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Inside Edward Snowden's Life as a Robot

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- 06.12.14 |
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Snowden appears via Beam bot in the ACLU's New York offices with (from left) journalist Laura Poitras, Freedom of the Press Foundation director Trevor Timm and security technologist Micah Lee. Photo: *Courtesy of Freedom of the Press Foundation*

Since he first became a household name a year ago, Edward Snowden has been a modern Max Headroom, appearing only as a face on a screen broadcast from exile in Hong Kong or Russia. But in the age of the telepresence robot, being a face on a screen isn't as restrictive as it used to be.

For at least the past three months, Snowden and his supporters have been experimenting with a Beam Pro remote presence system, a Wi-Fi-connected screen and camera on wheels that Snowden can use to communicate with the staffers in the New York office of the American Civil Liberties Union, according to his ACLU lawyer Ben Wizner. From a computer in Moscow, Snowden can turn on the video bot and wheel around the ACLU's office on a whim. And Snowden's supporters hope the Beam system might be the first of several that could bring the distant whistleblower into the room with colleagues around the world, partially erasing the isolation enforced by the Espionage Act charges awaiting him if he leaves the relative safety of Russia.

"He's used it to roll out into the hallway and generously interact with large numbers of ACLU staff," says Wizner. "I think it can be a profound response to exile."

Snowden's Beam bot has been in the ACLU offices since before his TED talk in March, when he used the same \$16,000 wheeled robot to speak on stage. Wizner says the TED organizers wanted to test the robot in New York before it was used at the Vancouver conference. "They brought a couple models to the office, and gave us a login," says Wizner. "We found that it worked really well."

Snowden can drive his in-office telepresence system with his keyboard's arrow keys at around two miles an hour. It has an eight hour battery life before it needs to dock into a \$950 charging station, and even comes with a "party mode" that activates more ambient microphones and elevates the volume of its speaker.



Edward Snowden is interviewed by TED Curator Chris Anderson via Beam during the 2014 TED conference. *Photo: Steven Rosenbaum/Getty*

Since its first appearance at TED, Snowden's Beam came into the spotlight again Wednesday in a [story in the German newspaper *Tagesspiegel*](#). But while *Tagesspiegel* described Snowden as using the Beam system on a regular basis, Wizner says Snowdenbot has been a more occasional visitor to the ACLU office. Once, the non-profit's executive director Anthony Romero gave the Snowden-possessed machine a walking tour of the building. Another time, Wizner had to jump on a phone call during a meeting with his whistleblower client. When he got off the phone, he found that Snowden had rolled the bot into civil liberties lawyer Jameel Jaffer's office and was discussing the 702 provision of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. "It was kind of cool," Wizner says.¹

Trevor Timm, the director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation where Snowden sits on the board, says Snowden had been interested in trying the telepresence bot even before his TED talk. "He was telling people for a while that it could be this game-changing technology," says Timm. "I don't think anyone quite believed him until we saw it in action...All he needs is arms to open doors, and he can go wherever he wants."

Timm met with Snowden-as-robot last April, along with journalist and Snowden-chronicling filmmaker Laura Poitras. "It lights up and he shows up on the screen," Timm describes. "When it started moving towards us, everyone kind of jumped back."

Scenes like these have already spawned a genre of Snowdenbot twitter humor. "Beep boop I believe in transparency," reads one tweet from [an account called Robot Snowden](#). Snowden leak-recipient Glenn Greenwald wrote that he'd [like to see the robot unleashed in the NSA parking lot](#).

But jokes aside, Timm and Wizner say they hope to somehow put more Beams in other locations where Snowden would like to have face-to-face interactions, like the Freedom of the Press Foundation office in San Francisco and Glasgow University in Scotland, where he was elected as a rector last February. "I hope there will be a fleet of them someday," says Timm.

The biggest drawback to Snowden's use of the telepresence bots may in fact be their security—a major hitch for a former intelligence officer known to take almost paranoid measures to prevent surveillance of his communications. Beam uses standard TLS and AES 256-bit encryption to keep conversations private. But its network administrator's guide warns that the company's "infrastructure establishes the trust relationship between the device and the pilot station," and that "compromised infrastructure would be able to carry out a man-in-the-middle attack." With the right hacker exploit or legal demand, in other words, an eavesdropper might be able to listen in on the everything the robot hears, sees and says. That likely limits Snowden's use of the technology to only the conversations he'd be willing to have in public.

Suitable Technologies, the Palo Alto company that makes the robot, also seems a bit skittish about openly supporting Snowden. Some of its customers "aren't Snowden's biggest fans," says the company's director of marketing Erin Rapacki. They may even include the NSA itself, as *Forbes* [reported in January](#).



Snowdenbot chatting with attendees at TED 2014. Photo: Bret Hartman/[TED](#)

But Rapacki says she's "very happy to enable a person who couldn't travel to go where he needed to be." She compares Snowden to other Beam customers who use the bots to visit factories in China or attend meetings and conferences remotely. (Watch a truly stranger-than-fiction marketing video showing the robots' intended function [here](#).)

Rapacki says she considered Snowden's first public use of the technology at the Vancouver TED talk a striking success. She points out that the Beam Snowden used to speak on stage was around the size of a human being. When NSA deputy director Richard Ledgett responded to Snowden, by contrast, he did so via video feed on a massive screen above the stage. "It almost had a Big Brother feel," says Rapacki. "It wasn't as intimate. With Beam, you're on that person-to-person level."

After his TED talk, Snowden used Beam to [briefly roam the conference hall](#), talking with the ACLU's Anthony Romero, greeting audience members that included Google's Sergey Brin, and posing for photos. As Wizner says, "Everyone wanted to have a conversation and a selfie with the Snowdenbot."

Robot or not, it sounds like one of Snowden's most human moments.

¹Correction 7:00 EST 06/12/2014: An earlier version of the story incorrectly stated that Snowden had met the Tagesspiegel reporter through the Beam bot, when in fact they met over Skype. It also stated that he met with Jamila Johnson, when in fact he met with Jameel Jaffer.

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