



# Narrating the stories of leaked data: The changing role of journalists after Wikileaks and Snowden



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 17 February 2017

### Keywords:

Mass media  
Whistleblowing  
Journalism  
Media discourse

## ABSTRACT

Traditionally, investigative journalists had a gatekeeping role between their confidential sources of information and the public sphere. Over the last two decades and with the arrival of new media, this role has been undergoing changes. Recent cases of whistleblowing, such as WikiLeaks and Snowden, illustrate how contemporary media allow individuals to release data directly to the global audience. This raises the question of how recent leaks affect how journalists operate.

In this study we compare how *The Guardian* covered two cases of whistleblowing which are commonly referred to as WikiLeaks and Snowden. We analyze how access to leaked data is provided or facilitated on *The Guardian* website, how readers are invited to interact with these data and how journalists present their own activities. A qualitative analysis of the leading articles further shows how the stories are framed and how much prominence is given to the data and the various actors.

The results show how the roles of journalists shift from gatekeeping to data management, interpretation, contextualisation and narration. Journalists may no longer be needed to publish leaked data but they are still needed to tell the stories of leaked data.

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## 1. Introduction

In June 2013, a major leak by whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that most communications over digital networks were accessible to the US secret services. The surveillance was carried out through access to large scale information technologies controlled by multinational corporations (e.g. Microsoft, Google, Facebook, Apple), which are beyond the control of localized jurisdiction. It soon became clear to the public that the US, who had accused other countries of spying and hacking their computers, had been using the central position it holds for having created the internet to its own advantage, turning this global communication infrastructure into a sort of global panopticon (Sullivan, 2014; Zuboff, 2015). This revelation sparked an unprecedented international debate about digital surveillance in contemporary societies. It also led to a range of political consequences, including tensions between the US and other countries. Not least, it raised fundamental questions concerning the roles of journalists in such emerging societal and power configurations. Traditionally, journalists used to have the role of gatekeepers who control how much information

from their sources is passed on to the general public. This role is challenged today, when individuals can leak information online without relying on journalists as intermediaries. This leads us to our research question, which is: How do contemporary forms of online whistleblowing change the role of journalists as intermediaries between data and the general public?

Against this broad background, we present and discuss the case of how one newspaper, the British *The Guardian*, covered part of these revelations. *The Guardian* had an active role in both the WikiLeaks and the Snowden cases by being granted advance access to the leaked data prior to their public release. In addition, *The Guardian* had already taken a leading role in establishing new models of data journalism before these two whistleblowing cases, for instance by launching their data blog in 2009 (Rogers, 2013).<sup>1</sup> This makes *The Guardian* a perfect focus for studying how new modes of releasing leaked data go hand in hand with new roles for journalists and new forms of reporting. We will study these innovations through a qualitative analysis of the content and function of the articles that were published on *The Guardian* on the two stories.

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<sup>1</sup> The first big story on *The Guardian* data blog was launched on 31 March 2009 and dealt with MPs' expenses. See <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2009/mar/31/mps-expenses-jacquith> (last retrieved on 14 June 2016).

## 2. Mass data: whose stories?

### 2.1. Open participation and media bias

It has long been acknowledged that objectivity in news reporting is an unattainable ideal. On the macro-textual level, the selection, omission and framing of news events is driven by the aim to maximize the news values of a story, which can lead to bias (Galtung and Ruge, 1973); Cohen and Young (1973) even use the expression “the manufacture of news” in the title of their collected volume. In a similar vein, Bell (1991: 147) makes the point that “[j]ournalists do not write articles. They write stories.” He calls journalists “professional story-tellers of our age (1991: 147) and points out the structural similarities between personal narratives and news stories (1991: 147–155). News values determine the structure and content of news stories and thus help journalists to tell their stories in a way that appeals to the audience (Bell, 1991: 155). However, if the need for audience appeal is taken too far, it can lead to misreporting and distortion of facts (Bell, 1991: 216). At a micro-textual level, various linguistic devices have been identified that can create bias in news texts (e.g. Fairclough, 1988, 1995; Floyd, 2000; Fowler, 1991; Locher and Wortham, 1994; Stenvall, 2008, 2014; Wortham and Locher, 1996). In addition, it has been pointed out how the practices of text production are closely interwoven with organizational structures and economic interests (e.g. Czarniawska, 2011; van Dijk, 2008, 2009).

Citizen journalism maintains that open participation rather than professional journalism would rebalance the bias of large media by watchdogging the elites (Allan, 2013). Recent years have seen an increase of user-generated content in journalism and lay people’s data production has been challenging current forms of journalism (Boczkowski, 2004; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, 2013; Bruns, 2005, 2016; Conboy, 2004; Landert, 2014a, 2014b; Lewis, 2003; Newman et al., 2012; Ostertag and Tuchman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2009; Wardle et al., 2014; Wardle, 2016; Wardle and Williams, 2008). Indeed, nowadays moderating and editing content produced online by ‘crowds’ has become a central part of the work of journalists: user-generated content contributes significantly, directly and indirectly, to influential news publications. For instance, by the time reporters arrive at war or disaster sites, plenty of information and pictures are already available by those directly affected (Allan, 2013). Dutton (2009) argues that internet-based communication allows the consolidation of a ‘fifth estate’, i.e. bloggers, social media and online reporters, as distinct from the fourth estate (which refers to the press and mainstream media in general) and counterbalances its inequalities. Resonating with the ideal of an open cyberspace confronting large conglomerates that WikiLeaks in 2006–2013<sup>2</sup> appeared to have revived, Brevini et al.’s (2013a) volume emphasizes the prospects of transparency and free flow of information in contrast to secrecy and dominance of the few. Their tone is well-exemplified in the opening of the book: “Transparency and open access to information are the only real pressures on governments to remain true democracies.” (2013: xvi). This enthusiasm for openness and democratization for every niche of society that the arrival of the World Wide Web promised (Poster, 1995; De Kerckhove, 1997) has since been curbed by revelations of global surveillance.

<sup>2</sup> We refer to this period because later developments of the WikiLeaks case, especially concerning the US presidential campaign in 2016, showed how its openness may have been exploited by Russian government to influence the US electorate.

### 2.2. Whistleblowers and journalists

The fourth estate has always relied on non-journalist informants; anonymous sources have always been central for investigative journalism. Whistleblowers have often found support and resonance on the press and news media. So, if an open democratic public sphere remains chimerical, and if investigative journalism has always been part of the fourth estate (Benkler, 2011), what new can we learn from the recent wave of whistleblowing? The traditional role of journalists used to be gatekeeping. They were in charge of and responsible for deciding what information to make accessible to the public and how. With the help of platforms like WikiLeaks, contemporary whistleblowers can engage in a different way with the public opinion by making information public and taking the frontstage, without relying on journalists as intermediaries. With contemporary media, access to information is faster and less restricted to the extent that professional journalists are constantly challenged by competing sources. In this context, the recent cases of whistleblowing have transformed the established balance between frontstage and backstage maintained by journalists (see also Flew and Liu, 2011).

The relation between WikiLeaks and traditional media journalists is characterized by ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand, the relation is mutually beneficial (see Dunn, 2013). For journalists, the documents that are leaked on WikiLeaks can provide valuable material for news stories that otherwise would remain untold. At the same time, for WikiLeaks, the coverage of the documents in traditional media is crucial for achieving political impact. Without reports in major newspapers, most of the documents published on WikiLeaks would remain unnoticed by the general public, which is why WikiLeaks actively seeks the attention of journalists (Dunn, 2013; Lynch, 2010: 311). In addition, WikiLeaks makes use of the infrastructure of established media organisations for the analysis of the raw data they receive (Brevini and Murdock, 2013: 49; Lynch, 2013). On the other hand, the ethos adopted by WikiLeaks stands in contrast to the established principles of investigative reporting in a number of crucial points. Ethical concerns that have been raised include the limited options of independent verification of the information (Lynch, 2010: 314) as well as the lack of redaction of leaked documents, which has been argued to have endangered lives in some cases (see Benkler, 2013: 24). This leads to various tensions between journalists and WikiLeaks.

Lynch (2010) describes these ambivalent attitudes during the early years of WikiLeaks. Her study is based on public reports by members of the WikiLeaks collective and on a survey among reporters. Members of the WikiLeaks collective are described as being frustrated with the perceived lack of press response to certain leaks and the fact that mainstream journalists do not grant enough authority to their analyses (Lynch, 2010: 312). One point that is of particular relevance to the present study is the claim that some of the documents received little attention from journalists because they were difficult to understand (Lynch 2010: 312). At the same time, the attitudes of journalists toward WikiLeaks varied greatly in Lynch’s survey. Some of the journalists used the site regularly or at least occasionally as a valuable source for news stories, while others said that they had only come across the site during an ongoing investigation of a story. One of the greatest benefits journalists saw in the site was its use as a repository for leaked documents, especially in cases in which journalists come under legal pressure to keep them from publishing leaked information (Lynch, 2010: 315–316). Overall, Lynch concludes that “Wikileaks has been only partly successful at appearing credible and newsworthy in journalists’ eyes” (2010: 315).

Lynch’s (2010) study reports on the early stages of the interaction between WikiLeaks and traditional journalism, during a time in which the general public had relatively little awareness of the

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