



Wikileaks: Truth or power?

Meghan Van Portfliet

review of

Avila, R., Harrison, S., and Richter, A. (2017) *Women, Whistleblowing, Wikileaks: A conversation*. London: OR Books. (PB, pp. 127, £12, ISBN 978-1-682191-16-3; EB, £8, ISBN 978-1-682191-17-0)

Introduction

With the recent arrest of Julian Assange – on charges related to a computer hacking conspiracy, and not the charges of sexual assault and rape that fuelled the original Swedish international arrest warrant – the insights of *Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks* are more relevant now than ever. In their conversation mediated by Wikileaks journalist Joseph Farrell, Renata Avila, Sarah Harrison and Angela Richter – all women with ties to Assange and his work – reflect on a wide range of pressing questions, such as: is the internet a means of diminishing inequality in the world, or just another tool for the powerful to control and dominate the poor and/or uneducated? Do we live in the digital age, where information on everything from history, to current world news and even diplomatic cables is available right at our fingertips? Or is information filtered by companies such as Google and Facebook, or by journalists working for large media outlets? Is giving up our data a fair price to pay for access to this knowledge? And is the information we are getting in return pure? By discussing how knowledge can be used for emancipation but also for domination they weave in and around the many issues that whistleblowers face in this new media age.

Rather than seeking answers, *Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks* brings the expertise of three digital human rights activists from diverse cultures and areas of expertise – a Guatemalan human rights lawyer, a British journalist, and a Croatian-German theatre director – and explores the ‘movement for online freedom of information, transparency, accountability, journalism and the protection of privacy’ [97]. In conversation they discuss the nuances and complexities that surround how society consumes information, what limits are placed on access to information, and how personal data is one of the costs of consumption. A wide range of topics are critically discussed, with each woman providing their insights gained from experience and expertise in their respective field and background. For example, in Chapter 1, the authors discuss how the spread of information on the Internet sparked their political activity. The emergence of Wikileaks was a defining moment for Richter and Harrison, but Avila traces her inspiration back to the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, when a group of armed peasants rose up against an oppressive regime and used the Internet to expose their situation to the world. In Chapter 2, the authors then reflect on the role of the media in spreading ‘facts’ or ‘truth’ and how Wikileaks changed this by providing uncensored information to everyone, allowing for ‘localized interpretation’ of information that would otherwise be inaccessible to many.

In Chapters 3 through 6, the discussion weaves around the idea of an ‘online movement’. The authors reflect on how the Internet, by providing everyone with instant, equal access to knowledge is a great tool in combating some of the social inequalities that exist, but also how this tool, through tactics like privatization and mass surveillance, is also a weapon being used to limit access to knowledge. The role that journalists play in exposing or limiting access to information arises, with the example of Edward Snowden and Glen Greenwald being used: Snowden provided his information to journalists that then decided what was relevant, ultimately publishing small portions of the documents they were given. The authors contend that because the information was released through journalists, and not in bulk to the public, government agencies were able to step in and convince journalists that some information was ‘too sensitive’ to release. This leads to a discussion of concerns over how closely the government is working with big technology companies, and how powerful companies like Google and Facebook have become by providing access to user data. The women deliberate on not only how individuals do not have control over their own data, but that often the poor and/or marginalised groups lack full access to the internet and instead rely on free platforms – like Facebook Lite – and therefore lack access to unbiased information. The result is a prioritization of western news and culture, as this is the context that the private companies in control of access emerged in.

Chapter 7 returns to discussion of Edward Snowden – his status as traitor or hero, contrasting his journey and motives with that of Chelsea Manning, and in Chapter 8, Harrison reflects on the time she spent with Snowden in the airport in Moscow. Chapters 9-15 cover a later meeting between the authors, one year after their initial gathering, and the women review their ideas – particularly around mass surveillance – after a series of terrorist attacks rocked various cities in western Europe in 2015 and early 2016. They are critical of the weight that the discourse around national security has been given, and how governments and technology firms have become even more intertwined. They end their second discussion by reiterating that the change necessary to ensure transparency, accountability, and protection of privacy relies on action – and that inaction on the part of the people that are being exploited is the most dangerous course.

Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks is not an academic text, but a transcription of a conversation, but the insights that are touched on in resonate with literature on organizations and whistleblowing. To situate the book in the extant whistleblowing and organizational literature and, specifically, this special issue, I consider it in context of the three themes that make up the title, working my way backwards from Wikileaks to Women.

Wikileaks

Of particular relevance to this special issue on speaking truth to power is the discussion of the many ways that information, let alone whistleblowing, is mediated – by the media and by organizations like Wikileaks – but also how information is suppressed – in the name of national security, or by algorithms embedded in Google and Facebook that filter what information is available to the layperson. The privatization of knowledge by these mega-tech companies has led to ‘truth games’ (Foucault, 2007) where knowledge lies in the hands of large powerful tech companies, and increasingly, governments that align with them under the guise of ‘national security’. The control over knowledge by these organizations means that they are better able to assert their ‘truth’ and in doing so they limit the power of individuals and citizens to do this for themselves. Wikileaks, then, is an example of one way to resist this censorship of knowledges, as it provides un-censored access to information that would otherwise remain accessible only to the few.

While Wikileaks has been explored in the context of legal studies and media studies (e.g. Benkler, 2013; Brevini et al., 2013; Fuchs, 2011; Nolan and Hadley, 2011; Sangarasivam, 2013), the research on the implications such projects can have for organization studies is limited. Notable exceptions are Munro, who has

explored Wikileaks as a ‘networked parrhesia’ – a collective speaking truth to power – (2017) and as a tactic of resistance in power relations (2016); Logue and Clegg (2015), who have explored it in relation to politicized labelling in organizations, and Kaulingfreks and Kaulingfreks (2013) who have put it forward as an example of a way of organizing without hierarchy or management. In *Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks* the conversation never quite gets around to how organizations can learn or benefit from the type of unrestricted access to knowledge that Wikileaks provides, they certainly provide a critique of such projects and how they can be co-opted by those in power under the guise of protecting the layperson. In this way, they point to empirical examples of how this new form of resistance is resisted by those that stand to lose out – those in positions of power – and how it, as well as the Internet in general, can be a tool in what Munro (2017) calls, with reference to Foucault, ‘the politics of truth’ – legitimating a narrative that is presented as neutral, but is in actuality still controlled by those in power. They also point, however, to the necessity of these projects, and the necessity of expanded access to knowledge in general, pointing out that ‘localization’ of knowledge is as beneficial to the larger society as it is to the individual, helping those affected to make informed decisions and understand what certain information means *for them*, and this sentiment is easily translated to organizational life.

Whistleblowing

The authors’ conversation also touches on several important points of debate in the whistleblowing literature as well. Richter comments in her foreword that ‘it now only takes one person to stand up to their power. If just one person reveals a few truths that are obvious to everybody who wants to see and hear them, the scheming is over’ [4]. This echoes the recent academic work that has likened speaking up to Foucault’s (2010) concept of parrhesia – where the whistleblower risks it all in order to speak the truth (e.g. Kenny, 2018; Mansbach, 2011; Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012; Weiskopf and Tobias-Mirsch, 2016). In their discussion of Snowden, the ambivalence of attitudes towards whistleblowers is discussed briefly, with Harrison asking, ‘Is Snowden a “traitor” or a “hero”’ [69]. While all three women support Snowden and his disclosures, they note that the public is not always as accepting.

An idea that is not well covered in the whistleblowing literature is found in the discussion of the media’s role in whistleblowing disclosures. In particular, the authors highlight how Snowden’s disclosure was mediated by Glenn Greenwald, and how Greenwald, due to pressure from the United States Government, held some key information back. Most studies on whistleblowing present the media as

a neutral recipient of disclosures – a channel of releasing whatever information the whistleblower wants to make public – with little discussion of the potential that journalists have to dominate both whistleblowers and the public in that they are both able to choose which stories to publish and which to suppress, and they are in control of the narrative. This view of journalists as on the side of domination, rather than on the side of resistance illustrates how not only whistleblowers, but also journalists as recipients of disclosures are political actors, susceptible to influence and power structures in the wider society.

Women

Despite the title, and the absence of a gendered aspect in whistleblowing research more generally, *Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks* mentions very little about gender. This is surprising, given that in the foreword, it is stated that the purpose of the book is to bring women together to discuss ‘an area of activity that is widely perceived as heavily male dominated: whistleblowing and digital dissidence’ [2]. Later in the same section Richter reflects that:

It’s been striking to me that, in my years of working on digital activism, from Wikileaks to a diverse range of internet groups, women are active and hold important positions, yet are seldom prominent. ... It stems, in part, from the unwillingness of mainstream media to appreciate and fairly report the role of women in digital activism. [3]

In other words, women are active in the world of whistleblowing and digital dissent, but they are hidden from view, according to Richter, by the media. Avila echoes this view at the end of the chapter when she comments: ‘I think women in the world of digital dissidence play key roles as leaders and dissenters, but that sometimes [they are] less visible as compared with men’ [64]. For Avila, this hidden work of women is not always a bad thing though, as she reflects: ‘In one way, ironically, it’s kind of fortunate that their role is downplayed within their own community and dismissed by their governments, because that actually gives them greater room to act’ [64].

These are striking points, which unfortunately are not elaborated on further – these two excerpts are the only references to the topic in the book. This is unfortunate as these points are ones that are missing from studies in this area more generally. Whistleblowing research that explores the experiences of those that speak up tend to present a gender-neutral figure. Indeed, even research that explores the role of the recipient of whistleblowing disclosures tends to overlook the gender dimension. The result is that women have been effectively written out of whistleblowing research, and while neither Avila, Harrison or Richter are

whistleblowers outright, their close ties to Assange and Snowden, as well as their in-depth familiarity with the journey of Manning provides ample opportunity to discuss this aspect in detail. The conversation they have focuses mainly on ‘marginalised groups’ more generally, with ethnic minorities getting most of the attention in this space.

Conclusion

This book, overall, articulates key issues that are facing organizations and whistleblowers today – how access to knowledge (or lack thereof) influences which truth gets told, making both organizations and those that speak up about wrongdoing political actors and susceptible to influence by powerful others. From Zapatistas to Edward Snowden, disclosures are not just made, they are mediated – by the media, by technology, and by truth games that play out in everyday life. The conversation that the authors have touches on areas where whistleblowing research would benefit from further exploration: journalists and their impact on whistleblowing narratives, the impact of gender on whistleblowing journeys, and how full access to information is key to ensuring that all individuals are able to have self-determination. In short – *Women, whistleblowing, Wikileaks*, urges us to stop and think about our everyday practices, and what we can do to ensure future generations are better able to speak truth to power. It is a book that anyone interested in power, media or whistleblowing will find relevant and insightful.

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the author

Meghan is a PhD student at Queen's University Belfast. Her research interests are whistleblowing, advocacy groups and recognition, and she plans to continue her research in these areas after she graduates in December 2019.

Email: mvanportfliet01@qub.ac.uk