



Invitation for an *ephemera* workshop on:

## Speaking truth to power? Theorizing whistleblowing

**Organizers:** Kate Kenny and Meghan Van Portfliet

**Date:** 14 December 2016

**Location:** Queen's University Belfast

This workshop explores the relation between whistleblowing and forms of organizational power, and with critique. With the shocking revelations of Snowden and Wikileaks, and news of Manning's mistreatment in custody, whistleblowing is a 'hot topic' in news debates. Even so, public perceptions of whistleblowers are rife with ambivalence; for some they represent 'traitorous violators' of a code of fidelity to their organization, suspicious figures who reject their obligations of loyalty to the employer, and dangerous tellers of secrets. Others view whistleblowers as heroes: martyrs to the cause of transparency and openness and the veritable 'saints' of today's secular culture (Grant, 2002).

Where is organization theory in this? Specifically, how can we conceptualize the variable ways in which whistleblowing intersects with, challenges, and/ or reinforces structures of power and domination in today's organizations? Organizational research into this area tends to be somewhat a-political, evaluating whistleblowing in terms of whether predefined rules defining employee disclosures have been followed. Studies in the field range from predicting the likelihood of whistleblowing occurring in a given organizational setting (Bjørkelo et al., 2010; Miceli, 2004), and creating typologies of motivations for why people speak up, to studying whistleblowing as an ongoing

process rather than a one-off event and examining the kinds of retaliations and personal impacts that organizational whistleblowers suffer (Alford, 2001; Glazer and Glazer, 1989). Such approaches are valuable indeed for enhancing our understanding of whistleblowing as an experience, but where the focus is explicitly upon micro-level issues such as retaliation, motivation and personal impacts, there is a tendency to ignore the wider political and cultural context in which they occur.

Some scholars have explored the relation between whistleblowing and power, seeing the former as a type of organizational resistance (Martin, 1999; Vinten, 1994; Rothschild and Miethe, 1999), as caught up in societal discourses of domination (Perry, 1998), or as an instance of Foucault's parrhesia (2001), in which the whistleblower risks all in the process of speaking 'truth to power' (Contu, 2014; Andrade, 2105; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016; Wildavsky, 1979). These examples notwithstanding, issues of power and domination are somewhat absent from extant literature in the field and as a result our theories of whistleblowing and its relation to organizational power are somewhat anaemic.

These omissions are important; academic research can shape public and policy debates and thus has a tangible impact on people's lives (see for example ACCA, 2016). The ways in which whistleblowing is conceptualized within such research is therefore important to examine in depth, to critique, and to develop further where possible. This is particularly relevant in light of changes in the context of whistleblowing in the past five years, in the US, Europe and beyond. Many NGOs now campaign for and with whistleblowers. Regulators solicit whistleblowers to approach them, while legal professionals seek them out for business. We see a new form of journalism that brands itself as the facilitator of whistleblowing, in the form of Wikileaks (cf Panama papers and LuxLeaks). These shifts might represent sources of support for whistleblowers, but might also lead to their enmeshment in dynamics of power and domination even beyond the context of the organization in which they have blown the whistle (i.e. media pressure, party politics, and so on, see for example how NHS whistleblowers have been incorporated into campaigns protesting the privatisation of the NHS).

Against this background, the *ephemera* collective will host a workshop on **14<sup>th</sup> December 2016** at Queen's University Belfast. The focus is upon the possibilities and limitations of theorizing whistleblowing in relation to power along with the ethical and political consequences of this.

The event will be free to all participants by registration.

### **Confirmed speakers and preliminary program**

10.30-10.45	Welcome
10.45-11.45	Richard Weiskopf and Paul Zimmermann 'The construction and regulation of truth-telling in the discourse of anti-corruption: the example of Transparency International'
11.45-12.00	Tea and Coffee
12.00-12.30	S. Hilary Anne Ivory, 'Teasing the Minotaur from the labyrinth: Mytho-poetic analysis of the social experience of a handful of medical whistleblowers'
12.30-13.00	Randi Heinrichs, 'Who can play the Game of Truth?' Issues of power and consequence in the whistleblowing-cases of Edward Snowden and Anonymous'
13-14.30	Lunch
14.30-15.30	Wim Vandekerckhove and Marianna Fotaki, 'Whistleblowing as truth-telling?: Parrhesia in organization theory'
15.30-15.45	Tea and Coffee
15.45-16.30	Discussion and close
Evening	Dinner and Drinks

**Venue:** Old Staff Common Room, Lanyon Building, Queen's University Belfast.  
See here for a map: [http://ewh.ieee.org/r8/ukri/cis/Newsletters/QUB\\_Map%20-%20showing%20venue%20for%20DL.pdf](http://ewh.ieee.org/r8/ukri/cis/Newsletters/QUB_Map%20-%20showing%20venue%20for%20DL.pdf)

### **Organization and contact**

This ephemera workshop is hosted by the Queen's University Belfast Management School. To participate please let Kate (k.kenny [at] qub.ac.uk)

know that you would like to join. The venue is located at Queen's University Belfast.

### **Accommodation in Belfast**

Malone Lodge: <http://www.malonelodgehotelbelfast.com>

Dukes: <http://www.dukesatqueens.com>

Holiday Inn Express: <http://www.hiexpressbelfast.com>

Harpers: <http://harpersbelfast.wixsite.com/harpers-boutique>

And lots of places on AirBnB

Some other suggestions: <http://visitbelfast.com/stay-in-belfast/accommodation>

### **references:**

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Andrade, J.A. (2015) 'Reconceptualizing whistleblowing in a complex world', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 128: 321-335.

Bjørkelo, B., S. Einarsen and S.B. Matthiesen (2010) 'Predictive proactive behavior at work: Exploring the role of personality as an antecedent of whistleblowing behavior', *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83: 371-394.

Contu, A. (2014) 'Rationality and Relationality in the Process of Whistleblowing: Recasting Whistleblowing Through Readings of Antigone', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(4): 393-406.

Foucault, M. (2001) *Fearless speech*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

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Glazer, M.P. and Glazer, P.M. (1989) *The whistleblowers: Exposing corruption in government and industry*. New York: Basic Books.

Grant, C. (2002) 'Whistleblowers: Saints of secular culture', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 39: 391-399.

Martin, B. (1999) 'Whistleblowing and nonviolence: Activist paradigm', *Philosophy and Social Action* 25: 5-18.

Miceli, M.P. (2004) 'Whistle-blowing research and the insider: Lessons learned and yet to be learned', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 13(4): 364-366.

Perry, N. (1998) 'Indecent Exposure: Theorizing whistleblowing', *Organization Studies*, 19(2): 235-257.

- Rothschild, J. and T.D. Miethe (1999) 'Whistle-blower disclosures and management retaliation the battle to control information about organization corruption', *Work and Occupations*, 26(1): 107-128.
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- Wildavsky, A.B. (1979) *Speaking truth to power: The act and craft of policy analysis*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Willmott, H. and R. Weiskopf (2013) 'Ethics as critical practice: The Pentagon papers, deciding responsibly, truth-telling, and the unsettling of organizational morality', *Organization Studies*, 34(4): 469-493.