

An evening with Edward Snowden

By Caitlin McInnis



Host Julian Morrow and guest Edward Snowden

The Castan Centre recently supported Think Inc's "Evening with Edward Snowden" series of events, featuring Mr Snowden appearing via video link. The evening contained many interesting insights on privacy, surveillance, and the nature of whistleblowing from Mr Snowden.

Snowden is a controversial figure who is accused of serious crimes in disclosing top secret information. In 2013 he released US government documents which revealed the extreme nature and extent of the surveillance programs conducted by the US National Security Agency. He claims that his actions were motivated by a desire to provoke a debate over privacy and government surveillance.

At ThinkInc.'s event, Snowden spoke of the importance of privacy. It is often argued by governments in relation to surveillance that if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to worry about. Snowden's reply to this was succinct and articulate: "saying 'I've got nothing to hide' is the same as saying I don't need the right to free speech because I have nothing to say". For Snowden, the right to privacy is the right to individuality. He argues that there is no point in having freedom of expression if there is no safe and private space in which to figure out what it is you want to say.

Open discourse on Snowden's historic revelations is not only desirable, but necessary. His talk highlighted many points most would be ignorant of. For example, as a former intelligence

analyst, he asserted that meta-data, the seemingly innocuous bundle of information which the Australian government mandates must be legally stored, is far more important and efficient than content in discovering things about people.

Indeed, Snowden pointed out that Australia is getting worse in terms of surveillance. For example, the ASIO Act may be applied as easily to journalists as it is to whistleblowers. Journalism, argues Snowden, is incredibly important today as executive branches around the world start to hide more and more. The role journalism plays in this tension between government and its people is incredibly important.

Snowden provided some hope. He said that things were changing; the fact that the individual who released the Panama Papers has not been identified and is not in jail is a reflection of a trend in public and political institutions that whistleblowing has a role to play. He noted that it should not be the first tactic, but when institutions and official processes fail it is vital.

Mr Snowden's revelations were of the utmost importance to the international community. They revealed a disturbing level of indiscriminate surveillance of ordinary people all around the world by government agencies. The revelations raise serious questions about human rights, including the right to privacy, the right to security of the person, freedom of speech and freedom of association.