



## Citizenfour Discussion Guide

Director: Laura Poitras

Year: 2015

Time: 114 min

### You might know this director from:

The Oath (2010)

My Country, My Country (2006)

Flag Wars (2003)

## FILM SUMMARY

Director Laura Poitras was in the middle of her third documentary in post-9/11 America when she received an email from "Citizenfour," an individual claiming to possess insider information on the wide-scale surveillance schemes of the U.S. government. Rather than brushing the message off as bogus, she pursued this mysterious mailer, embroiling herself in one of the greatest global shockwaves of this millennium thus far.

Teaming up with journalist Glenn Greenwald of "The Guardian," Poitras began her journey. The two travel to Hong Kong, where they meet "Citizenfour," an infrastructure analyst named Edward Snowden working inside the National Security Agency. Joined by fellow Guardian colleague Ewen MacAskill, the four set up camp in Snowden's hotel room, where over the course of the following eight days he reveals a shocking protocol in effect that will uproot the way citizens across the world view their leaders in the days to come.

Snowden does not wish to remain anonymous, and yet he insists "I'm not the story." In his mind the issues of liberty, justice, freedom, and democracy are at stake, and who he is has very little bearing on the intense implications of the mass surveillance in effect worldwide. Snowden reminds us, "It's not science fiction. This is happening right now," and at times the extent of information is just too massive to grasp, especially for the journalists involved.

A courageous and damning human tale, CITIZENFOUR drives to our core and unearths what the powers that be so extensively work to bury. Whether we investigate the man or the matter is up to us. Poitras' lens brings us the unfiltered development of Snowden's world-altering decision, and leaves the rest to us.

## FILM THEMES

By throwing the blanket excuse of “terrorism” over every infringement of privacy, the U.S. government is actively corroding democracy. Snowden presents a fierce challenge.

### **BROAD-SCALE SURVEILLANCE**

The world drastically changed following September 11, 2001. In order to tackle the apparent threats of terrorism, the U.S. government allocated themselves far-reaching access to endless amounts of information in the form of The Patriot Act. Every action was written off as a means of tackling terrorism. When Snowden leaked the tsunami of damning proof against multiple governments’ mass surveillance programs of all citizens – regardless of criminal records or terrorism links – the full extent of the surveillance became clear, with damning implications. Suddenly the lives of each one of us wasn’t as much our own as we envisioned.

### **DEMOCRACY?**

Do democratic governments have to defend their actions to their citizens? According to most definitions of democracy, yes. The rules, however, have changed in light of Snowden’s revelations. If the NSA is granted permission to do whatever it pleases in whichever manner, with no limitations or accountability, liberty becomes corroded. An unrestricted secret police replaces the previous system of checks and balances. No longer can the home of the free declare itself to be a country of an electorate and elected, but rather a ruling class and the ruled. Mass surveillance has no time for fair, transparent democracy.

### **PRIVACY**

By collecting personal information on millions of Americans, people’s civil liberties are severely infringed upon. But what is privacy worth? How essential is it to a free and open society? If every action and decision is monitored, there is suddenly no space for protest or room for intellectual questioning. If individuals begin self-monitoring the words they type into search engines or the information they divulge online or over the phone, intellectual advancement is curtailed. Privacy is at the core of freedom and justice. Without the possibility of personally deciding what is public and what is private, individuals relinquish the self and the state becomes the sole deciding force.

### **MEDIA PERSONALITY**

Snowden repeated, “I am not the issue.” Well aware that the media was blood-thirsty for personalities, a face onto which to attach stories, he tread as carefully as he could. He had no intention of hiding and believed that by exposing himself, the information would be further validated. Yet would it be possible to keep the spotlight on the issue and not on him personally? It was a challenge, as the mass media proved how much it adores a personality, often placing the issue in the backseat.

**“It’s not science fiction. This is happening right now.”**

Edward Snowden

**“If we don’t have our right to privacy, how do we have a free and open discussion?”**

Ladar Levison, Lavabit founder

**“I am more willing to risk imprisonment personally than I am willing to risk the curtailment of my intellectual freedom and that of those around me.”**

Edward Snowden



## FILM FACTS:

- After its U.S. premiere at the New York Film Festival in October 2014, CITIZENFOUR went on to snoop up an incredible amount of prestigious awards and nominations. Awards include an Oscar, a BAFTA, an International Documentary Association award, as well as director Poitras winning an Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Documentary from the Director's Guild of America. Nominations include a CPH:DOX Award, a Chicago Film Critics Association Award, and Documentary of the Year from the Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association.
- Poitras and Greenwald cofounded The Intercept, a website reporting on the NSA documents leaked by Snowden, as well as providing a platform to publish "fearless, adversarial journalism across a wide range of issues."
- Originally established to decipher codes during WWII, the National Security Agency (NSA) was officially founded by President Truman in 1952. Today it is one of the largest intelligence organizations in the United States, with an estimated 2013 budget of \$10.8 billion.
- Following an interview with Edward Snowden in May 2014, NBC News ran a Twitter survey asking listeners whether they considered Snowden a traitor or a patriot. 59% called him a patriot, while the remaining 41% branded him a traitor.
- In late 2014 Russia extended Snowden's asylum with a three-year residency permit.
- Snowden became the eighth person charged by the Obama administration with breaking the 1917 Espionage Act. This is more charges than handed out by all other administrations combined.
- Director Laura Poitras was born and raised in Boston, and was originally interested in becoming a chef. However, after studying at the San Francisco Art Institute, she moved to New York City to pursue filmmaking. CITIZENFOUR is the third film in her post-9/11 trilogy.
- In December 2014, CITIZENFOUR filmmakers were sued by Horace Edwards, a former secretary of the Kansas Department of Transportation, who sought to have the film's proceeds reallocated to the U.S. Treasury.
- Glenn Greenwald graduated with a BA in Philosophy from George Washington University and a Juris Doctor from the New York University School of Law. Before working as a journalist, he was a litigation lawyer dealing in U.S. constitutional law and civil rights. He became a contributing writer at Salon.com in 2007, and then joined "The Guardian" in August 2012, which he left in late 2013 to pursue his work with First Look Media, an independent media platform seeking "to improve society through journalism and technology."
- "The Guardian" and "The Washington Post" shared a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service, for articles published on the Snowden leaks.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Read Glenn Greenwald's account of the 11 days he spent in Hong Kong with Snowden in his book, "No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State."
2. The Free Snowden website (edwardsnowden.com) offers many ways to help Snowden on a personal level, including donating to his legal fees, as well as how to petition against mass surveillance.
3. In order to protect yourself against surveillance, make sure to reset your passwords often and to use long, hard-to-crack passwords. Hard to remember them all? Use a password manager.
4. The Whistleblower Support Center and Archive provides unbiased assistance to whistleblowers and maintains an online archive of their stories. Learn more, and consider donating to their cause.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**