Article

When whistleblower retaliation backfires: Reprisal reversal and racialized retaliation at Amazon

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Abstract
Can aggressive whistleblower retaliation be turned back upon the employer? Existing scholarship on whistleblower retaliation in organizations has largely examined its destructive effects on individual whistleblowers. In this article, we foreground the opposite dynamic: the capacity for whistleblowers and their supporters to counter retaliation so that employer attacks ultimately backfire. Drawing on Martin's backfire framework—derived from studies of nonviolent resistance and underutilized in organizational research—we develop the concept of reprisal reversal. Reprisal reversal occurs when efforts to devalue a dissenting employee are reframed to reinforce the employee's legitimacy, thereby undermining the employer's credibility and perceived morality. We analyze an exemplar case study: Chris Smalls, a manager-turned-whistleblower at Amazon's largest North American fulfillment center (JFK8). Our analysis makes two contributions. First, we extend theoretical understandings of whistleblower retaliation by introducing the concept of reprisal reversal and its constituent mechanisms. Second, we provide an empirical account of racialized whistleblower retaliation, showing how racially charged reprisals can be front-staged when typically hidden discourse is exposed through digital leaks, news coverage, and social media. This article highlights how reprisal reversal enables whistleblower supporters to bear witness, amplify disclosures, and challenge organizational retaliation, with important implications for both scholarship and practice.

Keywords
Amazon, backfire, racialization, reprisal reversal, whistleblower retaliation

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Make him the most interesting part of the story. And if possible, make him the face of the entire union/ organizing movement. (Senior Amazon Executive quoted in Blest, 2020; Wong, 2020)

To begin to address the ways in which powerful organizations negatively affect our lives, we need information. Yet details of decisions made within organizations are often obscured by opaque practices and powerful public relations campaigns (Munro, 2017). Against this backdrop, workers and citizens speaking truth to power are an increasingly important means by which we learn about harmful practices (Lewis, 2008; OECD, 2019; Vandekerckhove, 2022). As revelations at Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Volkswagen, and hospitals and care homes during COVID-19 remind us, we all need workers' disclosures to safeguard our rights as citizens, our safety and wellbeing (Rhodes, 2016). Yet as these revelations also show, whistleblower reprisal is a common phenomenon, with studies indicating one in every five workers speaking out encounters some form of retaliation (Transparency International, 2017).

To date, scholarship on whistleblower retaliation in organization, management, and business ethics tends to focus on its negative impacts. Employers seeking to silence workers can draw on a range of tactics, from isolation in the workplace to demotion. In extreme cases reprisal causes workers to leave the organization, ensuring they are blacklisted in the eyes of potential new employers, and/ or subject to a public smear campaign. The power typically lies with the employer whose superior resources enable them to fund a robust legal defence, and in some cases, to actively prosecute a worker. These effects are damaging for workers and their families, as is well-documented (Kenny and Fotaki, 2021; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Van Portfliet, 2022).

In most cases, such workers struggle to sustain their disclosure (Da Silva, 2019). Those who succeed typically do so by gaining the support of allies interested in the information brought forth by the whistleblower. Effective allies have the capacity to support the dissenter, to keep the wrongdoing at the forefront of people's attention, and to ensure the whistleblower's version of events shapes the narrative. Working with whistleblowers, supporters can counter reprisal. Yet the precise ways in which this occurs are not known. Specifically, little is known about when and how whistleblower reprisal can be actively turned back upon an attacking employer. In practice, such tactics of resistance prove critical in a whistleblower's struggle, as practitioners including professional whistleblower advocates and lawyers describe (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Mueller, 2019). There has, to date, been silence around this topic in extant organizational whistleblowing research (Kenny, 2024; Martin, 2007). We are lacking in our understanding of how aggressive reprisal might be turned around to challenge perpetrating employers.

In this article we address this issue by building on the concept of whistleblower reprisal. Specifically, we foreground an unexpected dimension of reprisal: backfire. Backfire comprises aggression rebounding against an attacker (Martin, 2007). To our knowledge, this concept has not been widely used to understand whistleblowing reprisal. Addressing this, we develop the concept of reprisal reversal with its component dynamics: first, the dissenting worker and their supporters capitalizing on emergent, unintended consequences of employer aggression that backfires; second, front-staging hidden prejudice to galvanize public support, and finally, the mobilization of public outrage through digital spaces and affordances. Reprisal reversal overturns an employer's deliberate devaluation of a whistleblower by generating backlash that harms the employer's position, lessening their legitimacy, and causing withdrawal of public support. Our arguments are developed through analysis of a single exemplary case study: that of Chris Smalls at Amazon. This highly-mediatized case allows us to see, step-by-step, the emergence of a whistleblowing disclosure and wide-spread media backfire over a 3-week period, offering a rare and instructive insight into this phenomenon. Our first contribution is theorizing reprisal reversal, adding to extant scholarship on whistleblower retaliation. Our second, empirical, contribution is to foreground the complex way in

which racialization structures scenes of whistleblower reprisal: both as backdrop and as a discursive resource for retaliation while, conversely, anti-racism can provide a resource for resistance by whistleblowers and allies.

Our article proceeds as follows: we begin with a review of literature on whistleblower reprisal in management, organization, and business ethics scholarship, detailing extant oversights. We next introduce our analytic framing that draws on concepts of backfire, stigma and devaluation. Analyzing our empirical case, we explicate the emergent theoretical framing, and we conclude with implications for future research. We show how the article's insights into tactics to counter whistleblower reprisal adds to practitioner knowledge in this area.

Reprisal as devaluation and backfire tactics

Whistleblower reprisal and resistance

In organization studies and business ethics, scholarly interest in whistleblower reprisal has grown in the past 20 years (Andrade, 2015; Contu, 2014; Kenny, 2024; Kenny et al., 2019; Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012). Workers who speak out about wrongdoing have been described as engaging in "ethical parrhesia," a practice from Ancient Greece that involves speaking truth to power from a relatively powerless position and incurring risk as a result (Foucault, 2010; Ladkin, 2018). Today, whistleblowers are often erroneously associated with informing and being disloyal to one's colleagues (Bowie and Werhane, 2019). This general mistrust exacerbates the risk of speaking up, because it lessens the likelihood of support. In contemporary workplaces, such parrhesiastic risk manifests as whistleblower reprisal. Reprisal is defined as "undesirable action taken against a whistleblower—in direct response to the whistle-blowing—who reported wrongdoing internally or externally, outside the organization." (Rehg et al., 2008: 222).

Two points are notable within extant scholarship. First, it is assumed the whistleblower is destined to suffer from this action. A resource-based view of power dominates extant scholarship (Kenny et al., 2019) in which retaliation against a whistleblower will be proportional to the balance of power between worker and employer. The employing organization is assumed to possess an unfair advantage in whistleblowing cases, with superior access to resources, including legal expertise, witnesses in the form of other employees, and case files. The whistleblower—it is generally assumed—has little power in situations of deliberate and aggressive reprisal (Alford, 2001). Stemming from this conceptual lacuna is an absence of attention to counter-tactics in studies of reprisal. Some work has focused on the role of partners in supporting external whistleblowers and countering risk (Jones et al., 2005: 121; Munro, 2017), typically examining how partners can assist whistleblowers by hearing and amplifying their disclosures (Andrade 2015; Catlaw et al., 2014; Contu 2014). The focus here is on partner support via speaking on behalf of whistleblowers and supporting them personally, but there is little research on the counter-tactics that whistleblowers and partners can use to respond to aggressive reprisal (for exceptions see Kenny, 2024; Munro, 2017; Munro and Kenny, 2023). In contrast, practitioner literature, including handbooks for whistleblowers written by experienced lawyers and advocates, emphasize such tactics; they describe exploiting opportunities to counter reprisal as a key part of addressing the power imbalance between whistleblowing worker and employer (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Mueller, 2019).

Second, the question of how race shapes whistleblower reprisal remains underexamined. Scholars generally fail to differentiate between experiences of retaliation by different categories of workers. Some studies have focused on gender and sexuality, and show how in some cases possessing a minority characteristic can amplify whistleblower reprisal (Agostinho and Thylstrup, 2019;

Kaplan et al., 2009; Kenny and Fanchini, 2023; Maxwell, 2018; 2019; Rehg et al., 2008; Tavares et al., 2021). Yet race remains ignored. Race remains a critical dynamic in organizations, institutional structures, and indeed global economic systems (Prasad, 2023: 1114). Race-based differentiation continues to operate within social, political, and economic life (Gilmore, 2002: 261). Despite high-profile whistleblower cases in which race plays an evident role in reprisal, such as the CIA's Jeffrey Stirling among others, it is overlooked in whistleblowing scholarship. This results in a blindness around how intersectional dimensions including race alongside class and gender impact whistleblower reprisal.

In sum, while parrhesiastic risk and whistleblower reprisal are influential concepts in organization studies, significant omissions remain. The negative impacts of risky parrhesia are foregrounded, while the capacity for whistleblowers and their supporters to counter retaliation such that aggressive attacks on the discloser backfire on the employer, receives little attention. Characteristics such as gender have begun to be studied as factors in whistleblower reprisal yet race is generally overlooked. To explore this further, and begin to address this gap between theory and practice, we introduce the concept of backfire derived from political studies, specifically scholarship on nonviolent resistance.

Backfire: A concept emerging from nonviolent resistance studies

Studies of nonviolent resistance against organizations perpetrating wrongdoing inspired Professor Martin (2007) to develop his backfire theory. The concept of backfire describes how actions taken by organizations designed to inhibit public outrage, after a scandal emerges, can be turned back upon the organization working against it and in favor of resistors. This takes place when information about aggressive actions by powerful actors against the less powerful, "is communicated to people who perceive it as unjust, disproportionate, disgusting, or otherwise inappropriate." Examples include the widespread sharing of a recording of the beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles, and the US military prisoner torture in Abu Ghraib; awareness of these injustices rapidly spread leading to outrage.

The backfire framework is inspired by scholarship on nonviolent resistance tactics, particularly the "moral ju-jitsu" (Gregg, 1966) that occurs when violence by an attacker is met with a nonviolent response, causing the attacker to "lose[s] his moral balance" while the defender maintains and enhances theirs. Three groups are involved in political ju-jitsu (Sharp, 1973): "third parties not directly involved in the conflict; the attacker's supporters; and the 'general grievance group', namely those who support the goals of the nonviolent actionists" (Martin, 2007: 123). The "third party" audience plays an important role, "an audience, if present, sees the attacker's loss of prestige due to a resort to violence, leading the attacker to lose self-respect and self-assurance" (Martin, 2007: 121). Political ju-jitsu thus involves something of a performance that results in destabilizing the moral balance of the attacker and their assumed position of power. It does not take place in a vacuum but is heavily shaped by the affordances and obstacles of wider social, economic, and political contexts of the setting.

Increasingly, new kinds of information and communication technologies impact backfire. Cheaper and more accessible devices enabling high-quality recording and sharing amplify documentation of abuses and acts of resistance; injustice is easier to present to, and engage, an audience (Döveling et al., 2018). At the same time, audience media saturation is an obstacle to absorbing and making meaning of injustices and resistances as they are presented, with "compassion fatigue" ubiquitous (Kuntsman, 2012; Martin, 2007: 130). In whistleblowing cases, at stake is the question of how meanings are made and shared in ways that variously amplify or inhibit outrage in the target audience for a given disclosure (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Munro,

2017), with recent movements like #MeToo and the TechWorkersCollective exemplifying this (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019).

Specifically focused on organizations—how they work to inhibit post-scandal outrage, and how this can be counteracted by resistors engaged in ju-jitsu—Martin develops and refines the concept of backfire drawing on grounded theory analysis of case studies of organizational injustices. Five overarching themes encapsulate methods by which perpetrators of injustice attempt to inhibit public outrage: cover-up, reinterpretation, official channels, intimidation/ bribery, and devaluation. In turn, each method can give rise to a counter-tactic to amplify outrage, respectively: exposure, validation, interpretation, mobilization, and resistance. Communication with an audience is an important element. As Martin notes, while activists in practice frequently utilize backfire tactics, organizational researchers have tended to overlook it.

Relevant to our study, cover-up is the prevention of information about an issue reaching the audience in the first place. It can involve active censorship as the exercise of power by a group to ensure information remains hidden. Cover-up can also involve a deluge of information including the trivial and distracting. Exposure counters cover-up, "getting information to audiences that can make sense of it" (Martin, 2007: 138), including through free speech campaigns and investigative journalism.

Reinterpretation by an organization takes place once an issue has become public and cover-up no longer works. It involves creating new meanings around the issue: presenting it as a wicked problem that cannot be solved, for example, redefining it, or shifting responsibility to another party. Tactics include actively deceiving through "stating falsehoods, not stating truths, or giving misleading accounts" (Martin, 2007: 139). To counter, interpretation by defenders aims to lay bare such strategies. Further tactics include the use of official channels to dampen outrage stemming from injustice, and overt intimidation and bribery to threaten and punish, here omitted for reasons of space. In this article, we focus on the fifth dyad: devaluation-valorization.

Devaluation-valorization as backfire dynamic

Devaluation involves discrediting groups and individuals critical of the attacker. In practice, it consists of relegating a dissenter to a lesser subject position; devaluation can draw on pre-existing stereotypes, and out-groups perceived to be inferior (Martin, 2007). Extant studies of whistleblowing examine how dissenters are de-valued as part of employer reprisal (Kenny, 2019; Stein, 2021; see Van Portfliet, 2022 for an overview). A deliberate smear campaign aimed at destroying a whistleblower's reputation, for example, can involve singling out the worker and painting them as unreliable, not credible and overall, less-than worthy of attention (Devine and Maassarani, 2011; Munro, 2018; Park et al., 2020). This works to devalue the whistleblower in the eyes of the public such that their speech is not listened to, and retaliatory attack is perceived as justified (Alford, 2001; Kenny, 2018; Van Portfliet, 2022). Devaluation can operate through psychological processes of abjection where a despised aspect of the self, or the community, is projected onto a person or group (Stein, 2021). Devaluation of the dissenter inhibits outrage because it discredits the speaking subject.

In discussions of devaluation qua whistleblower reprisal, one aspect remains understudied: how to counter and challenge it. Attempting to address this, Martin (2007) draws on Wolfensberger's (1998) "social role valorization"; by increasing the devalued figure's perceived competency and capacity to fit into valued roles, they gain social respect. This conceptualization of valorization as countering devaluation is however somewhat limited for our purposes. It was developed from observations of individuals stigmatized because of intellectual difficulties, rather than excluded whistleblowers, and in the context of social roles. A more nuanced concept is needed.

Returning to whistleblowing scholarship, some have examined how devalued whistleblowers can resist damaging labeling through, for example, appealing to audiences interested in their disclosure and reaching "sources of support they otherwise would not have" (Van Portfliet, 2022: 461). Supporters help counter employers' attacks by granting whistleblowers recognition as valid truth-tellers, and scholars draw on theories of power and identification to examine this (Kenny and Fotaki, 2021; Munro, 2017). For Kenny (2019), the concept of "affective recognition" shows how supporters including friends, family members, lawyers, and civil society advocates, can help re-constitute a whistleblower's sense of self, by stressing the interconnectedness and mutual dependence of those involved. Through affective and intersubjective dynamics, the whistleblower is reframed as a social—rather than isolated and individualized—subject: part of the wider collective of concerned supporters. This constitution is critical for positioning the whistleblower as a legitimate discloser—both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

What remains uncertain however is how recognition can challenge aggressive whistleblower reprisal. It is to this question that we address our article. If our aim is to enhance our understanding of whistleblower reprisal by examining how whistleblowers and their supporters thwart and counter aggressive employer attacks on the discloser, it is clear that backfire tactics, specifically the granting of valorization by partners in an active move to counter intentional devaluation, are a fruitful place to begin.

Re-signifying whistleblower reprisal: Case study and research approach

In organization and management studies, emancipatory theorizing is used to rethink a phenomenon through a practice of interpretive re-signifying (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Husted and Just, 2022). Our aim in this article is to re-signify an existing concept, whistleblower retaliation, through the novel lens of backfire theory, with the aim of developing new understandings. Single case study analysis is a common method for such new conceptual development (Janssens and Zanoni, 2021; Nyberg, 2021), and has been used in theoretical work on whistleblowing (Alford, 2001; Ceva and Bocchiola, 2019; Maxwell, 2019).

Most injustices do not result in backfire, hence it is critical to examine exemplary cases (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006; Rhodes, 2016). Two essential requirements for backfire are: "a perception of injustice, and communication to receptive audiences" (Martin, 2007: 132). The nuances of backfire are best studied as an emergent process (Sharp, 1973). Many cases are difficult to study due to lack of information, hence a high-profile case that "generates enormous interest, stimulates participants to tell their stories, and raises the stakes for everyone" can offer insights into the dynamics of outrage inhibition and amplification (Martin, 2007: 142). In such cases, mass media seek out additional perspectives, probing into "backstage behaviours" via detailed investigative reporting. Those on both sides of the dispute are given media platforms to make their points and are "are encouraged to challenge their opponents publicly. All this helps to expose some of the techniques that are usually hidden . . ." (Martin, 2007: 142).

For all these reasons a single high-profile case is ideal for analysis of exemplar tactics and counter-tactics. Amazon whistleblower Chris Smalls' disclosure is highly-mediatized; a large volume of information is available about key dimensions: the "scene" to which it gave rise; the emergence and subsequent life of the disclosure; and the reactions of those around it, including aggressive employer reprisal. This grants a rare glimpse into amplification and inhibition of outrage and the role of the whistleblower therein. Due to the complexity of backfire in practice, Martin (2007) advises examining each dimension of backfire in turn, before bringing together in a more comprehensive analysis. Because our question centers on the reprisal levied against an individual whistleblower, we focus on the devaluation-valorization dyad. This dyad, more than the other

Table 1. Case material.

Source material type	Numbers and details	Sample source
Newspaper articles	182	New York Times, Daily News, New York Observer, Chicago Daily Herald, The Guardian (UK), Financial Times, MailOnline.
Transcripts of audio and video coverage.	47	CBS News, CNN, BBC World News, NPR, PBS, NBC News.
Magazine articles and news websites	6	Time, The Verge, Labor Notes, Jacobin, Common Dreams, Vice News
Blogs	1	https://tbray.org
Video	3	Fox News, C-SPAN, HBO
Podcasts	3	Wall Street Journal, BBC Radio 4, New York Times
Author interview with whistleblower	2	Interview 1: 10 Nov 2020, online (45 minutes) Interview 2: 24 Nov 2020, online (30 minutes)

dimensions, foregrounds the figure of the dissenter: how they are positioned and framed by the attacker, and the counter-response to this. Such positioning is critical in cases of whistleblower reprisal.

Stephen gathered case material (see Table 1), comprising: a media sample of 229 newspaper articles and transcripts of audio and video media coverage compiled on the LexisNexis database in April 2022 using the search terms "Chris Smalls" and "Christian Smalls," articles found in magazines and online periodicals, blogs, webinars, tweets reported in newspapers, and podcasts alongside two interviews with the whistleblower conducted by Kate in 2020.

Analyzing the case, we were informed by extant literature on whistleblower reprisal. Kate carried out an initial analysis of case data. Drawing on sensitizing concepts (cf. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Bowen, 2006), they identified critical aspects of the disclosure, including: its emergence internally within the organization; its recipients; responses including reprisals it attracted; and its subsequent journey to partners outside. Data relating to these themes were identified and discussed by both authors, with the emerging analytic categories including: advocacy and media support; whistleblower network and connections; media reception; emergent affordances and obstacles to disclosure; and unintended consequences such as apparent backlash against the employer. Finding the latter to be particularly present in the case material—and rarely examined in whistleblowing scholarship—we returned to the literature and iteratively worked with the data via a lens focused on this emergent and surprising aspect. Backfire theory proved helpful, particularly the devaluation-valorization dimension explaining critical aspects of Chris's case. Furthermore, racialization appeared a significant dimension of both reprisal and backfire, and so we developed our analysis moving between relevant literature and findings, with the framework of reprisal reversal and its constituent elements resulting.

In the presentation of the case, we weave theoretical points and discussion of specific concepts through our findings, with the aim of building theory as we progress.

Case study: Chris Smalls versus Amazon

Whistleblowing and walking out

Amazon held a unique advantage during the coronavirus pandemic. Much of the United States population was quarantining at home or practicing social distancing. Demand spiked for items required for home-schooling and working, and for appliances compensating for the closure of

services such as gyms and hair salons. Amazon's profits soared to $26 billion during 2020 (Herrera, 2021). After a significant hiring drive, the company began paying $2 more per hour to attract staff. Yet workers began to protest and, in some cases, walk out because of health protection concerns at Amazon's product packing warehouses, or "fulfillment centers." The onset of COVID-19 meant workers faced both an increased intensity of work and severe peril due to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and social distancing. Amid this, manager Chris Smalls came to international attention on 30 March 2020, while New York was battling the pandemic's first wave.

Chris Smalls had joined Amazon in 2015, working in warehouses in New Jersey and Connecticut before transferring to the JFK8 facility in Staten Island in 2018 (Alter, 2022). By his own account he was a dedicated Amazon worker prior to the events of March 2020. He had persisted at the facility despite lengthy commutes and unsocial hours and frustrated hopes of advancement (Barbaro, 2022). Although he supervised over sixty colleagues at JFK8, Chris remained in the role of an "hourly associate"—having been turned down for promotion to a formal management position. Chris attributed this to his tendency to stand up for his supervisees when disputes arose with the organization, but also Amazon's preference for white managers over black and other ethnicities (Author interview; Barbaro, 2022).

Figures released by the organization bolster this claim of racial stratification. At Amazon, a 2018 internal report calculated that 68% of those working in its' US operation as "labourers and helpers," including warehouse workers, were people of color, while conversely, 71.4% of top executives and senior-level employees were white (Alimahamed-Wilson and Reese, 2021: 59). Since 2018, the company faced legal actions alleging race-based employment discrimination and sustained negative media coverage suggesting the existence of a "systemic pattern of racism" at the company (Fairfax 2022: 148). This stratification is not unique. Across the labor force in countries such as the US, class positionality and racial background can intersect in a pernicious fashion (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Under racialized capitalism, workers belonging to racially-othered populations often experience negative outcomes in terms of "wages and remuneration, job security, physical safety, work fulfilment, career mobility, and overall respect and consideration" (Prasad, 2023: 1114).

During the outbreak of COVID-19, Chris and many of his colleagues repeatedly reported failures of Amazon to coherently respond to the threat posed to warehouse workers at JFK8. The firm did not provide sufficient personal protective equipment, despite multiple confirmed and suspected cases within the warehouse. Adequate cleaning was not taking place, nor were vulnerable workers allowed home without sacrificing pay. The situation was different for Amazon executives and office workers. As soon as a case of infection emerged, executive offices were closed and home-working was encouraged. As noted above, this discrepancy played out along racial lines with people of color overrepresented at the warehouse level.

In what has become one of the most newsworthy cases of external whistleblowing in recent years, Chris's initial attempts to disclose internally through HR channels led to no response from the organization (Barbaro, 2022); his attempts to resolve the situation proved futile. The situation deteriorated when it emerged that Chris and his colleagues had potentially been exposed to the virus by a visibly sick colleague who was at work despite testing positive for the virus (Barbaro, 2022; Linebaugh, 2022). He describes taking days off work to write to politicians, medical authorities and media outlets in the New York area, to draw attention to the dangers. New York had by now become the epicenter of the US COVID-19 outbreak, and Chris's emails went unanswered (Author interview).

Together Chris and his colleague, Derrick Palmer, decided to escalate their efforts to raise the alarm within the organization. For 4 days, they sat with colleagues in the cafeteria, on their own time, telling fellow workers about the risk they faced. Each morning at 9am, they interrupted the

managers' daily meeting to enquire about the plans for protection, albeit to no avail (Author interview). Chris, Derrick, and a group of coworkers petitioned the general manager for a 2-week closure and cleaning of the facility in line with the medical guidelines at the time (Barbaro, 2022).

After days of raising the alarm, on 28th March, Chris—alone—was sent home, ostensibly on quarantine, only the third person to be quarantined in a 5000 strong workforce (Author interview; Barbaro, 2022; Wong, 2020). It was at this point that he and his colleagues began to coordinate amongst themselves, having become aware that fellow Amazon staff in another warehouse in Kentucky had walked out causing the state governor to close the facility (Barbaro, 2022). Chris and Derrick staged a walkout at JFK-8 to demand the temporary closure and cleaning of their workplace. When it came to planning the protest, Chris was candid about his inexperience in gaining media coverage:

> . . . I did not know what the hell I was doing. I was not an activist or organizer. I sent out emails to all the media that I can think of. (Speaking on Linebaugh, 2022)

Chris publicized the walkout via traditional and social media channels, where he was soon given the tag "the Amazon whistleblower." He recalled fearing the potential for retaliation:

> And when they [the media] showed up, I was definitely heart-pounding nervous, because I'd never done anything like this before. And I knew that it was going to be some type of repercussions, but I didn't know what it would be. (Speaking on Linebaugh, 2022)

Despite his nerves, Chris describes a tactical awareness that influenced his approach with the media, conscious of the need for the walkout to be something of a spectacle:

> I'm like, 'oh, all right. All right'. I'm picking up [the phone], telling them like, 'yeah, at noon March 30, it's going down'. And I just kept telling the media that over and over, 'yes, we're planning to walk out.' . . . And I knew the media wasn't going to come if I would have said five people [would be there].
>
> Interviewer: [LAUGHTER]
>
> So, of course I lied.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Interviewer: What did you say?
>
> Two hundred,' I said, 'about to be 200 people outside'. And I knew that it wasn't going to be. But I knew I checked the weather. I played chess. I checked the weather. I was like, 'Yo, it's going to be 60 degrees.' I know as an Amazon worker myself . . . I'd be outside eating lunch. So I said, 'the perception is everything. (Speaking on Barbaro 2022)

Major media outlets sent reporters to cover the walkout, with CNN and CNBC broadcasting interviews with Chris in advance. The story depicted life-and-death urgency at Amazon, a billion-dollar organization endangering the lives of its front-line warehouse workers.

In media coverage, Chris was frequently photographed as the face of the movement. Interviews with those involved in his campaign detailed how effective he was as a leader, while some commentators noted the discrepancy between his leadership role and his appearance. Wearing casual sports clothes, a bandanna headscarf, and sunglasses, reportage often focused on his street dress

style. According to his friend and co-organizer Derrick Palmer, this was constant: he had "the shades on . . . the red cap on, the red hoody, the red pants," a style prompting a BBC reporter to later note, "Chris does not look like a traditional union leader." As his mother stated, "he does dress urban, very urban . . . Some people want clean-cut and a tie, but that is not who Chris is." (BBC, 2022).

Dismissal and backfire

Warehouse workers quickly garnered support through the media coverage that followed. This was enhanced when news emerged that, just 2 hours after the walkout, Chris Smalls had been dismissed by phone call, and his colleague Derrick Palmer was given a formal warning (Alter, 2022). Reflecting on this, Chris described how he hung up on management in anger before they could give a full explanation of his dismissal (Barbaro, 2022). On the same evening, New York Attorney General Letitia James was cited as condemning Amazon's firing of Chris as "immoral and inhumane . . ." "It is disgraceful that Amazon would terminate an employee who bravely stood up to protect himself and his colleagues" (Johnson, 2020). Articles like this juxtaposed Chris, a defenseless worker, with CEO and "world's richest man," Jeff Bezos. Other articles followed a similar format, with Chris typically cited verbatim. For example, he was quoted in *Common Dreams*,

> We have plenty of workers that haven't been to work for the entire month of March because they're scared for their lives . . . We have people that have Lupus, we have people that have asthma, we have people that have infants at home, that have people that's pregnant. (Johnson, 2020).

Within 3 days of the walkout, a multitude of supporters joined the Attorney General's call for an investigation into Chris's dismissal for whistleblowing. One example of this is a protest letter, directed at Jeff Bezos and his fellow executives, that was signed by leaders from 7 national level unions, including the AFL-CIO and Service Employees International Union, and 40 elected officials from New York State (RWDSU, 2020). Prominent national-level politicians such as Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Bernie Sanders also publicly condemned the company.

We can see key dimensions of backfire. A powerful organization attempted to inhibit public outrage, as information about wrongdoing spread (cf. Martin, 2007). Inhibition tactics involved intimidating dissenters Chris and Derrick, first with threats, and eventually with Chris's firing, while a cover-up in the form of preventing information from reaching its audience was in progress. Countering this, whistleblower Chris engaged in as much exposure as he could, drawing on resources including mainstream media, supportive politicians (cf. Sharp, 1973), and trade unions. These groups formed a receptive "third party" audience for his disclosure—actors not directly involved but interested—and their interest worked against Amazon's attempts to inhibit outrage, by amplifying Chris's message. Amazon began to lose its "moral balance" in this ju-jitsu move, while whistleblower Chris's position was enhanced. This rebalancing is evidenced in supporters like the State Attorney General declaring Chris's treatment "disgraceful . . . immoral and inhumane."

Whistleblowers frequently attempt to refocus public attention on their wrongdoing employer, normally to no avail. What makes this case unusual is that the backfire effect appeared to be working. Being warned and then fired is a relatively common form of reprisal designed to silence those engaging in parrhesiastic whistleblowing speech (Alford, 2001). It is normally effective because, contrary to assumptions, public support for whistleblowers is rare and difficult to secure. Most external whistleblowers speak out alone, while most disclosures are ignored (Devine and Maassarani, 2011). The public declarations of solidarity by distant observers aligning themselves with Chris and his colleagues, in this case, were atypical. They represent examples of exposure

efforts enhanced by third-party audiences effectively countering cover-up. The whistleblower's interpretation of the information being exposed was accepted, creating alternative meanings to that being forwarded by the retaliating employer, and reframing ill-treatment of a whistleblower as a silencing tactic (cf. Martin, 2007). Retaliation was backfiring.

In our analysis of whistleblower reprisal dynamics in this case, the devaluation of the subject position of the whistleblowing dissenter proved particularly salient, with unexpected elements of racialization and backfire. We examine this in detail next.

Devaluation and valorization

Amazon executives were called on to respond to the outrage generated by the firing of a whistleblower speaking out about imminent threats to colleagues' lives. The official reason given to the media was that Chris was dismissed for violating Amazon's 2-week quarantine policy: he had returned to work too early. This point was central to company representatives' attempts to devalue him.

Chris responded by stating this was incorrect, that he was wrongly sent home on 28 March—almost 3 weeks after the case of exposure that formed the basis for his quarantine. His contrary view was cited in the media (Evelyn, 2020), an example of how this individual whistleblower was uniquely given a platform to speak to defend himself. Internal messages between Amazon Human Resources (HR) personnel from this period were leaked and reported to the *New York Times*. They reveal disquiet within the organization itself regarding the justification for Chris's dismissal:

> So . . . Amazon's official explanation always has been, and is to this day, that Chris was violating quarantine. However, I'm going to read you text messages that were sent between two Amazon HR officials on the same day Chris was fired. They're saying things like, 'Come on. They were social distancing, as requested. It was a peaceful protest. His right to organize is protected. This is going to be perceived as retaliation. Not a good look.' (NYT investigative journalist Jodi Kantor speaking on Barbaro, 2022)

Through this leaked information, we see the surprising valorization of Chris's subject position by internal sources: HR executives went against the company line to frame him as a peaceful protester whose rights are protected. In what follows, more intricate dynamics of devaluation-valorization would come into play.

Powerful voices continued to emerge to support the workers, in mainstream media and online. But the employer was fighting back. Some Amazon executives took to social media to malign this whistleblower. For example, senior vice president of Worldwide Operations and Customer Service, Dave Clark, responded to Senator Bernie Sanders' Twitter posts supporting Chris, declaring:

> You have been misinformed again Sen. Sanders. Mr. Smalls purposely violated social distancing rules multiple times and on 3/28 was put on Paid 14-days of quarantine due to COVID exposure. 3/30 he returned to the site. Knowingly putting our team at risk is unacceptable. (Quoted in Palmer, 2020a)

An hour later, Amazon's senior vice president of Global Corporate Affairs and former White House Press Secretary, Jay Carney, issued a remarkably similarly phrased post, also in response to Sanders:

> @SenSanders, I'm confused. Thought you wanted us to protect our workers? Mr. Smalls purposely violated social distancing rules, repeatedly, & was put on Paid 14-day quarantine for COVID exposure. 3/30 he returned to the site. Knowingly putting our team at risk is unacceptable. (Quoted in Wong, 2020; Palmer, 2020a)

As is clear, the second tweet was a close copy of the first. Devaluation is the discrediting of critics through relegating them to a lesser position, something often used to silence public whistleblowers (Alford, 2001; Van Portfliet, 2022). Here we see Chris painted as a violator of organizational rules and practices, but also as a particularly dangerous figure willingly risking colleagues' lives in the pursuit of his own aims. His allegedly malevolent acts are categorized as "unacceptable," which renders him invalid as a trustworthy source of information, and justifies the retaliatory action of dismissal (Kenny, 2018). He was thus presented as deserving of the sanctions levied. This portrayal of Chris should also be read within the wider context of "pandemic othering"—where marginalized groups were targeted with blame and scapegoated for the spread of COVID-19 (Dionne and Turkmen, 2020). The devaluation of racialized communities as reckless, dangerous, criminal, or otherwise deviant, has long been noted within the literature (Hall et al., 1978). In the US context, black men, particularly young black working-class men, such as Chris, are frequently evaluated in public discourse as "dangerous" or "threatening" (Like et al., 2015).

Two days later, on 2 April, information about how and why these responses were so similar emerged. A memo was leaked including notes authored by Amazon General Counsel, David Zapolsky. The notes came from a meeting of senior executives, including CEO Jeff Bezos. The topic of discussion was Amazon's communication strategy responding to the JFK8 walkout. It emerged that, at the meeting, the choreography of responses had been planned in detail. A central tenet of the strategy was the discrediting of Chris Smalls, as the memo detailed:

> We should spend the first part of our response strongly laying out the case for why the organizer's conduct was immoral, unacceptable, and arguably illegal, in detail, and only then follow with our usual talking points about worker safety. (Quoted in Blest, 2020; Wong, 2020)

Thus, we learned about the orchestration of devaluation. We also learned more: the memo instructed Amazon's communications teams to place Chris at the center of responses issued to the media:

> Make him the most interesting part of the story. And if possible, make him the face of the entire union/ organizing movement. (Quoted in Blest, 2020; Wong, 2020)

This note referred to the wider union movement among Amazon workers. Still nascent, workers at JFK8 had been attempting to unionize since 2018. As with other efforts by workers to organize, this had been strongly resisted by the company. As well as linking Chris to this failed historical effort, the memo went on to describe him in the following terms:

> He's not smart, or articulate, and to the extent the press wants to focus on us versus him, we will be in a much stronger PR position than simply explaining for the umpteenth time how we're trying to protect workers. (Quoted in Blest, 2020; Wong, 2020)

These remarks inadvertently went public. The executive mistakenly sent the email to a thousand colleagues at Amazon. It was leaked to Vice News, and then to other outlets. Uproar resulted. The email comments were read as a senior Amazon executive clearly stating that—in his opinion—to link all claims of worker dissatisfaction with "the face" of Chris Smalls, would grossly undermine their arguments (Barbaro, 2022). The statement was widely interpreted as racist as well as demonstrating overt and targeted whistleblower reprisal. When Chris Smalls himself was asked by the *New York Times* "how it felt to read that," he responded:

> I am just . . . you know . . . I had the same nonchalant, cool, calm, collected attitude. But of course, . . . I just said, 'Noted'. You know: 'not smart or articulate: black man'. That is the stigma. That is how they try to stigmatize us. We are not smart enough to be on the same level. (Barbaro, 2022)

For Chris, this was an attempt to devalue his position, first as a black man and then as a whistleblower.

Discussing research from countries in which both market capitalism and whiteness predominates, mainly the US but also Europe and its former settler colonies, Prasad (2023) notes how racialized populations are routinely subjected to exclusionary "white supremacist" discourses both within the workplace and in wider society. Such stigmatizing discourses seek to devalue those targeted and to legitimize inequality (Tyler, 2018). This can take the form of overt "hate speech" or more informal "words that wound" that have both psychological and physical health impacts (Bohonos, 2023). Specifically, "color conscious racist talk" can predominate in backstage spaces perceived as "all-white," as a form of in-group identity formation within organizations (Bohonos, 2023). Returning to Amazon, we see an aspect of whistleblower reprisal—its racial components—that is rarely discussed. Specifically, the sentiments expressed at the meeting appeared to draw on the assumption that emphasizing Chris's inferior position would resonate with an audience attuned to, and accepting of, racist discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Tyler, 2018). Rather than overt hate speech, these more subtle "words that wound" formed part of the silencing tactics of the organization.

Both these tactics, and the class and racial inequities underpinning them, were exposed by the inadvertent leaking of these words. The leaked information offered a glimpse into a normally backstage and hidden space (Bhattacharyya 2018; Bohonos, 2023). We see a "front-staging" (our term) of racialized whistleblower reprisal. This leaking of all-too-frank backstage talk was to prove highly consequential in the course this case would take.

Racialization, backfire and public outrage

The leaked communications from senior Amazon executives further exacerbated public outrage and had a sustained resonance. In early April, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez responded on Twitter that:

> Amazon's attempt to smear Chris Smalls, one of their own warehouse workers, as "not smart or articulate" is a racist & classist PR campaign. If execs are as concerned abt worker health & safety as they claim, then they should provide the full paid sick leave ALL workers deserve. (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020).

Meanwhile late-night talk show host John Oliver commented on the memo:

> Holy s**t! That is so racist I can't even point out how smart and articulate Smalls is without also sounding racist. (Last Week Tonight, 2020)

This controversy reemerged some months later, in media coverage of Amazon's public relations response as the *Black Lives Matter* movement gained momentum in summer 2020 (Gelles, 2020) and again in coverage of the successful union drive that Chris Smalls and allies went on to lead in 2022 (Alter, 2022; Barbaro, 2022; Linebaugh, 2022). In response, the memo's author sought to downplay its import, describing it as an emotional outburst:

> My comments were personal and emotional. I was frustrated and upset that an Amazon employee would endanger the health and safety of other Amazonians by repeatedly returning to the premises after having been warned to quarantine himself after exposure to virus Covid-19. I let my emotions draft my words and get the better of me. (Wong, 2020)

Within this response, we see further subtle devaluation of the dissenter subject position: Chris is again painted as a "dangerous" employee, out of control and risking the health of his colleagues "repeatedly returning." Such "personalized" defence and distancing of oneself from the impact of one's actions—a personal and "emotional outburst"—is a common evasive response as detailed in whiteness studies (Bonilla-Silva 2022; Mills, 2015). Despite its intended effect of dampening outrage, the executive's excuse was not taken seriously. Rather, as one commentator noted, it was interpreted as a weak attempt to defend "brutally insensitive remarks . . . where the focus was on defending Amazon 'talking points'" regardless of the situation (Bray, 2020).

Backfire amplifying valorization

From April 2020, Chris's whistleblowing actions, his colleagues' resistance, and the reprisals against them began to inspire others both within and outside the organization to speak out. Chris's former colleague, Derrick Palmer, explained his own response to the leaked memo:

> I was appalled. You know . . . How can you guys sit down at a meeting, and you are probably making millions of dollars, and Chris who is only making, what, 25 dollars an hour? So, I just knew that they wanted to - pretty much - silence the whole effort. Anyone speaking out: that was how they were going to treat them, moving forward. Including myself. (Barbaro, 2022)

Derrick continued to help organize the movement. He recalls how, after the memo was leaked, he received emails:

> . . . from people from all over the country - Amazon workers, non-Amazon workers, that just want to help advocate as well. (Barbaro, 2022)

In the weeks that followed, demonstrations took place at Amazon facilities across the country, with protesters holding placards stating, "we stand in solidarity with Chris Smalls," and "we stand in solidarity with JFK8" (Author interview).

Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, an activist group of workers who since 2018 had been organizing thousands of workers in walkouts and petitions protesting lack of climate action, also joined the cause in response to the leaks and the firing. Co-leader Emily Cunningham reflects on how they became aware of the palpable fear for their lives that exposed warehouse colleagues were feeling, and this prompted a desire to help.

> When warehouse worker colleagues asked us for support to get better coronavirus protections, we knew we had to do something. Warehouse workers are putting their lives on the line and are under real threat right now. We have to do all that we can to support workers on the frontlines, now more than ever. (Palmer, 2020b)

It was a sense of anger relating to the inequalities they perceived, as well as the fear experienced by workers, that prompted Emily and colleague Maren Costa to help. Each reflected on the vast difference between their treatment as white-collar office workers who were paid to work from home, and that experienced by warehouse colleagues when the pandemic began; when cases emerged in warehouses and some workers opted to stay home, "they just send more bodies in." This was, Emily was reported in CNBC as saying, simply unacceptable.

Maren and Emily promoted a petition among Amazon colleagues in support of JFK8 staff. They organized a webinar for 16 April that would feature Amazon warehouse workers from around the

globe discussing their employers' pandemic response, with activist and author Naomi Klein as guest speaker. After sending the invitation out on the internal mailing lists on 10 April, both Maren and Emily were fired (Paul, 2020).

Three days later, on 4 May 2020, news broke that a Vice President of Amazon Web Services, Tim Bray, had resigned in protest of the treatment of Chris Smalls and other whistleblowers within the organization. In a blogpost, Bray (2020) detailed the very different treatment of workers in Amazon's warehouses, and white-collar executives like him who had been allowed work from home and were generously provided for by the company. In the end, he noted, whistleblower retaliation, racial and gender discrimination drove his resignation:

> The victims weren't abstract entities but real people; here are some of their names: Courtney Bowden, Gerald Bryson, Maren Costa, Emily Cunningham, Bashir Mohammed, and Chris Smalls. I'm sure it's a coincidence that every one of them is a person of color, a woman, or both. Right? (Bray, 2020)

Tim's blog was shared on social media, and in turn cited in media articles and in a letter from nine US senators calling for Amazon to clarify the company's discipline and termination policies regarding workers who raise health concerns (Zaveri, 2020). The hundreds of comments under the blogpost, mostly supportive, are an indicator of the digital amplification this action triggered.

By now, pressure was intensifying from external parties showing solidarity with Chris and whistleblowing colleagues. Formal letters calling for his reinstatement came from Senator Bernie Sanders, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and many others who earlier spoke up on social media. As she had promised, Attorney General of New York State Letitia James began legal action (Weise, 2021). Many of these supportive actors would prove important in the efforts by Chris Smalls to advocate on behalf of Amazon workers through the formation of the Congress of Essential Workers and later the Amazon Labor Union, which he went on to do (Alter, 2022).

Backfire theory depicts valorization as the elevation of a dissenting subject by emphasizing their fit with valued social roles. Here we see more at play. Devaluation of Chris occurred by depicting him as a rule-breaker, and as dangerous. As such, he was deemed illegitimate as a speaker: his speech was not valid nor trustworthy. Drawing on extant studies of whistleblowing reprisal causing subjects who engage in transgressive speech to be considered "impossible" (cf. Kenny, 2018), a counter-dynamic of recognition can be mobilized to restore their status as worthy and valuable truth-teller (Munro, 2017). Here we see the dynamics involved, from discursive strategies such as the BBC's and New York Times's profiling of Chris as exemplifying courage and integrity, to symbolic actions including Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez's and Senator Sanders' social media posts, or Attorney General James' inclusion in speeches, and relational dynamics including the warmth and solidarity offered by supporters rushing to his side. Valorization is the extending of recognition, to counter reprisal deeming the whistleblower invalid.

In just over 3 weeks, we witnessed the rapid escalation of backfire, the exposure of internal devaluation and the galvanizing of outrage countering planned reprisals. Our case demonstrates how allies can play a critical role in bearing witness to, and amplifying, aggressive reprisal specifically through valorization countering devaluation. We rarely have access to the "inside" of how disclosures emerge; hence this case is instructive. The backfire that resulted sheds light on our extant understanding of whistleblower reprisal, discussed next.

Discussion

Our aim was to expand our understanding of whistleblower reprisal to encompass resistance to it. Whistleblowers are more vulnerable to reprisal when the wrongdoing disclosed is

likely to elicit a serious reaction from the public, for example in life-or-death situations (IBA, 2018; Lewis, 2008), or where a disclosure is likely to embarrass an organization damaging its reputation (Near et al., 2004). Moreover, retaliations worsen when disclosures focus on systemic and in-built elements of an organization's operation—exposing its entire business model as dangerous or corrupt, for example, or a core product on which all its value depends (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005). Because of the superior position of a large organization: its name recognition, its capacity to engage both PR and legal help where a whistleblower often cannot, and its access to files, emails and other sources of potentially damaging information about a worker's history, organizations like Amazon can normally expect orchestrated smear campaigns to gain public traction and negate a whistleblower's claim (Mueller, 2019). Here, however, the campaign backfired. Evidence of this backfire was clear in how Amazon's attempts to inhibit outrage failed to gain traction. When Amazon moved to counter Chris's claims of unfair dismissal, the information shared about specific quarantine dates and worker safety policy appeared to fall on deaf ears. Subsequent attempts at a choreographed PR response by executives appeared as mere robotic "cutting and pasting" of each other's social media posts. It appears that commentators largely refused to engage with Amazon's counter-narrative, apart from a cursory mention; thus, the firm's denials were effectively immobilized.

Analyzing how this occurred, we see the devaluation-valorization dyad works as a mechanism by which backfire can amplify resistance. It operates to interrupt and then reverse the corporate strategy of whistleblower isolation and de-legitimation. The backfire resulting from publicizing a series of personalized attacks, when they are perceived as both racialized and unjust, exponentially increased audience support for the dissenter. Whistleblower reprisal reversal consisted of three specific moves.

Capitalizing on emergent and unintended consequences: First, the use of emergent and unintended consequences of retaliatory acts. Chris and Derrick's creative and surprising responses to racist attacks were examples of these. A shock firing was immediately utilized by Chris as a story for the media, while news of racist speech was turned around and used to his advantage, echoed soon after by his colleague Derrick. Scholars show how racist speech infused with beliefs in racial inferiority and rooted in the historical oppression of certain groups, are generally interpreted by those targeted as "persecutory, hateful, and degrading" (Bohonos, 2023: 608). In an innovative counter-move, Chris externalized his interpretation, deeming it to be yet more evidence of structural racism at Amazon, and returned it publicly to the attacking employer from whence it came. "That is the stigma," he explained to the *New York Times* journalist interviewing him. "That is how they try to stigmatize us. We are not smart enough to be on the same level." The short period of reprisal reversal we highlight here showed numerous examples of rapid counter-responses to errors on the part of the employer, giving Chris and colleagues an unusual advantage.

Front-staging hidden prejudice: We also see the front-staging of hidden racial prejudices in a manner that galvanized public support. Since the 1960s, racist ideology and practice in the US has shifted toward a more ostensibly "color-blind" form, involving more subtle practices of "smiling face" discrimination than previously overt displays, yet ultimately justifying continued racial inequality in terms of market-based or cultural terms rather than the biological or moral arguments of the Jim Crow era (Bonilla-Silva, 2022: 2). It appears to have been in such a context that the racialized sentiments against whistleblower Chris emerged. Upon speaking up, whistleblower Chris was subject to an internal strategy to ostracize him, apparently deploying racist tropes presenting him as "not smart or articulate," as a source of "risk," and as engaging in "arguably illegal" conduct. In this case, however, the covert element of reprisal was fundamentally disrupted, with the violation of private, "backstage" organizational spaces and the resulting outrage, enabled by leaky digital

infrastructure. An existing sense of outrage was amplified exponentially by the rare glimpse inside the organization afforded by these disclosures. Revelations of prejudice drew significant numbers of new supporters to the workers' cause. It sharpened the picture for onlookers, elevating the dissenter as victim of hate speech and thus doubly-worthy of support. Chris's disclosure became at once a scene of resistance to organizational inequality when positioned as an instance of "David versus Goliath" for example through the protesting executives' emphasis on the underlying inequity evident in white-collar versus warehouse workers' treatment, but also an instance of racial discrimination, tied up with the wider "Black Lives Matter" movement that would emerge in the months that followed. It was no longer a question of standing up for the whistleblower, Chris's persona represented two forms of injustice. As Tim Bray declared, it was by now "clear to any reasonable observer that they were turfed for whistleblowing . . .. Every one of them is a person of color, a woman, or both." It was the unexpected disruption, or front-staging, of racial prejudice that foiled the attacks against Chris.

Rapid escalation through leaky digital networks: As a third point of analysis: the digital apparatus in place enabled the inadvertent sharing of normally secret documents including memos from an executive meeting at the highest level, later followed by HR personnel communications. The escalating intensity by resistant parties within the firm including climate activists and a protesting Vice President of Web Services was publicly on show, as voices normally contained inside a corporation leaked out in inadvertent information spills. While leaks have always been a feature of corporate life, digital methods of transmission whether via camera phone, email or on social media, have made such exposures both easier and faster. In the rapid valorization of Chris countering devaluation tactics, outrage was fueled by passionate and rapid exchange enabled by digital platforms. In the instantaneous circulation of news about this case, it was the shared pain, anger and empathy coalescing around the whistleblower and his utterance that drove the movement forward. Photographs of Chris, a powerful black leader in "urban" dress, appeared alongside discussion of his subjection to racist attacks and were rapidly shared. Intense outrage expanded and sharpened through ongoing circulation along various digital pathways bringing together previously disconnected concerned individuals (Papacharissi, 2016), who suddenly found themselves compelled to act and support (Döveling et al., 2018). These demonstrations of support were, in turn, amplified through repetition enabled by social media and blogs. On these platforms, commentators used stark, frank language to make their points in defense of Chris. Rather than protecting workers, the firm simply "send(s) more bodies in" as Emily noted, while Tim Bray was explicit in stating these were "actions I despise." Moreover, in using his blog to repeat the names of the whistleblowers, Tim engaged in affective refrains, urging further online repetition and ongoing circulation of the feelings engendered by the simple act of naming, setting the scene for affective spread of ever-sharper critique.

In these ways, digital reverberation enabled this whistleblowing disclosure about a life-and-death crisis to become "more than itself," and quickly, as supporters from Senators to Attorney Generals rallied to the cause: all within the space of 2 weeks. This amplification meant Chris and his colleagues encountered a rapidly-enhanced level of connectivity, reaching others and expanding far beyond the local scene in which workers suffered unchecked vulnerability to a deadly virus. Chris's credibility was strengthened in this flurry of enthusiasm for the issue. In nonviolent resistance struggles, third-party audiences, who are concerned but not directly involved in conflict, are powerful brokers of moral salience influencing the balance of power (Martin, 2007). Our framing shows how they were reached, and engaged. Overall, a critical element of backfire was the digital reverberations and leaky affordances shaping whistleblower valorization on the part of supporters. Finally, the role of the media in this cannot be overstated: in each aspect of reprisal reversal the support of mainstream media was pivotal.

Contribution

Bringing these three elements together, we propose the emergent concept of reprisal reversal, with implications for extant scholarship on whistleblowing. Scholars tend to conceive of reprisal as determined and debilitating from the perspective of the whistleblower, but we offer an alternative. We contribute to extant understandings of whistleblower reprisal by demonstrating the utility of a reprisal reversal framing, specifically the devaluation-valorization process within this. We know that assemblages of supportive parties are critical for effective parrhesia (Munro, 2017). Extant whistleblowing scholarship describes how affective recognition can re-position of the whistleblower as valid and legitimate (Kenny, 2019; 2024). Building on this, we show how this represents valorization contributing to reprisal reversal. Reprisal reversal can comprise: capitalizing on emergent and unintended consequences, front-staging hidden prejudice and rapid escalation through leaky digital networks. We acknowledge that this framing is propositional and emergent; our adopted method of interpretive re-signification aims at developing new understandings and concepts for future studies to take forward.

Our second contribution is empirical: elucidating the role of race, and specifically racist devaluation, in whistleblower reprisal. Martin (2007) details how devaluation of critics, as a tactic of minimizing outrage, can operate by drawing on pre-existing stereotypes that exclude certain out-groups (see also Van Portfliet, 2022). Yet to date, the operation of racialization as part of whistleblower reprisal has remained under-explored. Our case showed how outrage was amplified through a backfire effect of devaluation and valorization involving racialized depictions of a whistleblower. These insights are inextricable from the peculiarity of this setting, the US in 2020, and particularly New York, in which specific logics of race and racism persist. The experience of Amazon warehouse workers during the recent pandemic shows how organizations engage in life-threatening practices that are differentially applied depending on the category of worker. Executive decisions were taken about whose lives were valued most, and whose were not, with race already shaping these decisions prior to Chris's disclosing (cf. Islam, 2022). As a result of the virus, new inequalities emerged as pre-existing ones became amplified (Shymko et al., 2022). Thus, racial inequality—structural and institutional—was a resource "lying around" to be deployed as an apparently easy way to devalue this discloser. Ultimately, this account of a parrhesiastic disclosure shows up how executives at Amazon prioritized profit during this period of rapid expansion for the firm, over the safety of black and brown frontline workers (cf. Banerjee, 2008), and how prejudice relating to these bodies was intentionally deployed as a means to silence dissent. Racialization provided both the means of devaluation but also the impetus for backfire through valorization as anti-racist protest. While they cannot be assumed to apply elsewhere, studies of market capitalist societies in Europe and its former colonies including the US, increasingly highlight the subtle persistence of debilitating racialization (Bohonos, 2023; Prasad, 2023).

Can reprisal reversal be orchestrated? For practitioners involved in whistleblower advocacy, the orchestration of public campaigns that amplify disclosures, work to discredit counter—claims by aggressive employers, and offer support for whistleblowing workers, are recognized tactics. In assessing the practical contribution of contextual framing to these activities, we first acknowledge the importance of context. The chain of events following Chris's disclosure saw him garner unprecedented levels of support: from civil society actors, politicians, lawyers, journalists and even senior Amazon colleagues previously unknown to him. But these events occurred against a backdrop in which—due to the widespread lockdowns of early 2020—digital communications dominated, including social media platforms known for intensifying affects including outrage (Hemmings, 2012; Pullen et al., 2017). Moreover, anti-racist outrage as part of whistleblower valorization, for

example, was undoubtedly intensified by racialized tropes deployed at a time when US society was particularly attuned to racial injustice during the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Finally, backfire requires a perception of a clear injustice on the part of a receptive audience (Martin, 2007). Amazon's size and reach made it particularly vulnerable to this, while the sharpened moral sensitivities on the part of a public trained on differential exposure of individuals to COVID-19 during March 2020 played a key role. Thus, reprisal reversal is by no means a given. Anti-whistleblower smear campaigns are normally much more effective for the employer engaging them and, in this case, it is easy to see how an alternative outcome might have emerged. A powerful and well-connected organization, in the absence of in advertent digital leaks, might have convinced influential others to come to its aid and join the devaluation of the whistleblower, resulting in hostility or at least indifference to Chris.

With that said, we argue that awareness of the capacity to capitalize on unintended consequences, and within this, to publicly foreground the previously hidden nuances of whistleblower devaluation (whether racial, gendered, or otherwise), alongside the novel affordances of new digital spaces for sharing information and seeking support rapidly, stands to benefit practitioners in this area. It is important to recognize how aggressive tactics such as whistleblower devaluation can backfire, and how the audience watching on can play a key role in this, through bearing witness to aggression and amplifying the disclosure, effectively valorizing the whistleblower and strengthening their subject position. We own that our focus is narrow, on a single case study, but propose that our in-depth analysis gives a rare insider glimpse into an unfolding organizational scenario. We look forward to future research examining backfire effects in the multitude of other possible parrhesiastic scenes. For example, we acknowledge that media framings may differ in different media outlets, influencing backfire, and we welcome studies examining these differences.

This case was not straightforward. Chris gained a platform, yet his frank accounts of what happened sometimes appeared self-defeating. He described in an interview how he had intended to leave Amazon soon anyway, because he was not being promoted because of his race and his activism in the area of workers' rights (Author interview). He was open about giving exaggerated numbers of colleagues walking out, to the media—a kind of manipulation of the amplification potential of the situation that, it might be argued, was occasioned by the increasing media saturation of potential audiences for outrage. Finally, Chris later went on to publicly clash with unions and politicians who offered support that was, in his view, insufficient (Linebaugh, 2022). Yet the force of the perceived backfire his parrhesiastic utterance precipitated, appeared to render these aspects inconsequential, and perhaps further enhanced support for this, clearly human, activist leader.

In close, whistleblowing scenes remain critical sites of social and political activism (Munro, 2017; Olesen, 2019). Supportive journalists and editors working with whistleblowers are critical in today's environment of unprecedented media consolidation and decline in press freedom in many parts of the world, including the freedom to report serious wrongdoing. Yet the creation of support for a whistleblower's disclosure is famously difficult. Different parties have multiple agendas and commitments at any given time (Van Portfliet and Kenny, 2022), a challenge for solidarity networks more broadly (Fleischmann et al., 2022). Meanwhile SLAPPs and other legal tools are increasingly used to silence disclosers. Understanding counter-strategies is thus increasingly important, particularly if we wish to imagine a more hopeful future in which critics of wrongdoing gain an effective voice.

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