

NEWS FROM SOMEWHERE
A Reader in Communication
and
Challenges to Globalization

edited by
Daniel Broudy, Jeffery Klaehn,
and James Winter

*News from Somewhere: A Reader in
Communication and Challenges to Globalization*
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ISBN-10: 1938757092
ISBN-13: 978-1-938757-09-9

1. globalization 2. neoliberalism 3. militarism 4. hegemony
5. post-colonialism 6. intercultural communication 7. language
8. security 9. education 10. environment 11. identity politics
12. Inequality

The content of this collection has been peer reviewed.

Printed and bound in the United States of America
by Wayzgoose Press, Eugene, Oregon
<http://wayzgoosepress.com>

Set in Garamond

Edited by Daniel Broudy, Jeffery Klaehn, & James Winter
Copy Editing by Dorothy E. Zemach
Cover Design by D. J. Rogers

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE GLOBALIZATION OF WHISTLEBLOWING

Brian Martin

Introduction

In the late 1970s, I collected evidence that several environmental scientists and teachers had come under attack, for example being censored, denied tenure, or dismissed. In those days, environmentalism was considered quite radical. My assessment was that these researchers and teachers were seen as threatening to the status quo. I called the phenomenon of attacking dissidents "suppression of dissent."¹

Not long before this, the first important writings about whistle-blowing appeared in the US.² A typical whistleblower is an employee who speaks up in the public interest, typically about fraud, abuse of process, or hazards to the public. Whistle-blowers frequently suffer reprisals, including petty harassment, ostracism, reprimands, assignment to onerous or trivial duties, referral to psychiatrists, compulsory transfers, demotion, dismissal, and blacklisting. Bosses are usually responsible for reprisals, but co-workers sometimes join in, due either to fear of being targeted themselves or to a wish to ingratiate themselves with management.

For the whistleblower, this sounds pretty bad, and it is. Many whistleblowers suffer a great deal, often with damaging effects on their careers,

finances, health, and relationships. Many whistle-blowers are conscientious employees who make reports, believing that problems will be investigated and rectified. Instead, they are shocked to their core when they are treated as the source of the problem. The result is that they can lose their faith in society, specifically their faith in systems ostensibly designed to supply justice.³

The phenomenon of group members speaking out in the public interest has been occurring as long as groups and abuses have existed. However, the label "whistleblower" only gained currency beginning in the 1970s. Before then, some people might have known about it but had no name for it—as in the cases of other things such as sexual harassment, bullying, and nonviolent resistance.

Few whistleblower stories are documented. Probably most are known only to the whistleblower and relatively few co-workers. The cases reported in the media are just the tip of a large iceberg. Because relatively few cases are revealed to wider audiences, it is impossible to catalog a full history of whistleblowing. All that can be done is to extrapolate from what is known.

After I started writing about the suppression of dissent, people started contacting me to tell me about their own situations, often asking my advice. In this way, I heard about ever more cases, including different types. Prominent whistleblowers and dissidents are frequently contacted by others who have similar experiences.

For example, Clyde Manwell was Professor of Zoology at the University of Adelaide in the early 1970s. After he and his wife Ann Baker spoke out about the possible risks of spraying pesticides, there was an attempt to dismiss him from his tenured position, eventually involving inquiries, court cases, and student protests. As a result of the publicity, he was contacted by dozens of scientists and scholars recounting similar problems. Later, Clyde, Ann and I, along with another dissident, Cedric Pugh, edited a book about the suppression of dissent.⁴

Whistleblowers Australia

In the early 1990s, Whistleblowers Australia was set up to provide information, advice and contacts to whistleblowers. Most of the group's members were whistleblowers. I remember one early meeting of the national committee in which members introduced themselves, telling their stories,

sometimes at considerable length. The common pattern was one of reprisals from employers and the failure of appeal bodies such as boards of management, ombudsmen, auditors-general, parliamentarians and courts.

In Sydney, there was a weekly meeting of the state branch of Whistleblowers Australia at which people were invited to share their stories and receive support and advice from experienced members. I was able to attend a few of these meetings and was impressed by how valuable it was for whistleblowers to share their experiences with others who understood what it was like.

Many would start off by saying "I'm not a whistleblower, but..." or "I don't like the term word whistleblower." At that time, many members of the public saw whistleblowers as dobbers (an Australian term for snitches) or traitors. But these were loyal employees who reported problems to their bosses. They said they were just doing their jobs. They were shocked by the reprisals. Sometimes, someone said to them, "You're a whistle-blower." They looked up "whistleblowers" in the telephone directory, and later on the web, and discovered Whistleblowers Australia. But they still carried derogatory connotations of "whistleblower" in their heads, so they disliked or disowned the label and said "I was just doing my job."

Over the years in Australia, the term "whistleblower" has gradually acquired more positive connotations. Media coverage has played a big role in this, with stories about whistleblowers often portraying them as courageous critics of wrongdoing. In a typical story, "a whistleblower"—sometimes named, sometimes anonymous—is reported as making allegations about fraud, pedophilia, or health hazards, while managers say there is no problem. In many of these cases, later investigations vindicate the whistleblower. This sort of media framing has improved the image of whistleblowing.

From 1996 to 1999, I was president of Whistleblowers Australia. Everyone thinks the person at the top has more knowledge and power, so I heard from more whistleblowers than ever. Their stories became predictable: speaking out, reprisals, reports to watchdog agencies such as anti-corruption agencies (usually without success) and serious damage to careers, finances, and sometimes relationships and health. I felt I was repeating my standard advice so often that I decided to write a book summarizing it, now in a revised edition.⁵

Meanwhile, I took on the role of international liaison, trying to find out what was happening in other countries. Whistleblower laws were introduced in Australia, Britain and other countries, but there was little

evidence they were effective (on whistleblower laws, see Vaughn, 2012⁶). In a few countries, there were organizations to support whistleblowers. In the US, there were several important groups, most prominently the Government Accountability Project. In Britain, there were Public Concern at Work and a more activist group, Freedom to Care, which was similar to Whistleblowers Australia in mainly being made up of whistleblowers.

I occasionally heard about cases in other countries, such as Norway, Germany, and New Zealand. However, it seemed that initiatives to support whistleblowing—both at the government level and at the level of grassroots organization—were far more common in English-speaking countries. One possible explanation builds on ideas about community and solidarity.

Solidarity and Dissent

In traditional agricultural societies, there is a great deal of solidarity within groups, such as extended families, religious groups, and work groups. Indeed, members may not even think of themselves as individuals: their identity derives from group membership. In such societies, betraying the group is almost unthinkable. (It is unwise to romanticize traditional groups, because they harbored all sorts of abuses: think for example of slavery and violence against women.)

As societies industrialized, this traditional group membership weakened, especially due to capitalism. In search of jobs, some people leave their families and their usual occupations and religious groups. Employers try to rely on commitment to the organization, but workers are more atomized and alienated.

Whistleblowing can be seen as a violation of traditional loyalty to the group. However, in societies with high individualism—notably the US—groups are no longer as integral to life as they were before. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to think and act on their own volition and values. This possibly helps explain why whistleblowing became recognized and supported earlier in English-speaking countries, where individualism and the breakdown of traditional groups tend to be greater.

Whistleblowing can be seen as analogous to a body's immune response against disease: whistleblowers point to problems in an organization that need to be fixed. The more corrupt the organization, or the less accountable, usually the more hostility to whistleblowers.

The Leaking Option

Government spy agencies are among those especially hostile to whistleblowers, because these organizations, by virtue of their secret work, are seldom accountable to the public and, hence, often involved in disreputable or criminal activities. When WikiLeaks was set up in 2006, it provided a way for whistleblowers within the national security apparatus to raise their concerns without as much risk as before. The success of WikiLeaks, in collaboration with mainstream media, in revealing secrets is reflected in the extraordinary campaign by figures within US government circles to demonize WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and to encourage companies to withdraw financial services from WikiLeaks.⁷

WikiLeaks' most important source was Bradley Manning (now Chelsea Manning), who might never have been identified except for revealing his identity to a hacker, Adrian Lamo, who turned the information over to the US government. The impact of WikiLeaks, and its record in never revealing the identity of its informants, points to the potential power of anonymous whistleblowing, which can also be called public interest leaking.

Most whistleblowers today continue to speak up, commonly assuming that their concerns will be investigated and any problems fixed, and they are often dismayed by the reprisals they suffer. Meanwhile, most of their co-workers, who are more afraid, cautious or cynical, remain quiet about festering problems. Worst of all, few whistleblowers are able to bring about change in their organizations. In this context, the option of anonymous whistleblowing has several advantages.

By remaining anonymous, whistleblowers can usually avoid reprisals. Another advantage is that they can remain on the job, collect more information and continue to leak. This overcomes the problem of employers marginalizing the whistleblower and cutting off access to information.

Online leaking services such as WikiLeaks are suitable for certain kinds of public interest leaking, especially large-scale revelations, but for the more common sorts of problems, other leaking outlets are often better. The key thing is to get information to audiences who care about it and who have the capacity to take action. A traditional option is to provide information to a trusted journalist; media stories can alert a wider public and put pressure on employers to fix problems. Often just as effective is to establish a connection with an action group, for example an environmental, human rights, or financial responsibility group.

It can be very powerful to build alliances between insiders, typically employees, and outsiders, such as journalists or campaigners. While employees have information about what is happening inside an organization, it is often risky for them to openly voice dissent. Whereas outsiders are relatively safe from reprisals, they often lack the most precise information about how best to target their campaigns.

As more corporations undertake global operations and as international organizations play larger roles in the execution of those ventures, the opportunities for corruption and abuse increase and the need for whistleblowing increases worldwide.

Two Routes

There are two main routes for whistleblowers. The first is to use official channels, such as reporting problems to the boss, higher management, internal grievance committees, boards of management, professional associations, ombudsmen, and other oversight bodies. Reporting to the boss can be effective when the problems are minor and no one in power is threatened by addressing them. However, when bosses are either part of the problem, for example receiving payments, or have tolerated the problem, then the whistleblower will be seen as a threat and likely subject to reprisals, small or large. An important skill for potential whistleblowers is to figure out when and how safe it is to make disclosures.

The second main route is to take concerns to wider audiences. This is the route of publicity and mobilization of support. The wider audience could be other workers, other businesses, the general public or international audiences, among others.

Potential whistleblowers considering the route of publicity and mobilization need a variety of skills. They need to understand the organization and how senior managers will react to disclosures. They need to understand the thinking of other workers and how to win some of them over. They need to understand channels for communication to wider audiences, and how to craft messages that will stimulate shared concern and action. They need to understand their own capacities and vulnerabilities, so they can develop an effective personal strategy and acquire the knowledge and skills to pursue it. If they leak information, they need to maintain appearances, including continuing to do their job well.

This sounds like a very high expectation for whistleblowers, and it is. Great skills are needed to be effective. After all, owners and top managers have extensive powers, and most other workers are likely to be unwilling or unable to take risks to their jobs and careers.

Conclusion

The globalization of whistleblowing can be reconceived as globalization of knowledge, skills, networks and alliances among workers and outside activists. However, this sort of globalization will not occur quickly or automatically. In many parts of the world—indeed in most parts of nearly every country—it is still exceedingly risky to speak out against corruption and abuses, especially when it involves those with the most power. It is unwise to encourage workers to become whistleblowers unless they are aware of the risks and there is a reasonable chance their actions will make a difference.

Previous forms of solidarity, in small communities, have been co-opted by governments and managers, through what is called patriotism and corporate loyalty. Commitment to rulers and bosses allows abuses to occur, so there needs to be a new form of loyalty. In the labor movement, this was to the working class and to co-workers, but unfortunately this has allowed new venues for corruption, in unions and in political parties ostensibly siding with workers. Whistleblowers within unions and political parties are treated as traitors, just as they are within corporations and government departments.

Rather than unthinking loyalty to any group, citizens and workers need to be able to understand the world and make independent judgments about right and wrong. Then comes the harder part: acting strategically, with like-minded others, to bring about change.

The globalization of whistleblowing should be seen as part of an ongoing struggle between unrestrained and unaccountable power holders and grassroots challengers. A whistleblower has information, and often believes this is enough on its own, with the strategy of "speaking truth to power." Unfortunately things seldom work this way, which is why whistleblowers so seldom make a difference. Information needs to be used to support collective action, and that means taking it to wider audiences. The globalization of whistleblowing will involve the spreading of skills and the willingness to act openly or anonymously in the public interest.

Questions for Critical Reflection

1. The author points out that the phenomenon of whistleblowing had no name, at least until the early 1970s. Why do you suppose it has taken many hundreds of years for human societies to evolve enough to name and define this practice?
2. Why do support groups for whistleblowers emerge sooner in some countries than in others?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of remaining anonymous when revealing information?
4. The author recommends that potential whistleblowers have the right knowledge as well as the right skills. Discuss how any of the recommendations might be useful to problems you have witnessed.
5. The author refers to the ability of the powerful to rebrand concepts such as 'patriotism' and 'loyalty'. Discuss examples of other words that have been redefined to protect power and privilege.
6. Discuss any reasons why you feel it is useful to act in ways that align with the public interest.

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