

Citizenfour Review: Power, Truth, and the Responsibility of Exposure

By Diego A Rodriguez

Most people think surveillance isn't really their problem. The mindset is simple: if you're not doing anything wrong, then you've got nothing to worry about. *Citizenfour* completely destroys that idea. Instead of easing you into the topic, it drops you straight into the moment when Edward Snowden decides to expose one of the most powerful surveillance systems in the world. There's no dramatic buildup, no over-explaining—it's just raw, real, and honestly kind of uncomfortable to watch. But that discomfort is the point. It forces you to actually think instead of just passively watching.

What makes *Citizenfour* different from most documentaries is how real it feels. Directed by Laura Poitras, the film doesn't rely on flashy editing or constant narration. Instead, it just lets things happen. A lot of the scenes are quiet, almost awkward, and that silence ends up saying more than any dramatic speech could. You're not being told how to feel—you're just watching everything unfold in real time. One of the most important moments is when Snowden explains how far surveillance actually goes, saying, "They can use the system to go back in time and scrutinize every decision you've ever made." That line hits because it's not exaggerated. It's simple, calm, and real—and that's what makes it unsettling. It makes you realize that this isn't just about catching criminals. It's about having the power to track someone's entire life.

At the same time, the film makes it clear that Snowden knows exactly what he's doing. He's not acting on impulse or trying to be some kind of hero. He understands the consequences completely. When he says, "I don't want to live in a world where everything I say, everything I do, everyone I talk to is recorded," it shifts the whole perspective. This isn't just about exposing the government—it's about what kind of world people are willing to accept. Snowden knows he's giving up everything: his home,

his freedom, his identity. And he still goes through with it. That's what makes the situation so intense. Whether you agree with him or not, you can't ignore the weight of that decision.

This is where the documentary really connects to journalism and media responsibility. People like Glenn Greenwald and Poitras aren't just filming something happening—they're directly involved. They're handling classified information that could have serious consequences if released. According to *Inside Reporting*, journalists are supposed to inform the public while also thinking about the risks of what they're publishing. *Citizenfour* shows how complicated that actually is. There's no clear "right" move here. Publishing the information could expose the truth and hold powerful systems accountable, but it could also create risks for national security. The film doesn't simplify that decision, and that's what makes it strong.

At the same time, it doesn't try to paint Snowden as purely right or wrong. That's another thing that makes the documentary feel real. On one side, he's exposing something that people probably should know about. On the other side, he's breaking laws and putting himself—and potentially others—at risk. The film leaves that tension unresolved on purpose. It doesn't hand you a conclusion. It forces you to figure out where you stand, which is honestly more effective than just telling you what to think.

Another major idea in *Citizenfour* is control—specifically, who controls information. The documentary shows that surveillance isn't just about security. It's about power. If a government has access to that much data, it can monitor not just individuals, but entire populations. And the scariest part is that most people wouldn't even know it's happening. That's where journalism becomes important. Without people willing to expose these systems, they stay hidden. The public stays unaware. And nothing changes.

The tone of the film also plays a huge role in why it works so well. There's no over-the-top drama or forced emotional moments. Instead, the tension builds through small details—Snowden checking his surroundings, speaking quietly, typing carefully on his laptop. These moments seem simple, but they create a constant sense of pressure. You can tell that everything happening matters, even if it doesn't look dramatic on the surface. It makes the situation feel real instead of staged, which makes it hit harder.

Even the setting adds to that feeling. Most of the film takes place in a hotel room in Hong Kong, which feels both controlled and unstable at the same time. It's like everything is contained in this one space, but at any moment, it could all fall apart. That environment creates tension without needing action scenes or dramatic effects. It shows that sometimes the most important moments aren't loud—they're quiet, but high-stakes.

What really makes *Citizenfour* stand out is that it doesn't just give you information—it makes you deal with it. It doesn't guide your opinion or try to manipulate how you feel. It just presents what's happening and leaves the responsibility on you to think about it. That's what good journalism is supposed to do. It's not about telling people what to believe—it's about giving them enough truth to form their own perspective.

In the end, *Citizenfour* isn't just about Snowden. It's about power, truth, and the responsibility that comes with exposing both. It shows how information can be controlled, and why it matters when someone decides to challenge that control. Whether you see Snowden as right or wrong, the documentary makes one thing clear: understanding what's happening behind the scenes isn't optional anymore. If anything, *Citizenfour* proves that ignoring it is exactly what allows it to continue.