



The battle for the whistleblower: An interview with John Kiriakou

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abstract

Whistleblowing, or speaking truth to power, is complex. How truth telling is shaped is an important issue, as is the legitimacy of the individual who speaks out. Both the person who blows the whistle, and the disclosure itself, may be framed differently depending upon the agendas of others. This is further shaped and complicated by the various mediums through which disclosures are made. In what follows we present an interview with CIA whistleblower, John Kiriakou, and discuss its implications for theories of whistleblowing including those drawing on the concept of parrhesia. This case demonstrates the complexities involved in establishing a voice and gaining legitimacy amid contemporary forms of media, alongside the effects of this for the whistleblower.

Introduction

Who is allowed to speak up? Our interview with John Kiriakou, a U.S. *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) whistleblower, illustrates the battle for legitimacy that often characterises a whistleblowing struggle. Despite what we might imagine and indeed wish it to be: a simple tale of an ethical hero telling the truth; whistleblowing can involve complex battles over how this truth is told and by whom. Different versions can be used to variously celebrate or denigrate the teller. This forces many whistleblowers to be strategic in managing the ways both they, and their stories, are received. While perhaps appearing calculative to outside observers, it is often an unpalatable necessity of surviving as a whistleblower as we have found elsewhere (Kenny, 2019). The act of ‘speaking truth’ is by no means straightforward (Perry, 1998).

While this has always been the case, the difficulties experienced by today's whistleblowers in making their claims heard are heightened in an era of ubiquitous news and competing media agendas. John Kiriakou's story exemplifies this. His interview speaks to current debates around the ambivalence with which society often views whistleblowers: as both heroes and traitors. It paints a vivid picture of how it is to blow the whistle on serious, systemic and deep-seated problems within government agencies today, in a world in which attempts to speak up are necessarily mediated through many diverse channels both online and off, and are subject to a range of influences from powerful actors. If, as many organisational theorists claim (Andrade, 2015; Jones et al., 2005; Kenny, 2019; Mansbach, 2009; Rothschild, 2013; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013), whistleblowing can be seen as an act of parrhesia – speaking truth to power – then stories such as John's helpfully problematise the challenges of gaining an audience for such acts. We interpret John's account of the messy reality of speaking truth to power in an online and mediated world, as an illustration of how the space available for whistleblowing disclosures can be reshaped, the struggles to achieve this, but also the power of vested interests in this process.

'The torture whistleblower'

John Kiriakou is often described as the only person in the United States to be charged with a crime in relation to that country's policy of torture against suspected terrorists, but his 'crime' was to speak publicly about it. In 2007 he gave a TV interview on the CIA's so-called enhanced interrogation programme, thus confirming its existence. Sentenced to 30 months in prison, his treatment was seen as having a chilling effect on other would-be whistleblowers. Those he claims to have engaged in forms of torture, remain insulated from scrutiny and law.

Having begun working with the CIA as an analyst during the Cold War, he became Chief of Counterterrorist Operations in Pakistan after September 11, 2001. Offered training in 'enhanced interrogation techniques' – what is now confirmed as torture under international law (UN General Assembly, 1984) – John describes how he rejected this, having been uncomfortable with witnessing the implementation of the practice post 9/11. Leaving the CIA in 2004, he did not publicly speak about the programme until 2007, when he confirmed in an ABC News interview that torture was implemented systematically, as policy, in U.S. counterterrorism operations.

The Justice Department then concluded that he had committed no crime in speaking up, but five years later the CIA requested his case be reopened under the Obama administration, which was actively cracking down on official leakers and whistleblowers. Originally charged under the Espionage Act, John was charged with revealing names of CIA employees along with sharing classified information with the media, thus violating the Intelligence Identities Protection Act. In 2013, he accepted a plea deal admitting guilt to one count of the latter, in the hope of avoiding the lengthy prison sentence threatened by the US Department of Justice. All other charges were dropped. John was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, not for his disclosure regarding torture, but for speaking to a journalist about a fellow CIA agent and naming him, despite that others in the intelligence community claim this to be common practice for former agents who write books, advise Hollywood producers and serve as sources for reporters (see *Judicial Watch v U.S. Department of Defence*). Critics of John's believe that his disclosures regarding torture are an invalid form of whistleblowing, as he initially did not condemn the interrogation programme in public. Others claim he intentionally leaked his colleague's name in an attempt to raise his own public profile (Coll, 2013). In many circles however John is celebrated as a hero for his important disclosures and his continued work towards ensuring free speech (Blueprint for Free Speech, 2018).

The following interview was carried out by the first author as part of a research project examining whistleblowers' experiences of survival after their disclosure, including the costs of speaking out.¹ This research finds that genuine whistleblowers who no longer work in their organisation and whose names have become public as a result of their disclosure, suffer serious financial and personal hardships and receive little support from society despite performing a vital public service.

The interview

Alexis Bushnell (AB):

One of the things we seem to always see is that people really can't rebuild their career in the sector they were in. So I am wondering what you're doing now.

¹ The research is funded through an ESRC Transformative Grant undertaken by Professor Kate Kenny, Professor Marianna Fotaki and Dr Alexis Bushnell.

John Kiriakou (JK):

Yeah. That's a great topic. The bottom line is that none of us [intelligence sector whistleblowers] will ever work in our fields again. We're sort of blacklisted for life. When I got home [from prison], I got a job in a progressive think tank here in Washington – *The Institute for Policy Studies* (IPS). It was a temporary thing because, as you might imagine, like any progressive organisation, they are constantly broke... They make their money on \$20 and \$50 donations from poor people. So they gave me this job as a visiting fellow just to help me get back on my feet again. I was only making minimum wage. I did that for a year while also writing a weekly column for readersupportednews.org, which I also still do... I left IPS after a year. Then for six months, all I had was this weekly column, which only paid me \$400 a week. Finally, the Russians called me. It was the *Sputnik News Agency*. They said that they wanted to offer me my own daily radio show – two-hour show – during the evening drive. I was extraordinarily reluctant to do it. I'm a patriot and also I came of age in the CIA during the Cold War. To work for the Russian government is just something that never in a million years did I ever think that I would do. But nobody is beating down the door to offer me work [...]. So I took the job. I actually like it a lot and I like the people I work with. It's not the first choice of jobs that I would have made but I am fortunate to have it.

AB:

What do you think their motivation was for offering you the job?

JK:

I'm controversial and newsworthy and I speak my mind. I've taken on the government, so to speak, and they like that. Just the fact that they hired me was newsworthy.

AB:

I assume that it's nowhere near what you were making before all of this happened.

JK:

No. It is, I'm going to say, two-thirds of what I was making. And like I say, thank God I have that weekly column, too, because that supplements it. Right now, I am making what I was making 10 years ago.

AB:

Ok. I know you had mentioned in a few different platforms that you spent somewhere around \$50,000 for your pleas in court.

JK:

I ended up running up a bill of \$1,150,000. I gave [my attorneys] \$50,000, which was all I had, and then I raised another \$20,000. That was it. That was all I ever paid them...

AB:

Did any of the whistleblower support groups in [Washington] DC prove to be forms of support?

JK:

Yeah, one did. And one actively avoided me. The Government Accountability Project, which is where Jesselyn Radack was at the time, they embraced me. Honestly, I couldn't have got through it without Jesselyn. She's not a criminal defence attorney, but she was my only outreach to the press, to the media. I couldn't speak to the press but she sure could, and she did on my behalf. One of the things that the government does is it just leaks constantly and it gets its side of the story out there so that it can taint the jury pool. And you [a private citizen] normally can't do that, because you're not supposed to speak to the press and they say it can be used against you. But at least I had [Name] planting stories at *Huffington Post*, *Washington Post*, *Politico*, *New York Times*, and I got a fair shake at the media that way.

AB:

Do you feel that the media mediated or controlled your story at all?

JK:

By and large, I feel like I got screwed by the media but not for lack of trying. The media have their own agenda. You can try to offer up a convincing position, but that's not to say they will always buy it. I ended up getting some really great coverage from the *New York Times*, including an editorial calling for the president to pardon me. Then I was ignored by the *Washington Post* – just ignored. The *Washington Post* was the only major outlet that referred to me as 'CIA Leaker, John Kiriakou'. Every other outlet called me, 'CIA Torture Whistleblower, John

Kiriakou'. Not the Post – I was always 'CIA Leaker'. Politico was hostile. But then I just got fantastic coverage from the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. They were really supportive. It was these hometown outlets [Washington, DC] that really did me in... They characterise me as an irresponsible leaker... I'll tell you who finally really helped me out was [Name] at CNN. She called me one day and said, 'I'm reading these articles and it's like the mainstream media is just not recognising what it was that you did. They're just focusing on the fact that the information was allegedly classified'. I said, 'Yeah, and misclassified as far as I'm concerned, because it is illegal to classify a criminal act. I believe that torture was a criminal act'. So she had me on her morning show the day before I left for prison. They identified me at the bottom as 'CIA Torture Whistleblower' and then on the ticker, it kept saying 'Whistleblower John Kiriakou speaks out against torture'. So she really helped me. Once she's set the tone and changed my moniker from 'leaker' to 'whistleblower', almost everybody else fell into line. I have one beef with [another network TV host] – I had been on her show a number of times – [she] refers to me this way: 'John Kiriakou, who fancies himself a whistleblower'. Can you imagine saying something like that? So her producer called me about a year ago and asked me to be on the show again and I said, 'Are you out of your fucking mind? I will never ever be on your show again. You guys have shown me disrespect that even the right-wing media hasn't shown me'... I'm a regular on Alex Jones' *InfoWars* because all they want me to do is talk about the Deep State and bash Obama, which I am perfectly happy to do, even though I am pretty solidly 'left'... Frankly, we end up using each other... if he [Alex Jones] wants to talk to me about rule of law and respect for UN-negotiated treaties, I'm happy to do it. And at the same time, he wants me to criticise Obama and Eric Holder [former U.S. Attorney General]. Again, happy to do it because Donald Trump is not the one who [...] and sent me to prison. So at the same time, I used him to reach an audience that I otherwise would never have access to – never. I've become something of a libertarian. I consider myself actually to be part of what is called 'the Libertarian Left'. It allows me to criticise the National Security State and the Justice Department, and to do it from the left but in a way that's appealing to the right. You understand what I mean?

AB:

How can you reach the moderates and people on the left if it's not through mainstream media?

JK:

That's the hardest part. The way I have been able to do it – and, I think, successfully – is to continue writing. [...] So that's what I do. I have written two books about it. I won the PEN First Amendment Award for it – one of the four top literary prizes in America. My weekly column; I would say easily 50% of the columns that I write are about judicial reform, sentencing reform, prison reform, corruption at the Justice Department and the FBI, stuff like that. God knows, the information is out there... I usually get picked up by other outlets, too. About a quarter of the articles that I write, I will get calls from National Public Radio (NPR) stations around the country asking if I will come on their shows, which I always, always say yes to... It's turned out that that's my 'in' to moderate Middle America – NPR.

AB:

Have you used social media? And what do you think about that?

JK:

Yes. I never really paid much attention to social media before I went to prison. When I went to prison, I had about 425 Twitter followers. My cousin ran my Twitter feed while I was in prison and he was a real Twitter nut. So I came home with 30,000 followers, including every national security journalist in Washington. [Describes how he assisted a political candidate by refuting false claims being made by his rival.] I tweeted it and Facebooked it. I have 30,000 on Twitter and 3,800 on Facebook. Immediately, the calls started coming – *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*. It was crazy. I gave all these interviews. I said, 'This actually has re-legitimised me'. Right after that, I started getting calls from CNN: 'Can you come on at two o'clock and do the show? Can you come on at six o'clock and do the show?' And I always say yes. I even posted something on Facebook to my private page saying, 'Looks like the legitimisation of John Kiriakou has begun, because instead of being asked to be on Iranian television, now I'm being asked to be on CNN again'.

AB:

Do you get any regular people reaching out to you?

JK:

All the time. Literally every single day.

AB:

What are their perceptions of you and your disclosure?

JK:

Universally, that I did a public service... I've gotten thousands and thousands of emails through my website and I have never got a single troll or nasty complaint or anything, nothing like that, nothing... It opens up this whole new world of support that I just never knew existed... I have Daniel Ellsberg to thank for that, too. Dan told me early on that ever since he went public with the Pentagon Papers, he has been broke. He said he has just been financially ruined since 1970 and he said, 'This is the thing – when you decide to turn whistleblower, you ruin yourself financially for life'. And by God, I was determined that that was not going to be me. I was not going to let this ruin me.

AB:

Did you talk to Daniel Ellsberg much? Did you become friends?

JK:

Yeah. All the time. I just talked to him yesterday, as a matter of fact. He's been a great friend and mentor to me, something I will always treasure.

AB:

What did you think about the documentary, *Silenced*? How did you think it went?

JK:

It did me such a service. It's *Silenced* that really informed people about my situation. We were very reluctant to do the film in the first place. [Name] called early on in the process and said, 'There's this documentary filmmaker. He was nominated for an Academy Award last year and he wants to follow you for the year as you go through this experience'. [...] And I'm so glad I did because it got such great coverage. It's still on Netflix, it's on Amazon, it's on iTunes, it's everywhere. A guy wrote to me the other day and said he saw it on the plane. He has really done me a great service, Jim Spione [Director of *Silenced*]. And then on top of that, it was nominated for an Emmy for Best Documentary. We have become good friends. [...] I've got emails from people as far away as Kazakhstan because of *Silenced*. People saw it all over the world.

AB:

Were there any other forms of media or encounters with media that you had?

JK:

[Describes an invitation offered by a mainstream TV host, after a mutual acquaintance requested it] ‘Yeah. Tell him we will treat him like a king.’ So I went up to New York and they did treat me like a king, first class train travel, they gave me a \$500 tab at a Greek restaurant right by the Rockefeller Centre, a limo picked me, took me to the studio and then she eviscerated me on national television... I was blindsided.

AB:

I wonder why she took the position that she did. Was it her own personal thought that you are awful or was she asked to do that?

JK:

Honest to God, I have no idea because I really thought it would be positive... [Regarding being asked for an interview with another journalist, by a mutual friend] I said, ‘Thanks...I’m not interested. I’ve been so screwed by these people so many times I just can’t’. He said, ‘I’m telling you he’s going to give you a fair shake. You want this because you want something positive to build on so you can ask for a pardon’. So I reluctantly – and as it turns out, stupidly – agreed to speak to [the journalist...]. He comes down to the house. He spends a couple of days with us. He follows me around. He talks to the attorneys. Then I go to prison for a month and the article comes out... and he just kills me... Just killed me. So now I do it on my own terms. Unless you’re some obscure blogger or podcaster, I’m not going to rehash old stuff. If you want to talk about rule of law, I’ll give you an interview. If you want to talk about corruption in the Justice Department, happy to talk about it. Or we can talk about contemporary stuff: terrorism, intelligence policy, CIA reorganisation. Otherwise, I’m done talking about my *ABC News* interview in 2007.

AB:

Ok. Do think that you could ever get a job in the Intelligence Community in America again or not?

JK:

No. Never in the intelligence community. I will say that I have been in touch with a couple of companies, serious major global companies. You know what it is? It's *Silenced*. This... company CEO saw *Silenced* on a plane and sought me out and found me. We've had half a dozen conversations and he wants to bring me into the company as the corporate spokesman. So that would actually be more money than I have ever made in my life. But we're not quite there yet; we're still talking. I think once the legalities are set aside, yeah, I think I can make a comeback financially – but not in the intelligence community, never.

AB:

What was your experience of prison like?

JK:

I thought I was going to a minimum-security camp and they screwed me when I got there. The judge had ordered that I go to a minimum-security camp and when I arrived, they took me to the actual prison. I said, 'No, no, I'm supposed to be at the camp across the street', and the guy laughed at me and said, 'Not according to my paperwork, you're not'. So it took me five days to get access to a phone. I called my attorney and I said, 'Hey, they put me in the actual prison with the paedophiles... and the drug kingpins. What do I do?'. He said, 'Oh my God, we could file a motion but it will be two years before we get a hearing and you will be home by then. You're just going to have to tough it out'. So I decided that I'm going to fall back on my CIA training and I am going to do anything and everything that I needed to do to protect myself. And I got this book written.

AB:

Was it quite regimented in there? Are you on schedules?

JK:

Yeah, it was regimented; it was violence. Everything that you see and hear on MSNBC at 11 o'clock at night when they run those prison shows: it was as bad as you think.

AB:

Did your identity change at all through all the years of this going on?

JK:

Sure, absolutely. [The CIA] made me a martyr for human rights and civil liberties.

AB:

Are you ok with that?

JK:

Yeah, I embrace it. [A senior member of] the CIA tweeted at me a couple of days before I left the prison... He said, 'Don't drop the soap, asshole'. So I gave myself a few hours... And I tweeted back at him and said, '[Name], I am on the right side of history and you are not'. I left it at that. I'm not the one that committed crimes against humanity and war crimes. I can sleep at night with what I did.

AB:

Have any legal groups or international lawyers or anyone come to you about the crimes against humanity or about the torture – prosecuting the people involved?

JK:

A couple of times, they have. I have addressed the European Parliament twice. In May, I flew to Germany to meet with Angela Merkel's national security advisor on torture issues. So in Europe I am this big star where I meet with senior political figures in Western Europe, and here I cannot get a job at Target, which is literally true.

AB:

Did you apply for positions at places like Target?

JK:

Yeah. Sure.

AB:

Besides the Inspector General, do you think there's any way that people can actually do anything about whistleblowing claims in the intelligence community?

JK:

Not really. That's really the \$64,000 question right there because look at Tom Drake.² Tom Drake is the perfect example of someone who did it exactly the way you're supposed to do it. He went completely through his chain of command: National Security Agency, Department of Defence, and then he went to the Congressional Oversight Committees and they charge him with nine felonies, including seven counts of espionage. It's irrelevant that the case eventually fell apart. What is relevant is that he did everything the way he was supposed to; everything legally, and they completely ruined him. They ruined him. He'll never make a comeback – he's working at the Apple Store for all these years... That's what they set out to do. They set out to ruin you, to make you an example for anybody else who is considering blowing the whistle: 'You see what we did to Drake? You want the same thing to happen to you? You see Kiriakou went to prison? You want to go to prison too?'

AB:

Do you think that this is sort of a coordinated playbook; that they already know exactly what they're going to do if people come out [disclose corruption and abuse] to the public?

JK:

Absolutely. I told Ed Snowden the same thing: 'Don't come home. The fix is in.' Actually, his dad came to visit me in prison to thank me. He asked me what attorneys he should hire. I said, 'Hire my attorneys. They're the best ones'. And he did. So I was able to get messages back to him. I said, 'Don't come home unless you have something called an 11 C1C deal'. That means that your plea and your sentence are written in stone, because what they are going to do is you're going to come back and you're going to think you have a deal and you're going to stand there in the eastern district of Virginia, which is the 'Espionage Court', that's what they call it, and you are going to plead guilty thinking you have a deal and they're going to put you in prison for the rest of your life. And you have no recourse and you're going to die in there. That's what they want to happen. So don't come home.

2 Thomas Drake is a former NSA senior executive and whistleblower who exposed what he believed to be illegalities committed by the NSA. He was charged under the US Espionage Act and ultimately these charges were dropped.

AB:

How were you able to communicate with Edward without being caught? In this whole atmosphere of big data and surveillance, how is it possible?

JK:

Yeah. We do it through mutual friends who pass the messages back and forth and the messages are not in writing. Literally anything can be intercepted. We have mutual attorneys. We have a couple of mutual friends who go back and forth and visit him. I just passed my messages through them.

AB:

I see. Do you think there are young drone operators [and others in the Intelligence and Defence Community] who see abuse happening and want to address it? Have you seen any of the millennial generation?

JK:

Yeah... I actually met some drone operators who had left the military and had gone home. [They] sought me out after a speech... a couple of years ago, saying that they had the same concerns, that they were ordered to fire a rocket and they refused because there was a child standing there next to the target. The commanding officer said, 'It's not a child, it's a goat. Fire'. And he said, 'I'm telling you. I'm looking at the screen. It's a child'. And he refused to fire and was dishonorably discharged for it.

AB:

Are they coming out at younger ages? [Previous National Security whistleblowers] were obviously at retirement age.

JK:

Yeah, I think so. It's not people who have been in for 15 or 20 years. It's the young people, and they're going to be the people that will lead this debate... We're in this new, bizarre world, though, where everything is a felony under the Espionage Act. That's thanks to Barack Obama. It's Barack Obama that set that standard – that any contact with the press should be prosecuted through the Espionage Act... They even put it on the 2012 campaign website, that they were cracking down on leakers and using the Espionage Act to make sure that people respect their secrecy agreements. But they are bragging about this.

AB:

Do you think there is any way that that would be rolled back under a Trump administration? Or do you think he's concerned?

JK:

No, I don't. I've written about this too. The Espionage Act was written in 1917 to combat German saboteurs during the First World War. It's never been updated. It doesn't even mention classified information. It mentions national defence information because the classification system wasn't even invented until the 1950s. But no one's ever defined what 'national defence information' is. So the government – the justice department – can easily use the act to crack down on dissent because none of these things are defined. The problem is on Capitol Hill, you don't win any new votes by rewriting the Espionage Act and you don't get any new PAC money by rewriting the Espionage Act. So no one messes with it. If you do rewrite the Espionage Act, you're going to be accused of being weak on traitors and spies. Nobody's going to do it.

AB:

Well thank you so much for talking to me. I know I've taken up a lot of your time. Would you mind if I follow up with you in the future about some of this?

JK: You're welcome. Oh, no, not at all. Feel Free.

Discussion

In what follows, we reflect on this interview in light of what we have learned to date through organisation studies of whistleblowing. It is important to note that this is an extreme case; John Kiriakou was a U.S. intelligence whistleblower. This means he was in a particularly vulnerable position. Intelligence whistleblowers have weaker legislative protections and a more ambivalent public profile than those in other sectors. Even so, we believe that John's story sheds light on other examples of whistleblowing. Specifically, it illustrates a weakness in how we currently understand whistleblowers: scholars underestimate the difficulty of gaining a platform for engaging in public debate, and sustaining it in the face of powerful opposition.

This lacuna may relate to the recent influence of Michel Foucault's ideas on parrhesia in scholarship on organisational whistleblowing (Jack, 2004; Jones et al., 2005; Mansbach, 2009; 2011; Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012). A

parrhesiastes is one who embodies an act of brave speech that is designed to instigate change. For example in the case of a philosopher: ‘when a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and more than that, also takes a risk’ (Foucault, 1983: 4). The *parrhesiastes* is thus one who speaks truth to power, and who risks his life to do so. In Foucault’s earlier writings, this figure necessarily holds a ‘legitimate’ position in Ancient Greek society – as a philosopher, an honorable citizen or a recognised teacher (Foucault, 2005), or as an advisor to the monarch who has been tasked with speaking truth (Foucault, 2010). As Foucault later notes in his second Collège de France lecture held in 1984, the development of the Greek polis and democratisation in relation to this, saw *parrhesia* become, in theory, the right of every citizen. It is this position that enables him to engage in brave speech of this kind, and that requires others to listen even if they disagree or find themselves threatened by the words. In other words, the speech uttered by the person occupying this subject position is not censored, because they are perceived to be a valid, legitimate, speaking subject (cf. Kenny, 2018).

Today, then, the concept of *parrhesia* is increasingly influential in how organisation scholars view whistleblowing (Andrade, 2015; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). It is a compelling theory for this purpose not least because it frames whistleblowing as an attempt by someone of a relatively low status in a power hierarchy to disrupt the status quo by speaking the truth as they see it (Contu, 2014; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). It invokes a view of whistleblowing as ‘at once an act of resistance and an act of integrity’ (Rothschild, 2013: 656), that is, something to be proud of. Moreover it highlights how this ethical act is embodied by the speaker – they ‘come into being’ as *parrhesiast* through their speech – it is thus a lived practice. A *parrhesia* lens enables scholars to view the whistleblower as a political subject attempting to achieve positive change; it thus helps to counter the famous ambiguity that accompanies speaking truth to power, where some perceive whistleblowers as heroes, others seeing them as traitors (Jones et al., 2005; Mansbach, 2009; Rothschild, 2013). However, until now the whistleblower tends to be idealised as an extraordinary hero rather than a real human in need of assistance, in scholarly work on the topic (Brown, 2017; Kenny, 2019).

John Kiriakou spoke publicly about the CIA’s programme of enhanced interrogation, the techniques of which have been universally condemned as torture. He told the American public what he saw as the truth regarding this CIA programme: that it existed and was systematically applied to terror suspects. This contradicted official government accounts. John challenged the moral integrity of

a powerful state through his statements in the public sphere, and thus attempted to create change in the context of asymmetrical power relations (see also Mansbach, 2011; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). In part, through such statements, human rights organisations, lawyers and scholars were able to confirm reports they already had on the torture of terrorism suspects carried out by U.S. state actors. The public could begin a meaningful dialogue regarding these practices and what their application means for democratic states, international law, military and ethics. In the U.S. the resulting public debate led to the technique known as ‘waterboarding’, along with others implemented as part of enhanced interrogation, being prohibited by Congress in the National Defence Authorization Act (The National Defence Authorization Act, 2016). John’s own continued practice is to engage in truth-telling of other kinds where he sees the need, through his writing and speaking. In many ways, therefore, he exemplifies what others have described as a ‘parrhesiastic whistleblower’.

But what can we learn from his account? A key aspect of parrhesia in its application to organisational whistleblowing is the idea that the speaker will be heard. The classical figure of the parrhesiastes is one who has been granted legitimacy to speak freely and frankly, either by a recognised authority or by his status as citizen. Either way, they occupy the subject position of a valid speaker. Without this legitimacy they are merely speaking into a vacuum and the political impact of their statement is lost. John’s situation is different. For him, an audience is neither automatic nor stable. Rather he is embroiled in an ongoing battle to gain and sustain legitimacy: to be seen as a person whose speech is deemed to be valid. We see how some players attempt to de-legitimise him and his truth, even as others provide a platform for his story. We see the shifting and ever-changing landscape in which different sources offer and withdraw support. Against a complex backdrop of political debate around national security and torture, in John’s case the truth is both contested and political (Foucault, 1997; see also Munro, 2017), as is his own position as whistleblower. Reflecting other studies of whistleblowers, the role of media in his struggle is crucial (Fotaki et al., 2015; Kenny et al., 2018a; Kenny, 2019). For John, financial and political interests on the part of those owning particular news outlets influence where and how his story is told.

As a whistleblower, his very subject position – who he is perceived to be – is caught up in wider networks of influence that determined whether he should be seen as a valid speaker or not. At the time, powerful actors dictated official discourse around the CIA’s practices: what could and could not be said about this organisation. Torture practices were carefully ‘re-framed’ (Butler, 2009) as interrogation techniques, for example, with the purpose of legitimising and normalising these. The media presentation of John’s case focused on whether

the documents he described were classified or otherwise, rather than their contents. He transgressed these official accounts, and for this reason, his own position was deemed unacceptable. By calling out his organisation's practices as torture, and as illegal, John upset the dominant narrative and therefore his very self was excluded from what was considered to be an acceptable speaking subject (Butler, 1997, see also Kenny, 2018a; Kenny et al., 2018b). To achieve this, he was reframed through the use of different labels to describe him ('torture whistleblower' in some cases, 'CIA leaker' in others). As he notes, such terms really do 'set the tone', changing how he is perceived and whether he is listened to. This demonstrates the power of framing discourse that prescribes who 'counts' as legitimate whistleblower, and who does not – John was presented as a mere leaker of classified information and a person who broke the law in so doing.

The consequences of framing are not simply linguistic or discursive however. As we see, where frames are disrupted this can have serious material implications for the disrupter. His act of speech – which transgressed the official framing – invited what Butler terms 'normative violence' (Butler, 2004). Cast out in this way and presented as an 'impossible' figure excluded by official channels from engaging in public debate on issues relating to his case, he became the recipient of various forms of aggression through his act of disruptive speech resulting in financial precarity and his own incarceration.

Returning to contemporary scholarship on organisational whistleblowing including studies drawing on the concept of parrhesia, we find that they can downplay the difficulty of reaching an audience that will listen (see also Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012). Studies often imply that courage, and the acts it prompts, will be enough. But speaking truth to power necessarily involves legitimacy – 'validity' – as a speaking subject. And this often comes with struggle. Parrhesia is therefore a more vulnerable and contingent practice than often implied in the literature. Against a backdrop in which the whistleblower has little public support, its very emergence will be subject to powerful interests capable of framing certain debates, along with vulnerability to the normative violence that can ensue.

But contra to many accounts depicting whistleblowers as simply victims, John's story highlights the ways in which he resists the framing imposed upon him. He was engaged in a battle over his own name. He describes how, to opt out of a continued fight to be heard, across different media including books, social media, TV and radio, is to risk losing control of his story. Unlike many whistleblowers, John is keenly self-aware of how he is perceived. We see his attempts to strategically manage the narrative through contemporary forms of

social and alternative outlets. We see the bittersweet nature of this, for example, in his mistreatment by journalists he trusted (see also Kenny et al., 2018a). We see the essential role of others in his struggle in other whistleblowers including Daniel Ellsberg and Edward Snowden whose stories, shows of support and practical advice are invaluable. In all of this however, John stresses persistence, noting that if he speaks about his story continually, it will be his version of events that remains in the public imaginary; his 'side of the story will be the side of record'.

Finally, we note that John's narrative highlights the less-articulated but vital issue of material supports for speaking out, and the often grim necessity of trying to make ends meet. We have found in our research that this is often an area of struggle that whistleblowers can themselves downplay, for fear of being stigmatised in a world that equates legitimacy with social status (Fotaki et al., 2015). Whistleblowers often struggle financially and thus their ongoing attempts to make their claims heard can be tied up in the messy reality of trying to find ways to supplement income as John's work for controversial news outlets suggests. Perhaps his very material vulnerability contributes to his enrolment in wider international political dynamics, as he is sought out by Russian channels who wish to draw on his status as critic of the US for their own aims. It also appears to enroll him in corporate America, through for example the offer of work by a 'major global company', to act as a spokesman and make 'more money than I have ever made in my life'.

Concluding thoughts

Whistleblowing is often complex and rarely pretty. We might wish the stories of society's truth tellers to be straightforward tales of heroes that struggle to bring the plain truth to the attention of the public, albeit that they suffer many obstacles to achieve their ultimate goal of righting serious wrongs. But clinging to such fantasies is both simplistic, and unfair. The odds are frequently stacked against those who attempt to break from the norms of their organisation and transgress implicit rules of silence. Reprisals against known whistleblowers are common, blacklisting is a frequent occurrence and the devastating impacts on the lives of whistleblowers: their health, finances, relationships and careers, are well-known. To counter this, whistleblowers often find, early on, that the truth is simply not enough. The articulation of truth necessarily involves continual strategies of managing one's image, refuting counter-narratives, and of engaging with media in an instrumental fashion, as for example John has done. John's story certainly shows the complex and myriad reshaping of space for speaking out (Nayar, 2010) enabled by new forms of mediation today (Bachmann et al.,

2017; Munro, 2017). Against this backdrop, the battle for the name of the whistleblower continues. In this battle, however, the 'balance' of power appears weighted in favour of the well-resourced organisation and its capacity for influence over legal processes and communication channels (Alford, 2001). Today society offers little support for whistleblowers that attempt to inform us about grievous wrongdoing in their organisations. And this needs to change (for how this can be achieved see <http://www.whistleblowingimpact.org>).

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