

Forbes

Edward Snowden Says Don't Fear Donald Trump -- Save Yourselves From Surveillance

Thomas Fox-Brewster

November 10, 2016

Edward Snowden doesn't appear as worried about the election of Donald Trump as half of America is. Speaking from Moscow today, in a live stream hosted by private browser maker StartPage, Snowden said that for those concerned about privacy, they should not worry too much about Trump, they are the ones who can make a change. In a remarkably optimistic speech, he said the focus of the global populace should be on providing worldwide protections from spies and that this was entirely possible.

"While I care what happens to me... this is not about me, it's about us," Snowden said. Noting that President Barack Obama said he would end mass surveillance, torture, extrajudicial killings, he failed to deliver. "We all put a lot of hope on him because of this," Snowden said. "But unfortunately once he took that office he didn't actually fulfil those promises." Mass surveillance perpetuates, as does Guantanamo Bay.

And so it is unwise to put too much faith or fear into the incoming leader of the free world. "This is just one president," added Snowden. "Politicians do what they think will gain them support... ultimately if we want to see a change we must force it through.

"We should not fear a Donald Trump, rather we should build it ourselves."

Think not of Trump, but of everyone

Asked by cryptography luminary Phil Zimmerman about the potential for Trump to abuse the power of the National Security Agency, Snowden said the focus should be on protecting people across the world, not just Americans. "I try not to look at this as a question of a single election or single president or even a single government," Snowden said. He pointed to recent legislative changes in Russia and China, where regulations allowing mass surveillance were passed this year.

"They got away with it because they said they'd modelled it on America's laws," Snowden said.

Talking of the global surveillance of the web, the whistleblower added: "This fabric of communications that was intended to empower citizens and communities and families is increasingly being used to disempower them... What if we weave this fabric in a different way?"

He imagined a world in which every transaction over the web or the phone would be encrypted, so people wouldn't have to learn how to use complicated security technologies, no matter where they lived. "I think this election reminds us that capability is within our reach today. We have not just the right to try, but the duty."

As for what tools people can use today to get that protection, Snowden recommended Signal, a freely downloadable app for Google's Android and Apple's iOS. It encrypts all calls and messages, and was this week certified as secure by an independent review. (I use Signal too, and wholly recommend it too).

Trump v. Snowden

Snowden didn't offer much comment on the potential for his own extradition, or a potential pardon. He wasn't particularly worried about the former. "Let's say some kind of deal was made, let's say all of that turned around and I was sent away... if I was worried about safety, I would still be in Hawaii. I never expected to make it out of Hawaii. The fact I did, still surprises me today."

Others fear for him, however. Trump has had some somewhat negative words to say about Snowden in the past. Indeed, he's repeatedly called for his execution, though did tweet he'd be a fan if he leaked President Obama's records. Add to that the Putin regime's fondness for Trump, and Snowden's domicile in Russia suddenly appears under threat.

Any thawing of relations currently looks unlikely. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), whose counsel Ben Wizner represents Snowden, announced yesterday that if Trump pursued his more contentious policies outlined in the run up to the election, the organization would see him in court. "These include your plan to amass a deportation force to remove 11 million undocumented immigrants; ban the entry of Muslims into our country and aggressively surveil them; punish women for accessing abortion; reauthorize waterboarding and other forms of torture; and change our nation's libel laws and restrict freedom of expression," the ACLU wrote.

Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said he feared for Snowden's future. "I would certainly be worried if I were him. His current residency permit lapses next August, and it would not be surprising if Putin decided to make a gift of Snowden to his new friend in the White House even before then. You have to imagine he's looking for other options," Sanchez told FORBES.

Whilst many are concerned about the NSA's powerful surveillance apparatus under Commander-in-Chief Trump, former NSA staffers told FORBES this week a more immediate concern was the FBI. Trump's support of the FBI on forcing Apple to break its own security during the debate over the San Bernardino shooter's iPhone, and the feds' director James Comey's actions on the Clinton emails, have led to anxiety the pair will abuse their respective powers.

"My country's government continues to believe I'm a fugitive," Snowden said, in relation to the FBI's ongoing investigation into him.