

The New York Times

Snowden Sees Some Victories, From a Distance

By [SCOTT SHANE](#) MAY 19, 2015



Edward J. Snowden appeared via streaming video at the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm to receive an award in December.

WASHINGTON — For an international fugitive hiding out in [Russia](#) from American espionage charges, Edward J. Snowden gets around.

May has been another month of virtual globe-hopping for Mr. Snowden, the former [National Security Agency](#) contractor, with video appearances so far at Princeton and in a “distinguished speakers” series at Stanford and at conferences in Norway and Australia. Before the month is out, he is scheduled to speak by video to audiences in Italy, and also in Ecuador, where there will be a screening of “[Citizenfour](#),” the Oscar-winning documentary about him.

But there have been far more consequential victories for Mr. Snowden’s cause two years after he flew from Hawaii to Hong Kong carrying laptops loaded with N.S.A. secrets.

Two weeks ago, [a federal appeals court ruled](#) that the first N.S.A. program he disclosed, which collects the phone call records of millions of Americans, is illegal. Last week, the House of Representatives [voted overwhelmingly to transform the program](#) by keeping the bulk phone records out of government hands, a change President Obama has endorsed and the Senate is now debating. And Apple and Google have angered the F.B.I. by stepping up encryption, including on smartphones, to scramble communications and protect customers from the kind of government surveillance Mr. Snowden exposed.

The fallout has been deeply satisfying to Mr. Snowden, who at first feared that his revelations might be ignored, said Ben Wizner, an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who represents him. But the debate about Mr. Snowden is far from over.

“His life is very, very rich and full,” Mr. Wizner said, eager to refute predictions by Mr. Snowden’s critics in 2013 that he would end up in bitter obscurity in Russia. “What a remarkable public citizen he’s become. How fitting that he has been able to use technology to defeat exile and participate in the debate he started.”

American intelligence officials tell a different story about the saga that began on May 20, 2013, the day Mr. Snowden flew to Hong Kong. Mr. Snowden’s decision to leak hundreds of thousands of highly classified N.S.A. documents to selected reporters still prompts fury from many in the Obama administration, who say his revelations taught terrorists and other adversaries how to dodge the agency’s eavesdropping. They note that his disclosures, some of which were printed in *The New York Times*, went far beyond the phone records collection, touching on many programs that target foreign countries and do not involve Americans’ privacy.

“The only debate we’re really having in the U.S. is about the very first document that Snowden produced,” said Stewart A. Baker, a former N.S.A. general counsel and outspoken critic of the leaks, referring to the secret court order authorizing the phone records program. “The rest of the documents have been used as a kind of intelligence porn for the rest of the world — ‘Oooh, look at what N.S.A. is doing.’ ”

In a new memoir, Michael J. Morell, former deputy director and acting director of the C.I.A., expresses the dark view of many intelligence veterans, even blaming Mr. Snowden’s leaks for empowering the Islamic State extremist group, also known as ISIS or ISIL.

“ISIS was one of the terrorist groups that learned from Snowden, and it is clear his actions played a role in the rise of ISIS,” Mr. Morell writes in “*The Great War of Our Time*,” offering no elaboration. “In short, Snowden has made the United States and our allies considerably less safe. I do not say this lightly: Americans may well die at the hands of terrorists because of Edward Snowden’s actions.”

Given such assessments, prosecutors have shown no inclination to offer Mr. Snowden a plea bargain he would accept. The Russian government granted him a three-year residency last summer, and he has no obvious prospect of leaving any time soon. Even if Mr. Snowden acquired some kind of travel documents — the United States has revoked his passport and he is not a citizen of Russia, so he has no Russian passport — he would face a high risk of arrest in any other country and a return to the United States for trial.

Some Russian commentators have remarked on the paradox of Mr. Snowden’s calls for liberty and privacy from President Vladimir V. Putin’s increasingly authoritarian country.

“All these months he’s been pretending successfully he was not in Russia, but just somewhere, in some limbo,” Andrei Soldatov, a journalist who runs an investigative website covering Russian intelligence, said in an email. Mr. Snowden has found asylum, he added, “in a country which is on a crusade against Internet freedoms.”

Mr. Snowden's main source of income, his lawyer said, is speaking fees, which have sometimes exceeded \$10,000 for an appearance. His American girlfriend, Lindsay Mills, who represented him at the Academy Awards ceremony in February, has joined him in Moscow.

But Mr. Snowden's standing, if complicated, is still a far cry from what it was after he first went public from Hong Kong in June 2013 as the source of the leaked N.S.A. archive. In Congress and on cable television at that time, there was much talk of treason, suggestions that Mr. Snowden must be an agent of Russia or China and even calls for killing him with a drone strike.

To date, there has been no evidence that Mr. Snowden took the N.S.A. data on behalf of any other country or shared it except with journalists. (Mr. Morell, the former C.I.A. official, says he believes that Mr. Snowden would have rebuffed any offers from Russia or China, "given his mind-set and his clear dislike for intelligence services of any stripe.")

And he has proved a far more lasting draw than many predicted. His gaunt visage, with the shaggy haircut, stylish glasses and thin beard, has appeared on T-shirts and posters worldwide.

He was edged out by Pope Francis as Time magazine's Person of the Year for 2013, and a campaign on Facebook and by Norwegian politicians to put him forward for the Nobel Peace Prize fell short. But he has given a hip, young face to the abstract anxiety shared by many people in the United States and beyond about the menace posed by government snooping when it is fully empowered by technology.

At Princeton this month, the director of the university's program in law and public affairs, Kim Lane Scheppelle, introduced Mr. Snowden to a crowd that filled a large auditorium and two overflow rooms. She acknowledged that it was unusual for a program on law to feature as speaker someone facing serious criminal charges.

"But the very size of this audience today," she said, "indicates that Edward Snowden has done something very important, by disclosing information that alerted the public to what was being done in our name."

Then the huge, projected image of Mr. Snowden himself loomed over the stage. He laughed sheepishly, muttering about looking like Big Brother.

The next week, he spoke to the Nordic Media Festival in Bergen, Norway, a day after the court ruled against the N.S.A.'s phone data program. "This being struck down is really a radical sea change in the level of resistance that the United States government has faced thus far," Mr. Snowden said, clearly excited. He predicted a ripple effect far beyond that program, saying, "It will affect every other mass surveillance program in the United States going forward."

Last Friday, at Stanford, he fielded the inevitable question: Is he a hero or a traitor?

"It's not about me," he insisted. "It's about us. I'm not a hero. I'm not a traitor. I'm an ordinary American like anyone else in the room."

But he was not in that room in California, and he spoke a little wistfully about that.

“If the opportunity was presented, I would of course come home,” he said. “Because that’s where I live. That’s where my family is.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/20/world/europe/snowden-sees-some-victories-from-a-distance.html>