

BOB WOODWARD AND MONOPOLY JOURNALISM

[youtube]QK8nTyS0ehs[/youtube]

There's an absurd debate going on about whether, by hiring Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras (who are the only journalists who have a full set of the documents Edward Snowden leaked), Pierre Omidyar has obtained a "monopoly" over NSA's secrets. As to the substance of the debate: if Omidyar did set out to monopolize the NSA's secrets, he's a failure of a billionaire monopolist, given that since he and Greenwald first joined forces, a slew of other outlets have been publishing Omidyar's monopoly with no apparent compensation to him.

Bad billionaire monopolist!

That said, I'm rather stunned that Bob Woodward – both his history as the previously quintessential "journalist" and his comments about the Snowden leaks specifically – has only received passing mention in this debate. Greenwald mentioned him to deflect claims that his practice with Snowden was any different from what Woodward has done across his career.

Or let's take the revered-in-DC Bob Woodward, who has become America's richest journalist by writing book after book over the last decade that has spilled many of America's most sensitive secrets fed to him by top US government officials. In fact, his books are so filled with vital and sensitive secrets that Osama bin Laden personally recommended that they be read. Shall we accuse Woodward of selling US secrets to his publisher and profiteering off of them, and suggest he be prosecuted?

But what Woodward does is different, and he explicitly stated it would have been different if he were sitting on Snowden's stash.

I would have said to [Snowden], let's not reveal who you are. Let's make you a protected source, and give me time with this data and let's sort it out and present it in a coherent way. I think people are confused about whether it's illegal, whether it's bad, whether it's bad policy.

That is, it's not just that (as Dave Weinberger observes) there are many options besides Greenwald and Poitras these days.

Before the Web, the charge that Greenwald is monopolizing the information wouldn't even have made sense because there wasn't an alternative. Yes, he might have turned the entire cache over to The Guardian or the New York Times, but then would those newspapers look like monopolists? No, they'd look like journalists, like stewards. Now there are options. Snowden could have posted the cache openly on a Web site. He could have created a torrent so that they circulate forever. He could have given them to Wikileaks curate. He could have sent them to 100 newspapers simultaneously. He could have posted them in encrypted form and have given the key to the Dalai Lama or Jon Stewart. There are no end of options.

But Snowden didn't. Snowden wanted the information curated, and redacted when appropriate. He trusted his hand-picked journalists more than any newspaper to figure out what "appropriate" means.

It's that the notion of stewardship has changed – which, if Woodward is the model, previously meant a former intelligence operative would sit on the information for years, hiding both the information and the source, long enough for him to expose selected details through the actions of Important People, told in an

omniscient voice.

Curiously, both Weinberger and Woodward talk of confusion not having this omniscient narrator causes.

That the charge that Glenn Greenwald is monopolizing or privatizing the Snowden information is even comprehensible to us is evidence of just how thoroughly the Web is changing our defaults and our concepts. Many of our core models are broken. We are confused.

Woodward believes he should have had the opportunity to tell us what to think about the dragnet. Greenwald's critics suspect Omidyar plans to tell us what to think about it (or keep it secret).

But the sheer confusion suggests any monopoly has already been thwarted.