

FOCUS

Secret world

The Post's Lana Lam was the only Hong Kong reporter to interview the whistle-blower during his time in the city. Here, she tells of how the encounter came about, her hour-long webchat with the fugitive and the frenzy that erupted afterwards

The voicemail message on the morning of Wednesday, June 12 last year was simple and to the point: "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

It was from a contact with whom I had worked to uncover details of the secret rendition in 2004 of Libyan dissident Sami al-Saadi from Chek Lap Kok airport to the torture cells of the late dictator, Muammar Gaddafi.

The story revealed for the first time that Hong Kong was part of a secret campaign – run by United States and British intelligence – to kidnap and torture suspected terrorists, interrogating them with little regard for human rights or due process.

To this day, the rest of the Hong Kong media have ignored the scandal of Saadi's secret rendition, despite the fact that it was sanctioned at the highest levels of their own government.

What was to follow was a story no one would be able to ignore and one in which my role and that of this newspaper has been the subject of uninformed conjecture, unverified rumour and plain untruth which, for the sake of accuracy, demands a response.

"I have something very important. I want to reach you," the voicemail said. There was an unusually urgent edge to my contact's voice. Just three days had passed since Edward Snowden had broken cover in Hong Kong and my mind was racing as I returned the call.

My contact apologised for bothering me on a public holiday – it was the Dragon Boat festival – and said the situation required complete secrecy.

Our relationship was based on a mutual trust built over many months, so without hesitation I accepted the need for discretion.

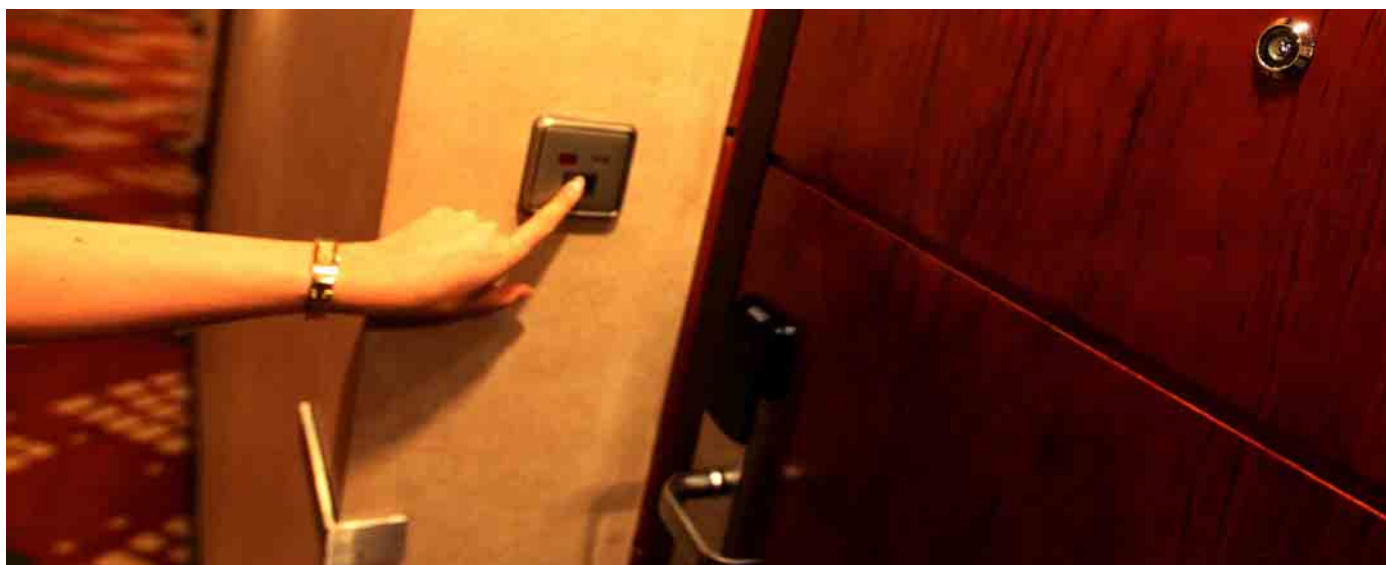
Names and details could not be mentioned over the phone. I was instructed to be in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui that afternoon. And I was to come alone.

It was a short call, big on repercussions.

Waiting game

The Sheraton lobby was busier than usual because of the public holiday when I arrived around lunchtime and took a seat near the front desk.

As I scanned the faces of holidaymakers, business travellers and families in the busy check-in area, a text message confirmed



The room at the Sheraton in Tsim Sha Tsui where Lana Lam was led before the interview with Snowden could take place. Photos: Felix Wong

my contact was on the way. The relaxed chatter of locals enjoying a day off was in stark contrast to my mood.

After a few minutes, a call came instructing me to go up to a different level of the hotel.

When I got there, I found myself on a totally deserted floor. I looked around, but couldn't find anyone.

Then, in the distance behind a large column, I saw my contact – and a man who was introduced to me as a colleague – standing slightly out of sight, but obviously waiting for me.

Speaking in hushed tones, we took the lift to the executive floor and into one of the suites.

Inside, my suspicions that the cloak and dagger operation was for former US National Security Agency contractor Snowden were confirmed.

Sitting behind a desk in front of a laptop was Laura Poitras, Snowden's closest confidante.

She is also the documentary film-maker who made the 12-minute video of Snowden that catapulted the then 29-year-old former CIA infrastructure analyst



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to worldwide fame, or notoriety, depending on your viewpoint. Also there was Ewen MacAskill, one of *The Guardian* reporters who broke the first stories about the NSA's secret and wide-ranging collection of phone and web data from its citizens.

They stepped outside to discuss their next move, leaving me alone in the room.

Undivided attention

The curtains were partially drawn, offering a glimpse of Victoria Harbour, and several laptops were strewn around.

A camera was set up on a tripod and a half-eaten Nashi pear lay on the table beside a small bottle of red wine, which was opened, but not empty.

When they returned, we moved to a different location within the hotel, but not before Poitras confiscated our mobile phones, saying they must be left in the room.

I asked Poitras when I would be meeting Snowden. "Soon", she said. For security reasons, the meeting would not be face-to-face, but online.

Then came more waiting and the opportunity to talk with MacAskill, who described Snowden as "calm".

He added that since joining the team covering the story, he had learned a lot more about the need for security while communicating with sources. He said encryption was a key tool.

After about 45 minutes, I was told the interview with Snowden was about to start and I sat down



On the laptop screen was a chat box with the name Verax, Snowden's online handle

at a black laptop. On the screen was a chat box with the name Verax, Snowden's online handle.

This was it. I had his undivided attention.

"Hi Lana, thanks for coming for this," Verax. Latin for "truth-teller", wrote as we began a real-time online chat using a secure network that encrypts the conversation.

Snowden went straight to the reason we were both there. "The United States government has committed a tremendous number of crimes against Hong Kong," he said. "The PRC as well."

Shortly after this, the network we were using dropped out a few times. Snowden was worried. "Sorry," he said. "Please advise Laura that I am being repeatedly dropped by the Jitsi network I am using to communicate. This is probably due to a computer network attack," he wrote. After a few minutes, it stabilised and we continued.

The hour-long conversation covered his plans to stay in Hong Kong as well as a detailed explanation of documents which, he claimed, showed Hong Kong and mainland Chinese computers were being hacked by the US government.

In a sign of his ability to share information, he sifted through the details, alerting me to what was important and minimising some of the overly technical details. His responses were prompt, except for one moment when the conversation slowed and I wondered if something had happened. "Sorry, I have to deal with something," he said after a short absence.

As we chatted, I took down all his answers in a notebook and at one point, I looked up, taking in

the view of the harbour. Along with the sounds of people moving about and chatting, it felt so far removed from the world in which I now found myself.

Asked if he was offended by accusations that he was a traitor, he replied: "No, I believe in freedom of expression."

"I acted in good faith, but it is only right that the public form its own opinion."

Snowden's reputation and credibility came under fire the moment he broke cover and his concerns about this were apparent during our conversation.

"Just please try not to make me look like a jerk. I'm getting enough of that in the media already," he said.

He spoke about his concerns for his family as well as his faith in Hong Kong's legal system before he signed off. "Okay. Thank you for agreeing to meet on such short notice for this," he wrote.

Then he was gone. I talked with Poitras for a few more minutes. We shook hands and I left.

In the spotlight

Stepping back outside into the oppressive humidity, the blaring car horns and the clacking traffic signals jolted me back to a noisy street-level reality – and the realisation that the *Post's* deadlines were looming.

The next few hours were a frenetic mix of checks and double-checks with sources and discussions with editors as the stories came together.

At points throughout the interview, Snowden was clear that certain information he gave me – often in order to better explain what at times were complex technical issues – could not be published and that he trusted me not to reveal it.

That wish for confidentiality was complied with at the time and is an ongoing commitment of mine and this newspaper. We

ONLINE

scmp.com/greenwald
Check our website to watch Snowden's interview with Glenn Greenwald

did not report certain details about the circumstances of the interview at the time because there were concerns about Snowden's security.

We also had to firm up the information and make sure each story was published at the right time and to the complete satisfaction of both the newspaper and our sources.

My contacts suggested I get a different mobile number – setting the tone for two full weeks of round-the-clock fact-checking and hush-hush meetings.

As the first online alerts went out on our exclusive interview with Snowden, the newsroom was abuzz – as were the office screens showing our online hit-rates.

When the first stories hit our website, traffic shot up. The frenzy increased further when international television crews set up camp outside the *Post's* office in Causeway Bay.

It was 2am before I left the office, dodging the television crews outside. Sleep was fitful at best and what little I had was ended by my doorbell at 7am.

Paranoid thoughts born out of the story's subject matter were quickly dispelled when the early morning caller turned out to be a tenacious former colleague in search of a scoop.

Over the next few days and weeks, my e-mail inbox was flooded with requests for interviews, as well as misguided requests for me to give up my sources.

Truth and lies

Snowden's decision last summer to reveal details of US cyber-attacks on Hong Kong and mainland Chinese targets to the *Post* falls neatly into his modus operandi, which is to work closely with trusted media outlets to expose cyber espionage programmes run by the NSA.

His decision also ensured that his profile in Hong Kong was raised dramatically.

Just two days after the *Post* published the first in a series of stories, hundreds of supporters took to the streets, marching to the US consulate and demanding that the local authorities protect him from extradition.

Since last June, several stories have emerged calling into question my professional background, including allegations of connections to mainland Chinese and Russian intelligence.

All these claims are false, entirely unfounded, based on fanciful speculation and written by people with no knowledge of the facts.

As Hong Kong and the world reflect on the year that has passed since Snowden's revelations, the future of the man who abandoned everything he knew to expose the secrets of his own government remains uncertain.

Hero, villain or something in between, Snowden represents that part of our psyche that questions the status quo.

His revelations triggered a vibrant, at times divisive and, in Snowden's words, necessary debate about the right of everyone to privacy. lana.lam@scmp.com

Gore says Snowden performed vital service

Former NSA man was more a whistle-blower than a traitor, former US vice-president says

The Guardian

Edward Snowden secured his highest endorsement yet in the US when former vice-president Al Gore described the leaking of top secret intelligence documents as "an important service".

Asked if he regarded Snowden as a traitor or whistle-blower, Gore on Tuesday veered away from the "traitor" label. He refused to go as far as labelling him a whistle-blower but signalled he viewed him as being closer to that category than a traitor, saying: "What he revealed in the course of violating important laws included violations of the US constitution that were way more serious than the crimes he committed."

Snowden leaked US and British documents to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* in June last year, starting a worldwide debate on the balance between surveillance and privacy. His revelations have led to proposed changes in legislation in the US and a backlash against government surveillance by major telecoms and internet companies.



Al Gore expressed strong views



In the course of violating law, he also provided an important service

FORMER U.S. VICE-PRESIDENT AL GORE

But he remains a polarising figure in the US. An NBC poll a fortnight ago showed 24 per cent backing him and 34 per cent disagreeing with his actions, with 40 per cent having no opinion. Among the younger generation there was more support, with 32 per cent backing him and only 20 per cent opposed. Some members of Congress have welcomed the revelations but refuse to go as far as supporting Snowden, who is wanted by the US and lives in exile in Russia.

Gore, interviewed at a technology conference in Nashville, Tennessee, was asked if he viewed him as a whistle-blower or a traitor. "I hear this question all the time. I'm like most people: I don't put him in either one of those categories. But I'll be candid and give you what you want. If you set up a spectrum."

The interviewer interrupted: "How would you define it?"

Gore replied: "I would push it more away from the traitor side. And I will tell you why. He clearly violated the law so you can't say OK, what he did is all right. It's not. But what he revealed in the course of violating important laws included violations of the US constitution that were way more serious than the crimes he committed."

"In the course of violating important law, he also provided an important service. OK. Because we did need to know how far this has gone."

Snowden's supporters will seize on Gore's comments to help make the case that he is a whistle-blower and should be allowed to return to the US as a free man.



The desk at which Lana Lam interviewed Snowden on a laptop provided by his confidante Laura Poitras

Stone buys rights to thriller by Russian lawyer

Niall Fraser

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Hollywood director Oliver Stone has acquired movie rights to a political thriller penned by US whistle-blower Edward Snowden's Russian lawyer, the pro-Kremlin attorney said yesterday.

It is the latest in a series of deals which illustrate that the former National Security Agency contractor's story has lost none of its potency. "The rights to my book have been handed over to Oliver Stone and producer Moritz Borman," Anatoly Kucherena told Agence France-Presse.

"He [Stone] met with me, he did not meet with Snowden. The book will be published later."

Kucherena is completing a potboiler dubbed the *Time of the Octopus*, which tells the story of a US whistle-blower, loosely based on Snowden's experiences.

One of Russia's most high-profile lawyers, Kucherena was

39

Number of days Edward Snowden spent in Moscow airport before being granted asylum

among a select group of public figures granted a meeting with the US fugitive during his stay of over a month at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport last year.

The lawyer helped Snowden receive temporary asylum in Russia and has since acted as his spokesman and link to the outside world.

Filmmaker Stone, a trenchant critic of the American political establishment, has also purchased the movie rights to another book about Snowden writ-

ten by Luke Harding of Britain's *The Guardian*.

The producers of the James Bond franchise will also make a movie about Snowden, after Sony Pictures acquired the rights to the new book by journalist Glenn Greenwald, who reported the story for *The Guardian*.

Bond producers Michael Wilson and Barbara Broccoli will make the movie version of *No Place to Hide*, described by Sony as "a political film that will resonate with today's movie-goers".

A Google search for Edward Snowden last night produced more than 50 million results – just 600,000 short of the number for US President Barack Obama. It reflects the astonishing effect the man who knows too much has had on the public psyche.

Aside from the geo-political shifts his revelations have caused and the huge influence they have had on privacy and trust in governments, they have spawned a cultural cottage industry. From

Hollywood to China and all points in between, Snowden has gripped the public imagination – not always in a positive way – spawning movies, comic books and even a lucrative portrait painting business in Shenzhen.

Within days of Snowden revealing that the US had been hacking computers in Hong Kong and mainland China, four local amateur filmmakers produced a five-minute thriller depicting the nail-biting intrigue surrounding the intelligence leaker.

Shot in less than a week on a shoestring budget, the film *Verax* – Latin for "truth teller" – and Snowden's online name – depicted the drama leading up to Snowden's leaks on vast US surveillance programmes being made public in Hong Kong.

Though production was rushed, the film, became a major YouTube hit. Additional reporting by Agence France-Presse



US schoolteacher Andrew Cromeek as Snowden in Verax. Photo: AFP