

Tatiana Bazzichelli (ed.):
Whistleblowing for Change: Exposing
Systems of Power and Injustice
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Edward Snowden, the National Security Agency contractor who leaked a vast number of documents revealing covert surveillance by the agency, is perhaps the world's most famous whistleblower. He knew exactly what he was doing. He set out to expose and challenge massive abuses of power. He knew he could not do it on his own, and carefully went about recruiting journalists as allies. He revealed his identity a few days after the initial media stories, knowing that he would be tracked down and that being known would better help achieve his aims. He was willing to make an enormous sacrifice, spending his life in prison, but luckily so far has been able to spend it in exile, in Russia.

Snowden is not a typical whistleblower, and not just because his disclosures were so voluminous and sensational. Much more commonly, whistleblowers are ordinary employees who see something wrong at work and report it to their boss or someone else in authority, fully expecting that the problem will be investigated and, if necessary, fixed. A great many do not think of themselves as whistleblowers, at least not at first: they say they were just doing their jobs. So, they are deeply shocked when they become subject to adverse actions: ostracism, petty harassment, punitive transfers, excess work duties or removal from work, disciplinary measures, referral to psychiatrists, demotion, dismissal and blacklisting. Only later may they understand what happened to them and refer to these actions as reprisals.

Many whistleblowers are conscientious employees who are conventional in that they think the system works. That's why they report problems expecting them to be fixed. A more cynical employee would understand what is going on and either tolerate corruption or join in. Whistleblowers, in thinking the system works, are shocked in two ways. The reprisals are deeply distressing. In addition, whistleblowers are pushed to recognise that the world is not the way they thought it was. They learn that the world is

not just: the person who tries to do the right thing is the one singled out for attack.

In this context, Snowden and others like him are at one end of a particular spectrum of whistleblowers and their supporters. The spectrum here is about motivations. Is the goal to fix a local problem in an otherwise satisfactory situation and, associated with this, to ensure that whistleblowers are not penalised for their efforts? This goal underpins a great deal of the writing about whistleblowing, which deals with it at procedural or legal angles, for example by arguing for and about laws to protect whistleblowers from reprisals. Or is the goal to be part of a broader process of social change?

For some commentators, whistleblowers are one of the only hopes in a degenerating political culture. The major political parties are beholden to rich and powerful interest groups, so voting has little prospect of promoting fundamental change. Meanwhile, regulatory bodies have been captured by these same interests, so systemic corruption seems unstoppable. In this context, 'truth-telling' by whistleblowers and others is one of the few avenues to hold the powerful to account.

Tatiana Bazzichelli is a researcher and activist. She helped set up the Disruption Network Lab, based in Berlin, which has staged many events. The first element is 'disruption,' meaning here destabilising the usual way that people see the world by questioning normal assumptions. The second element is 'network': the intention is to build connections across a range of fields, for example art and protest, that would otherwise be unlikely. The third element relates to 'lab': activities are meant to be experimental, to try things out and see what happens, and learn from the process.

As part of the lab's activities, Bazzichelli has put together the book *Whistleblowing for Change*. She says the goal of the anthology 'is to encourage the exploration of critical models of thinking and understanding, and to analyse the wider effects of whistleblowing as an act of dissent on politics, society, and the arts' (18). The book is the most important publication available that presents whistleblowing as a form of activism. Artistic practice, something usually given little attention in writings about whistleblowing, is an important feature of the volume.

Most of the book's chapters are written by whistleblowers, activists or allies; other chapters are interviews by Bazzichelli with whistleblowers and others. The focus is on what might be called high-profile whistleblowing, especially in national security, and features contributions by or about

individuals well-known in whistleblowing circles, including Reality Winner, John Kiriakou, Daniel Hale and Julian Assange. Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning are not directly represented but their leaks provide a recurring reference point, sometimes close up as with Bazzichelli's interviews with Laura Poitras, the filmmaker to whom Snowden made his disclosures.

There are a number of chapters about the relationship between art and whistleblowing. Bazzichelli introduces the concept of 'art as evidence,' in which artistic works are used to convey aspects of whistleblowing in ways different from, or beyond, the usual media forms. She writes:

Artistic works of evidence and about evidence become therefore not only a challenge to expose facts and wrongdoings that are hidden and not accessible to the general public, but also an opportunity to collectively question the concept of evidence itself, and to reflect on which speculative forms of artistic research and practice might arise from its analysis. (81)

Filmmaker Laura Poitras talks about art as evidence in this way:

The goal in my art is to make work that is truthful to the facts, but that also has emotional meaning. If you don't feel something, then I have failed. The primary material feeds into how to work with it, and how it can be expressed. (96)

Trevor Paglen, an artist who writes about 'Turnkey tyranny, surveillance and the terror state,' tells Bazzichelli how he conceives art as evidence:

I don't think about it so much as revealing the invisible; I consider making artwork as being similar to making words. [...] building vocabularies that we use to see the world around us and to articulate the things that constitute our societies and our environments. It's not that there's something hidden and we're doing this work to reveal it, it's that we're trying to bring forth the possibility of seeing the world in a different way, or a more precise way. (106)

Whistleblowers come from all walks of life: education, police, military, churches, medicine, private companies, airlines, NGOs, and many others. In *Whistleblowing for Change*, the greatest emphasis is on three areas: government surveillance, military abuses and financial corruption. Some of

the highest-profile whistleblowers are in these areas: think of Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden.

This is a rich and readable collection. It is rich with a diversity of issues and information, told by individuals close to the action. It is readable, for the most part, because most of the chapters are in the form of personal stories rather than esoteric analyses. Yet there is plenty of social analysis implicit or explicit in the stories.

John Kiriakou worked for the CIA and tried to raise the alarm about torture being carried out by the agency. He was charged with revealing classified information and went to prison. Of all those involved in the US torture programme, none went to prison except Kiriakou, the one who tried to expose and stop it.

Joana Moll uses artworks to foster awareness of surveillance. Her preparations can involve considerable investigation. For one work, she collected every electronic record created in just one Amazon purchase and then printed them all out. One component of her work *The hidden life of an Amazon user* is a pile of paper two metres high. Her aim is 'to transcend the story and activate experience by allowing for the arrangement of different pieces of evidence across multidimensional layers' (p. 173).

Two of the whistleblowers say what triggered them to speak out. For Kiriakou, it was hearing George W. Bush say, 'We do not torture.' Kiriakou knew it was a lie. He agreed to be interviewed by a journalist and tell the truth. For Brandon Bryant, it was hearing Barack Obama say that drones were awesome. He decided he could no longer remain silent.

Leaking—anonymous whistleblowing—is usually a far safer way to make disclosures. It reduces the risk of reprisals, puts the attention on the disclosure rather than the whistleblower, and enables the person to remain in the job and continue leaking. Think of 'Deep throat,' the FBI insider who briefed US journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein about Watergate. Most leakers are never exposed. Hence, we seldom get to read the personal stories of successful ones. Instead, though, we can learn from the stories of those who receive leaks, most commonly journalists.

The Paradise Papers are a vast collection of information from the Panamanian firm Mossack Fonseca, revealing tax evasion from around the world, including by many prominent figures. These documents were leaked to the German broadsheet *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Rather than immediately publishing the story, two journalists, Frederik Obermaier and Bastian

Obermayer, decided to involve hundreds of other journalists in researching the papers, a secret and lengthy process that culminated in international news from dozens of outlets, with massive impact. Bazzichelli interviews Obermaier and Obermayer about ‘How the rich and the powerful hide their money,’ and how they decided to use the leaked documents to have the greatest possible international impact rather than for the greatest personal advantage. Obermaier recommends that whistleblowers first approach journalists anonymously, at least initially.

Daryl Davis is an African American musician and activist. He spends time talking with White supremacists and is so successful in convincing them to change that he has a collection of Ku Klux Klan robes given to him by former members of the White racist organisation. Davis thinks of himself, as the title of his chapter indicates, as ‘Another type of whistleblower: exposing the public to overt and covert societal truths.’ The first part of his chapter recounts many cases of US police violence against Black people, indicating that the murder of George Floyd by policeman Derek Chauvin was only different in being so well known.

Os Keyes is a whistleblower who reflects on the shortcomings of the usual conception of whistleblowing. Keyes laments the excessive attention on the whistleblower as noble truth-teller, noting that bringing about change requires collective effort. Just speaking out is not enough: there have to be others who listen and are prepared to act.

Anna Myers worked for the British whistleblower support organisation Public Concern at Work (now called Protect) and listened to a great many whistleblower stories. Her chapter is the only one addressing the full diversity of whistleblowing, from all walks of life but with remarkably similar trajectories. This helps to put in context the much higher profile cases, the ones that get into the news and generate support campaigns.

Whistleblowing is risky. This is not news to anyone familiar with the area. Anyone who speaks out in a way felt to be threatening to others can become the target of adverse actions seeking to deter, silence, discredit or destroy them. This is true for low-profile cases, such as teenage employees who question payment shortcomings, as well as high-profile ones like Snowden and Manning. Many of the chapters reveal the lengths to which authorities will go in attacking whistleblowers. Daniel Hale went to prison for exposing killings of civilians in the US drone program. His statement to the court prior to his sentencing concludes with an ironic and revealing

regret: his crime, in the eyes of the prosecutors, was using words, not killing innocent people.

Organisational definitions of whistleblowing typically refer to reporting problems at work to figures in authority. Most contributors to *Whistleblowing for Change* have a much broader conception, and some of them might even exclude organisational whistleblowing:

‘Whistleblowing is presented [in *Whistleblowing for Change*] as an act of “disruption”, which is able to provoke the unexpected with closed systems.’ — Tatiana Bazzichelli (11)

‘If we see the act of whistleblowing as a cultural perspective able to provoke change, with the strength to radically construct a different point of view, it is possible to find such a mindset in the activities of many artists, activists, journalists, researchers and people in general.’ — Tatiana Bazzichelli (79)

‘By contrast [with open source investigation], the act of whistleblowing commonly conveys large quantities of detailed and internally coherent information—documents, communiqués, account statements—into the public domain by the singular and decisive action of an individual (invariably, of course, at great personal risk).’ — Robert Trafford (112)

‘For the risks I take and the truths I tell by blowing the whistle and exposing the fraud, disguises, and hidden truths behind White supremacy, I am not protected by the law, nor am I compensated.’ — Daryl Davis (242)

‘I am using whistleblowing in its broadest sense to refer to the practice of exposing injustices, rather than drawing on definitions which situate it squarely as an act performed by workers in corporate or government contexts.’ — Charlotte Webb (259)

‘But one particular cluster of archetypes and people stands out [among activist techniques]. I’m thinking specifically of the “whistleblower”; the critical thinker and practitioner of critique; the iconoclast (literally: smasher of false idols). Each of these archetypes is distinct, but what

brings them *together* is the idea of a person who tells “dangerous truths”, and through doing so, catalyses and generates change in how we see the world—individually and collectively—and how we behave towards it.’
— Os Keyes (285)

‘We may define whistleblowing as the act of exposing alleged wrongdoing.’—Barrett Brown (345)

Whistleblowing for change is a collective process. As most clearly articulated by contributor Os Keyes, most attention is usually placed on the figure of the whistleblower, seen as a lone heroic individual, while others who are crucial to getting the message out and having an impact remain in the background. Both whistleblowers and audiences are misled by this picture. It is vital to involve others. In many cases, journalists are key players.

Whistleblowing for Change is an impressive contribution to thinking and acting. Through the range of chapters—only some of them mentioned here—readers can gain a sense of a diversity of initiatives involving a range of fields, from art to community-based investigations. It can help in seeing how whistleblowers can be connected to activists, or to be activists. A warning from Barrett Brown is appropriate: ‘The easiest part of being a whistleblower is blowing the whistle. The most difficult part of being a whistleblower is ensuring that the results are worthwhile.’ (345)

Theresa Züger, in the afterword, characterises *Whistleblowing for Change* as an example of art as evidence. She concludes by saying the book:

Exemplifies the resistance that exists despite all the wrongdoings it describes. Every chapter represents a successful act of uncovering and deepening our understanding of the specific type of resistance that is truth-telling and whistleblowing. It displays a belief in politics and citizens as political subjects that can make a huge difference, even though the struggle never ends. (373)

Whistleblowing for Change is available as a free download at:
<https://www.disruptionlab.org/book>.