GAWKER

A Discussion With Cryptome

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When the *Guardian* and *Washington Post* published their blockbuster NSA reports based on Ed Snowden's leaks, journalists lined up conga-style to congratulate them on the scoops. Not Cryptome. Instead, the secret-killing site blasted the *Guardian* and *Post* for only publishing 4 of the 41 slides that Snowden gave them about PRISM, the NSA's system for spying on the internet.

"Mr. Snowden, please send your 41 PRISM slides and other information to less

easily cowed and overly coddled commercial outlets than *Washington Post* and *Guardian*," Cryptome wrote in a June 10th dispatch titled "Snowden Censored by Craven Media."

To longtime followers of Cryptome, this response was unsurprising. Before Wikileaks, before Ed Snowden, there was Cryptome. Manhattan-based architects John Young and Deborah Natsios founded Cryptome.org in 1996 as a repository for documents no one else would publish, including lists of CIA assets, in-depth technical schematics of sensitive national security installations, and copyrighted material. As leaking has created a vibrant media ecosystem in recent years, complete with favored outlets, journalists and sources, Cryptome has positioned itself as its curmudgeonly ombudsman, quietly but blisteringly cutting down the hype and blather it sees in its competitors while advocating a form of radical transparency as straightforward as Cryptome.org's bare-bones website.

Recently Gawker sat down with Natsios and Young to discuss their thoughts on the state of leaking, the NSA revelations, and the surveillance state. **John Young and Deborah Natsios will join us at 2:30pm for a reader Q + A. Please leave your questions in the comments.**

Interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

Gawker: When did you first hear about the NSA leak?

Young: I guess when everybody else did. Did you guys get that through your tips?

Gawker: No, we didn't get anything about it.

Young: Did you go back and look?

Gawker: Yeah. Did you?

Young: Yeah, I didn't find anything.

Gawker: Why do you think Snowden went to established media like the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* as opposed to *Wikileaks*, or you?

Young: Snowden actually learned from [Bradley] Manning's miserable experience, so he was more careful about it. I think he shopped around. But I think he also got some advice. And I think that he has been pretty strategic in his approach. I don't think they're the only ones he sent this stuff to—he's too smart for that. But you notice, most of them were cautious too. I think each side is pretty cautious.

Gawker: You've been critical about the fact that the Guardian and the Post only released four out of 41 slides or however many. How would have you handled this differently?

Young: Well, we would have dumped it, the whole thing. Everyone else likes to play this game: "What if we harm somebody" or all this kind of crap. Which is strictly cowardice. Of course the companies who run the outlets, their lawyers won't let them do this kind of thing, so if you've got money invested in your operation you won't take these kind of risks.

Natsios: Where's Greenwald on the bar? Do you know where he's licensed to practice?

Gawker: No...

Natsios: Just New York State? Is he actively—what is the status of his licensure?

Gawker: I know his practice is defunct, but I don't know if he's licensed. Why do you ask?

Natsios: Well, because he would have certain professional, perhaps, obstacles to certain kinds of behaviors.

Young: Lawyers won't break the law.

Gawker: So your idea is that he's compromised in some way?

Young: Well he's cautious. It's one thing to be a rhetorician. It's another thing to break the law.

Gawker: But you would break the law?

Young: No, I would publish it. In other words, I don't acknowledge the power of the law. I just publish stuff. If someone wants to make a legal case, have at it. But it's not my job to pretend I know what the law is.

Gawker: Why do you think all 41 should be out? Apparently the Guardian has judged that these are the newsworthy ones.

Young: Well, one to call their bluff. The other is to not let them tease the public with what's coming, which is a well-known journalistic technique, to stretch out the product as though the great stuff is coming. Withholding is a kind of reputation building, to be responsible, respectable, *but oh boy, if you knew what we had***.** This is how spies talk. You can see all of them using that language: *If only you knew what we know*. *You gotta trust us*. So it's kind of scammy.

Gawker: Wikileaks did that too, with the Manning leaks.

Natsios: The serialization of content goes way back to tabloids, Charles Dickens, and other content providers in the 19th century.

Young: By the way, I don't have a problem with this, it's just their technique. There are other techniques. There should be many techniques.

Gawker: What's the Cryptome technique?

Young: Publish what we get, on that grounds we don't know what's good and what's bad and do not want to pretend that we do. Because that's just sheer self-promotion.

Gawker: Do you think Snowden is a hero?

Young: Yeah, in so far as you want to play up that word. I think that he's quite courageous to do what he's doing. I'm not convinced that he's operating as an individual but he certainly gives all the appearance of being a hero. So I think until proved otherwise, you can look at it that way.

But I think he's playing a teasing game too, because he's not so dumb as to dump everything in one place. That's suicide because he knows he gets screwed if he does that. The recipients would screw him in their own defense. I think that it's worth seeing what they do next, because usually these things have steps. They're testing the market right now: Will he get public support by releasing more? Under what circumstances? Who will we give it to? Is this guy going to be badly burned?

The military calls this being a rabbit: he's being set up to draw fire and see what happens. And if someone takes a potshot at him, you watch who does. It's risky behavior, but it's a good way to smoke out the opposition.

Gawker: In a post on Cryptome, you suggested the leak was a "wargame". Do you think that this might be an elaborate government test?

Young: Well, it will certainly be used for that purpose. They're certainly watching the response to this. They not only run their own games, they watch other people's games. Some are fortuitous like this. Some are deliberate.

Natsios: I like this notion of the spontaneously combusting war games scenario. It's not top-down driven, it's just erupts and you study it as a phenomenon and information emerges that wouldn't otherwise in the carefully scripted modeling scenario.

Gawker: It seems significant Snowden was an IT guy as opposed to a higher-up, like the other NSA whistleblowers, Thomas Drake or William Binney.

Natsios: I think it's interesting looked at in terms of large technosystem theory, the NSA taken as a large technosystem, this operative being something of a prosthetic extension of hardware. Snowden being understood as a kind of cyborgian creature without any political intuition. There's a kind of shock now in the system, now that this piece of hardware has suddenly, you know, gone rogue. And a person of his status, his age, his youth, there seems to be an incredible bias about their having any political voice.

It's a key threshold for him to have broken out of his little enclosure and committed the act of conscience. Presumably the cyborg has no conscience, they're just kind of artificially intelligenced. And that's why if he's to be a hero in the literary sense, it's based on this act of conscience argument that he's deploying.

Gawker: Snowden told the *Guardian* that in leaking these documents he wanted to reveal the "architecture of oppression." You're both architects—what

does that term mean to you?

Young: People take it metaphorically, but we think he means the actual, physical infrastructure. That's how I took it, he's waiting to tell us how this structure actually operates, not the historical version that goes before Congress and goes to the press. A number of people have written about the technology, [journalist James Bamford] and others have written about this so it's not like it's not out there, but I think he's testing the waters for language.

The word "architecture" is terribly thrown around, like gravitas and everything else and I think it's been taken that way without saying, "No, he's actually talking about the architecture." This building, these cable system, these hubs. These satellites dishes— actual physical structures. Without which you cannot do what they're doing.

Gawker: So you think he has information on what's actually on the ground.

Young: He was managing those systems. That's why he's so valuable.

Natsios: It's interesting in terms of the five or six big, vintage, historic telecom hubs downtown [in Manhattan]. Speaking of Verizon, my favorite Verizon is the tower at 375 Pearl St. that was bought by this Seattle data farm, Intergate. And now Intergate Manhattan, they tout the fact that they are in the NYPD security zone, and that they have protection from homeland security. For your storage. I mean, it's extraordinary. Homeland security will be standing guard over your data, don't you feel so much better about that?

Gawker: I'm also curious if you have any thoughts on the NSA's headquarters —that cube everyone is showing on the news.

Natsios: When the parking lot is full or empty?