the extraordinary and highly perilous step of reaching out to journalists who could tell a story that he passionately felt needed to be told.

Moreover, along the way Snowden also takes the time to confirm some of the suspicions many of us have had regarding our interactions with technology since the widespread introduction of the internet as an intricate and ubiquitous part of every aspect of our existence began back in the mid-1990s. For example, witness the following from “Encrypt,” the 24th chapter and one of my personal favorites:

“Think about the reasons that you yourself press delete. ... The truth, though, is that deletion has never existed technologically in the way we conceive of it. Deletion is just a ruse, a figment, a public fiction, a not-quite-noble lie that computing tells you to reassure you and give you comfort. Although the deleted file disappears from view, it is rarely gone. ... Instead, only the computer's map of where each file is stored – a map called the ‘file table’ – is rewritten to say ‘I'm no longer using this space for anything important.’ What that means is that, like a neglected book in a vast library, the supposedly erased file can still be read by anyone who looks hard enough for it.”

Think about that the next time you hit the delete key – or clear your browser history.

In the final analysis, the argument we should be having is not about whether Snowden is a hero or a villain; in the overall scheme of things, that is fairly inconsequential. What we should be debating are the issues and concerns he raises so eloquently in this articulate and insightful volume. It's not the actions of one person that matter – it's the kind of world we are creating for subsequent generations. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.