



EXPLOITING MORALS

The Relationship between Whistleblowers, the
Government and News Media in the US

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Abstract

This paper looks into the relationship between the United States government, its news media and federal whistleblowers. A case study of Edward Snowden, an intelligence whistleblower who leaked information about the NSA, is central to the question if and how the news framing of a whistleblower is affected by the relationship between the government and news media. In order to determine what the answer to this is, articles from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have been analyzed and discussed in the broader context of theories regarding transparency, traditional functions of the news media and government control, amongst others. Most importantly, it is researched whether Snowden was portrayed in a specific news frame by the *Times* and the *Post* and whether Snowden himself applies a specific frame to how he presents himself and his cause to the public.

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Introduction

Recent whistleblower affairs have showcased the aggressive, condemning attitude of the United States concerning the leaking of classified information. Individuals who come forward with classified information, such as Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden, face severe punishment for their acts in the form of long prison sentences. All the while, the news media have extensively covered both the leaked information and the controversial affairs. However, they have managed to do so without negative repercussions. In fact, regarding the release of classified information the government has shown a surprising leniency towards established news agencies, while utterly condemning the sources who provided the information to these agencies in the first place. This seems to suggest that the US government is more concerned about the act of leaking information than the actual leaks. As Yochai Benkler asserts in *Beyond WikiLeaks*, in relation to the *WikiLeaks* affair, “it appears as though the Administration either really did not fear disclosure, as long as it was by organizations it felt were within its comfort zone, or was using the distinction and relative social-cultural weakness of *WikiLeaks* to keep the established media players at the table and, perhaps, more cooperative with the Administration’s needs” (25). Moreover, the ongoing whistleblower affairs reveal an interesting relationship between the US government, media and federal whistleblowers. It is a relationship that appears to be beneficial to news media, but damaging to both the interest of the government and those that have blown the whistle. This is because while the three actors are reliant on each other to release and control the information, the news media are the only party to be positively rewarded and thanked for their efforts.

Insofar as the relationship between the general media and the US government is concerned, most scholars agree that “the media set the public agenda, and the role of media is to mobilize support for special interests that dominate government and society” (Willis 6). As explained in *Politics and the Press*, the news media additionally employ a specific kind of framing which directly influences the public. News framing serves to guide the selection of what is relevant news and the interpretation and evaluation of that news. The dominant framework places information that may be new to the public into familiar categories, while simultaneously promoting a particular interpretation, because of which the media are often dubbed “agenda – setting agents” (293). In addition, journalists and news agencies have the power to “agitate” people in power, institutions and public issues by “breaking embarrassing

news stories” without prior consultation and by “focusing on the conflict and differences between ideologies, organized groups or parties, and individuals” (Willis 30). Thus, journalists and news agencies appear to have a powerful, influential position in American society. However, Steven Livingstone, in *Politics and the Press*, does claim that “the media closely ‘index’ their coverage to the contours of official debate and controversy” and news organizations “leave policy framing and issue emphasis to political elites (generally, government officials)” (298). That is to say, the news media are partly influenced by the interest of the public and sometimes rely on the authority of politicians before they decide what they publish on. The book *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* authored by Timothy E. Cook takes this assertion even further and argues that the American news media have always been and still are indirectly controlled by the government, through sponsorships and subsidization.

This control has its limits, though. The government and its many institutions can obstruct investigative journalism, which is why the news are sometimes forced to work with controversial sources if they wish to fulfill their journalistic duties. In *The Media Effect*, Willis notes the difficulty journalists face when attempting to investigate a political issue “if it is cloaked in national security and/or sources just won’t talk” (47). While politicians and political institutions are eager to use the media to advance their cause, the legislative powers have also instituted several “information restrictive measures” (Willis 52). In addition, the so-called “chilling – effect”, the possibility of legal backlash after publishing sensitive information, can deter journalists from investigating certain cases (Willis 47). Therefore, news media are sometimes dependent on information provided by others in order to avoid responsibility for releasing sensitive facts and thereby the associated negative consequences of such an act. For example, newspapers can cooperate with whistleblowers who offer journalists so-called “gift-wrapped stories” that can be published without those journalists doing the research themselves (Willis 48).

In *Beyond WikiLeaks*, many authors argue that Manning, Assange and the platform of *WikiLeaks* itself are framed in specific ways by the media, which allows the latter to report without assuming responsibility, but tends to neglect the importance and motives of the sources. For example, it is mentioned how “it appears that the media organizations that were the most openly associated with the *WikiLeaks* scoops, and therefore felt most threatened, were the most critical of *WikiLeaks*” in their reporting of the affair (26). It has not been

researched whether this is also the case regarding the Snowden case and very little has been published about how Snowden was framed by the media. Moreover, because the NSA affair is so current and riddled in uncertainty, the research and theories regarding the issue are very limited as well

All in all, it can be suggested that the emergence of new, digital media and internet-based institutions such as *WikiLeaks* have altered the traditional role of news media. Considering the mutually beneficial relationship between the US government and major news agencies, these alternative sources of information are threatening the status quo. As of now, Edward Snowden has not been apprehended by the US government for alleged espionage crimes. As such, a case study of Edward Snowden, in which his relationship with the press and portrayal by the press is compared to the convicted Manning and *WikiLeaks* controversy, may provide new insights into the changing role of traditional news outlets. Whereas the Snowden affair has received little academic debate until now, the *WikiLeaks* affair has already been discussed and analyzed in some academic studies. These focus mostly on the relationship with the media and alleged government influence and examples of this can be found in *Beyond WikiLeaks*. Therefore, a case study of Snowden contrasted with the literature on *WikiLeaks*, and associated individuals, will add to the discussion and possibly affirm or contest existing theories about the news framing of whistleblowers and the involvement of both the news media and the government with whistleblowers.

The major objective of this study is whether the coverage of the NSA scandal, and the portrayal of Edward Snowden in the US media in particular, is in line with existing theories about how the media influences public awareness by framing news stories in a specific way. Analyzing the way Edward Snowden is portrayed by the US media, allows for a comparative study of whistleblower news framing and whether this is influenced by the relationship between the news media and government. In order to reach a conclusion on this matter, the text is structured in the following way. To start with, the first chapter focuses on establishing what the current relationship between American news media, whistleblowers and the US government is. It considers in what ways this relationship affects the portrayal and perception of whistleblowers and whether the news media exploit the moral conduct of whistleblowers. Moreover, chapter one analyzes the attitude of the US government regarding news media and how the news media respond to this attitude. Finally, chapter one draws conclusions about the attitude of the US government to old and new media as well as that of federal whistleblowers.

Chapter two offers an outline of Edward Snowden's life and includes an analysis of how he portrays himself in interviews. Following that, chapter three deals with how Snowden has been framed in the news by analyzing articles published by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* ranging from when the affair broke in June 2013 up until January of 2014. These two newspapers were selected because they have a history of working with or publishing material from whistleblowers and are influential, reputable news organizations which publish in print as well as digitally.

Chapter 1 – News, Politics and Leaks

This chapter outlines the current state of affairs regarding the government and the news media of the United States in relation to whistleblowers and the platform for leaks known as *WikiLeaks*. A discussion details how politics influence the news media and vice versa, what the significance and impact of news framing can be in journalism and how the transparency ideal plays a role in government, in the news media, and for leakers of secret information. This chapter also discusses the emergence of new media and how *WikiLeaks* and whistleblowers fit in this evolving landscape. Finally, it shows how the news media and government are involved in a complex relationship, in which both attempt to stay on top but is ultimately more beneficial for the news media and which seems to disregard the whistleblower's fate.

1.1 Politics and News

The media, in all of its forms, are an integral part of American everyday life. Due to its prominent presence and influence the media face heavy scrutiny in general. Despite the abundant criticism, the news media are presumed to have a very important purpose, namely to serve society. This purpose is sometimes overshadowed by elements that do not benefit the public, but are necessary nonetheless. In order to adhere to their purpose, the news media must balance different, sometimes contradictory, functions and one of these is cooperating with the government. First of all, throughout the last decades, the media have fitted a certain mold. As the scholar Bracci claims, “media ethicists in the Western tradition have generally presumed a dual function media system that ideally serves democratic as well as commercial purposes” (115). In addition, the media enjoy the rights to freedom of the press and freedom of speech in exchange for serving the public's best interest, which Bracci calls “the political rationale for their freedoms” (115). The media are given certain freedoms to ensure a democratic ideal of transparency, but they have their own goal to garner profits by informing and also entertaining their audiences. As a result, critics often note how the media are biased and overly dominant in modern society due to self-serving tendencies. For example, a news outlet may be more concerned with the number of subscriptions and readership, than providing relevant information.

Furthermore, an important aspect often attributed to the American news media is that

of being the fourth estate¹. That is to say, their primary role is to monitor whether the government successfully and justly manages the interests of American citizens. As Willis formulates it, the media are the “watchdog” and “the guardians of democracy, defenders of the faith” (138). Therefore, when important information is delivered to them, for example by a whistleblower, the press has the responsibility to publish it. Some, however, believe the opposite is true and perceive the media as “institutions who serve the rich and powerful in a capitalistic market-driven society” and according to these critics, the media’s primary function is to “control society and bring it in line with the thinking and ideals of the wealthy and influential: society’s elite” (Willis 145). Thus, the news media appear to have an influence on both public life and the state, but are simultaneously influenced by those same factors itself. The news media and journalists are very influential, but need the help and contributions of others to become so.

The news media can be considered to be a political entity because they can choose whether or not political matters will be reported on and explained to the public. The relationship between government and media is a “symbiotic” one and a “country’s mass media have a powerful effect on the way that country grows and develops” (Willis 42). Freedom of speech and the press is synonymous with democracy for most people. This is especially true for the most informative branch, namely the news media. Indeed, nations with a different political system often have a government in place that attempts to control the media. The latter is something that a democratic nation, such as the US, strongly condemns. In order to maintain an effective democracy though, “freedom of expression is not absolute but involves balancing freedom of speech against restrictions that are prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society” (Tambini 240). Naturally, this requires some form of cooperation between the press and the various forms of government. In fact, some argue that the news media have “become part of government” in the United States (Cook 86). Timothy E. Cook claims that “journalists are political actors,” because of their “principled adherence to norms of objectivity, deference to factuality and authority, and a let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may distance from the political and social consequences of their coverage” (85). He further asserts that “many studies have suggested that the political role of the news media lies in augmenting the reach of those already politically powerful” (86). In other words, the news media have political power because they are the ones who decide what political matters are presented to the public and which political actors are allocated a voice in their coverage.

Most news stories that cover political themes ultimately serve as “a critique of official power” which in itself is political, whether journalists do so intentionally or unintentionally (Cook 89). By discussing information concerning government issues and officials, journalists offer different perspectives on the information that they deem important, which allows the public to form an own opinion on these matters and provide the public the means to participate in the democratic debate. As Fallows argues, “journalists should stop kidding themselves about their ability to remain detached from and objective about public life” (260). In other words, journalists are almost never as objective as they claim or hope to be. It can be said that “they inescapably change the reality of whatever they are observing by whether and how they choose to write about it” (Fallows 260). That is to say, how a journalists frames a story and what language he uses can influence how the reader perceives it. The news industry and journalists in general possess authority over information by having the means to shape and mold it into certain forms and narratives. An effect of this is that certain events and facts may be omitted or emphasized to provide the public with what they should know, rather than simply presenting facts only. Objective reporting is thus not biased per se, but is influenced by current events and social constructions. In short, the news is political because it urges the public to concern itself with specifically selected issues, instead of all issues.

The current form of media in the United States is shaped according to certain values and beliefs, which results in biased news reporting. Nowadays, the news media are controlled by a small number of companies. In addition, they no longer appeal to all members of society, but rather choose to represent and attract specific groups in society. For example, a newspaper can be conservative and a TV news station can be liberal. Until the late 80’s the Fairness Doctrine, a policy from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), ensured that news outlets offered multiple views and contexts regarding their news coverage. However, this regulation was abolished in 1987, thereby “opening the way to partisan journalism” in the United States (Curran 23). Radio shows with a specific political agenda were created, offering news molded to an existing perspective, be it conservative or liberal. Another important job of the FCC was to maintain and control the diversity of news coverage. For example, the commission regulated how many radio stations could be owned by one party, the amount of news that had to be broadcast and such. Starting during the Reagan administration and continuing in the 90’s the control of the FCC diminished, making way for drastic changes in the American media landscape (McGuire). Reducing the power of the FCC and thus allowing

the media more freedom was supposed to result in a more competitive and objective media. However, “the relaxed ownership rules have allowed unprecedented mergers, and media companies have grown fat with influence as they have gobbled up their competition” (McGuire 703). Limited media ownership has given way to powerful, wealthy business people to use their financial means and social standing in order to promote their own values and beliefs. Most notably, this resulted in the rise of the infamous *Fox News Channel*, which is still a prominent news outlet in the present day. Although it faces scrutiny from within society, other media companies and scholars, *Fox News* remains a huge influence in the news consumption of right-wing conservatives. As such, it is an example of “the entanglement of American journalism with vested economic power” (Curran 23). *Fox News* and other news outlets with a clear political agenda are, therefore, examples of bias in the form of news framing. Now that the largest, and most influential, media companies are in the hands of just a few major players this begs the question of how objective they are and can be.

1.2 News Framing

As explained before, the main role of the media is to present to the public what affairs and events are newsworthy and crucial for people’s understanding of current society. The writer and journalist James Fallows explain this by referring to the principle “to see life steady and see it whole,” that is to say, “seeing life steady means keeping the day’s events in proportion. Seeing it whole means understanding the connections among the causes and consequences of various happenings” (47). He also claims that the real purpose of journalism is “to satisfy the general desire for information to have meaning” (129). The public does not merely want to know what is going on in the world, but also why it is happening in the first place. As such, journalists and news media in general are always obliged to add context to facts. However, the context of news stories is heavily dependent on the cultural background and political persuasion of the medium. According to Pippa Norris in *Politics and the Press* “people have cognitive schema that organize their thinking, linking substantive beliefs, attitudes and values” and these schema help people by “slotting the new into familiar categories” (275). As a result, the news media usually frame their stories according to a specific frame based on a specific set of values. A negative result of this kind of news framing is that it leads to a dominant mode of thinking and analyzing facts and events, because of which these dominant frames “come to be seen as natural and inevitable, with contradictory information discounted as failing to fit preexisting views” (Norris 276).

Many journalists, newspapers and other sources of news publish about events they are not necessarily an expert on and “have taken more and more of the quasi - political power of judging proposals and setting a tone for political action” without the actual responsibility an expert would face (Fallows 150). The media have become “agenda - setters” in their own right and research has shown that the news media are the “most prevalent and often the most significant influence” on what is important and current in society (Willis 59). It has even become apparent that this is influenced by the mere quantity of coverage “no matter what is actually said about the topic” (Willis 59). The news media are also faced with an unlimited desire for new stories and facts from the public, which forces news outlets to publish in quick succession and continually. Naturally, this can limit the quality of the news analyses. Another consequence is that the government is also forced to respond to political news stories swiftly and is forced to bend to the will of the news media and public by addressing concerns and opinions, since people might grow suspicious of the government if the latter were to ignore the media. In a way, the news media have taken on the role of “watchdog” and serve to “make sure everyone in Washington plays it straight and governs in the interest of the American people” (Willis 138). As such, it seems that the media are indeed the prolific fourth estate many people wish it to be¹.

While the news media expect the government to be transparent and cooperative, they themselves are often secretive and place themselves above society. In recent years the press has been under scrutiny and the fourth estate is slowly beginning to be associated with those outside of their influence, such as whistleblowers and the new media emerging from the Internet sphere. A significant point is that it is believed that “negative public attitudes toward media workers and practices (...) correlate to widespread political apathy and disconnection from community life” (Bracci 117). Since the function of the news media is centered on the notion that they have to inform and engage the public so it can perform its democratic duties, this is clearly problematic. When the media fail to carry out their democratic duties of informing the public and instead is thought to control and manipulate information for personal gains, such as financial motivations and prestige, its neglect could possibly lead to a less democratic society. As Daniel Dayan points out in his chapter for *Ethics of Media*, the “media used to be instruments of a democratic conquest. Many examples show them changed into a fortress, imposing transparency on other institutions, refusing it for themselves” (164). In other words, the media expect other parties to be open and transparent, but reserve themselves

the right to secrecy. For instance, the news media expect full cooperation from institutions and individuals in order to provide truthful and meaningful information to the public. At the same time, however, they sometimes refuse to name their sources. On the one hand, this is done to protect the sources themselves, especially when sensitive information is concerned, on the other hand this is done to hold an edge on competitors. Keeping information restricted, though, is of course the opposite of what they claim to stand for and it seems that the term democracy merely “serves as an alibi” (Dayan 170). That is to say, it can be argued that the news media hold their own interests above those of the public and thus, democracy.

1.3 Transparency and Whistleblowers

Ultimately, the driving force behind most cases of leaked classified information is a need for transparency. That is to say, the governing body of a democratic society must interact and share information in order to be a successful democratic state. States often resist this, because “constitutional executive-privilege and state-secret doctrines rest on the parallel presumption that the threat of disclosure will affect the executive's ability to protect the nation and perform his delegated duties” (Fenster 756). However, some claim that this assertion is too often used as an excuse. As is mentioned by Steven Aftergood, “one basic premise of the critics of government secrecy is that too much information is classified and withheld from the public in the name of national security, and that this has undesirable effects on public policy and on public discourse” (840). The limits of transparency are difficult to demarcate and different opinions and theories are attested by scholars. In the case of the US it seems evident that the government does not favor a high level of transparency. This was shown by the severe prosecution of Manning and the ruthless attitude of the government and government officials towards federal whistleblowers. The latter is one example of the US still favoring secrecy and suggests that it will not condone forced transparency. Rather, it seems it would prefer to retain complete firsthand control over information. However, resisting transparency and controlling information is becoming increasingly difficult for governments.

Whistleblowers can prove to be helpful in ensuring that the public is informed about topics that neither the government nor the news media can or will discuss. The government can choose to withhold certain information from both the media and the public. Admittedly, “there is a near universal consensus that some measure of secrecy is justified and necessary to protect authorized national security activities, such as intelligence gathering and military operations, to permit confidential deliberations in the course of policy development, to secure

personal privacy, and for other reasons” (Aftergood 839). However, determining what should and should not be kept secret is difficult, but important in light of the democratic duty of the US government and its media. However, since the news media are not always able to act out their function as the fourth estate, a third, external, player is sometimes necessary. This player is mostly embodied by the somewhat rare whistleblower, an individual who sees wrongdoing and feels morally obliged to share this information with outsiders. In his book *The Art of Moral Protest*, James M. Jasper terms them “ethical resisters, ” thereby emphasizing the fact that whistleblowers often act according to selfless morals in order to safeguard what is right and expose what is wrong (137). In order to do so, whistleblowers do require certain skills and characteristics. For instance, they must have “expertise in the subject matter and the ability to judge that, in releasing certain information to expose wrongdoing or generate public debate about specific policies, the benefits outweigh risks associated with the leak” (Crowley 251). Political whistleblowers, especially, are desirable and vital for the public, but extremely threatening for a government due to the risks that publishing classified information may bring to national security and the reputation of the government. Therefore, the mere possibility of whistleblowing is theoretically a strong motivation for political institutions to remain transparent. However, some argue that it can also lead to increased secrecy or restrictive measures from the government in order to avoid any and all leaks.

In recent years, Barack Obama has expressed a need for increased government transparency and initiated reforms, but to little effect (Shkabatur). For instance, Obama has openly celebrated the significance of whistleblowers and made promises to ensure a safe environment for those that deem it necessary to come forward with sensitive information (Ethics). However, the position of his administration on this matter does not seem to include federal and political whistleblowers. In fact, “unauthorized disclosures of information to the media have thus far triggered criminal charges under the Espionage Act of 1917 in five cases during the Obama administration” compared to “only three times” during “all previous administrations” (Shkabatur 113). Considering that the act dates back to the early 20th century, when the cultural landscape was vastly different from nowadays, it is remarkable that the government has even resorted to such an outdated law. Shkabatur argues that it may be due to the relatively new threat of the Internet which has made it “easier than ever to leak massive amounts of information, but harder than ever to expose whistleblowers” (115). The Internet allows for anonymity and is a way to circumvent national borders, due to which

whistleblowers can literally operate outside of government control. This has resulted in the US government attempting to institute restrictive measures concerning internet use and gaining control of internet spaces. Thus far, this has been met by severe protest from a majority of people. In addition, the first amendment protects journalists who publish sensitive information. As a result, the government has no choice but to persecute the very sources the press acquires their information from in order to remain in control of information they deem is not appropriate to share with the public. As such, the relationship between the three actors, government, media and whistleblowers, is one that is complicated and somewhat in favor of the news media. The government fears forced disclosure in the form of leaks and whistleblowers are always at risk of being severely persecuted.

The news media welcome leaked information and can use the information under the guise of doing their civic duty. However, as Daniel Ellsberg has pointed out, when it comes to government secrets and federal whistleblowers “telling secrets appears unpatriotic, even traitorous” (773). When news media publish secrets or sensitive information, the general consensus is that they do this to inform the public for the sake of transparency and democracy. Whistleblowers, however, are generally regarded with more suspicion. Not only have they misused the trust and access granted by their employers, they also purposely release information that could be damaging to certain parties. On the other hand, they are “uniquely credible as witnesses” (Jasper 138). The mere fact that they no longer support the morals and actions of the organization they are revolting against indicates that they possess a selflessness that the targeted party does not, especially combined with the fact that whistleblowers often face repercussions for their actions (Jasper 139). That is to say, in order to undermine the morality of whistleblowers, the targeted parties often retaliate by discrediting the responsible individual (Jasper 193). While this lessens the chance of someone blowing the whistle, it also serves to arm the whistleblower with more “rhetorical power” (Jasper 148), by being placed into a victim role. Whistleblowers are seen as essential for democracy, but detrimental to it as well. Due to this ambiguous, two-sided aspect whistleblowers are regarded as the quintessential outsiders, living outside the norm of everyday society and thus threatening to the status quo, regardless of whether their intentions are justified.

One way for the government to control information is by prosecuting those that fight transparency limits created by the US. Crowley notes how the US government is unable to prosecute news mediums, because it would damage the reputation of the government, both

nationally and internationally, and undermine the right to freedom of the press (250). Consequently, the US government aims to prosecute the sources themselves, under the outdated Espionage Act of 1917. Charging people with offenses under this Act, as was the case with Manning and is currently the case with Edward Snowden, is problematic, because modern life is drastically different from that of the early 20th century. Especially considering the fact that the most recent whistleblower affairs were conducted via the Internet and other technological advances which did not exist when the Act was instituted. In a way, “the Obama Administration's war against leaks can be understood as a response to the new whistleblowing reality created by the Internet,” because the internet is the place where the US government has essentially the least power (Shkabatur 116). Once something is on the Internet, it is likely to stay there forever and is also accessible to a massive, international, audience. As such, aggressively prosecuting people who leak classified information onto the Internet is the best way for the US government to stop secret information from entering the World Wide Web, because it serves as the “chilling-effect” mentioned earlier.

1.4 Relationship Government and News Media

The relationship between the US government and the US media is one of constant negotiation, in which both are forced to compromise. The media drive the public to absorb and discuss information and “in return they are granted by society a series of privileges” (Tambini 239). While the news media have more access to information and are certainly more protected in the release of this information than the average US citizen they do face certain restrictions and complications in both their research and publication processes. Fallows discusses something he refers to as “access bargaining,” which is when government officials and journalists come to an agreement about what will be published in exchange for access to a specific source of information and allows the government to remain in control to a certain degree (195). This conforms to the assertion of Steven Livingstone, as mentioned in the introduction, that while the media allow their choice in what will be reported on to be influenced by public discourse it is also determined by the influence of “political elites” (298). Simply put, in order to be able to collect information about a specific subject, journalists are sometimes forced to neglect another topic so that they may remain in good favor with their government contacts and sources. Furthermore, sensitive issues, such as government corruption or classified policies, “have built-in layers of protection that discourage serious journalistic snooping” (Willis 47). These protective layers can be laws, for example, which might result in punitive actions

against journalists and newspapers, despite the supposed fundamental human right of freedom of the press. Thus, they serve as the aforementioned “chilling-effect”. Despite this, the relationship is a collaboration based on “self-interests” (Willis 52). The media want access to information regarding governmental affairs, the government wants to control this flow of information by maintaining tabs on the media. As such, the two parties simultaneously help and obstruct each other in their respective goals.

One way for journalists to access government documents is through the Freedom of Information Act, which went into effect in 1967 and has been significantly amended since 1995. This act allows journalists and other individuals to ask for specific copies of documents from government agencies and to appeal to the court if the request is initially denied. “It gives legal standing to ‘any person’ to seek government records, and it requires the government to provide those records unless they fall into an exempted category” (Aftergood 843). Exempted categories are those that contain information that could negatively affect national security, for example. While this enables journalists to access a lot of information, the process is often time-consuming. It can take months for a request to be granted. David T. Barstow, a journalist, claims that government officials use the FOIA as a way to deter people from investigating further. When a journalist asks for documents which can reasonably be expected to be public record, an official can still refuse to release them and let the court decide whether they should. While the journalist will, most likely, gain access eventually the process can slow down a reporter or discourage them all together. Barstow argues that the government has laws in place that theoretically promote and ensure transparency, but that they simultaneously serve to deter people from using these measures. He states:

they are putting a premium on ‘access’ journalism – they are elevating the importance of access, of authorized leaks, of journalists currying favor with the right government officials to get information (...) if journalists cannot rely on being able to get source documents in a reasonable fast way, they are in a terribly weakened position when it comes to actually dealing day-in and day-out with high government officials. (806)

Moreover, the act can be a tool for journalists, historians and other individuals who seek to publicize information to the public, but can also be used as a tool by government officials to hold off parties who are attempting to use the act for what it is supposedly intended for. In addition, government officials are sometimes reluctant to give out information or provide source material, because the journalist might draw new conclusions from it or be alerted to

specific events, data, etcetera, which would have otherwise remained unknown or at least outside of the news. As Cook states, “sources may provide access to journalists for a particular purpose only to find that they have also unwittingly made themselves available to be questioned on other matters the journalists may find more newsworthy” (90). Indeed, even when the government does want to release something to the public they are dependent on whether or not the news media find it worth reporting. Thus, while the government asserts control over information by withholding it from the press, the press in return can withhold from publishing government information if it does not benefit them. This is mostly due to the fact that journalists are not necessarily interested in respectable or important political issues, but primarily in interesting and controversial politics (Cook 91). As such, the relationship between the two is a complex struggle of individual interests, which do not always coincide, while both parties possess means to either aid or obstruct one another.

1.5 The Digital Age and Old vs. New Media

Modern society is one of technological advancement, in which computers and the Internet play a vital role, which society can barely function without. P.J. Crowley talks about the idea that we live in a “‘hyper-connecting’ world,” which is the “consequence of globalization and one or more information revolutions that continue to reshape the nature of power, international relations and global politics” (244). The new reality of constant access to the Internet, smartphones and social media have not only made it easier for people to find and share information it has also diminished the boundaries between national and international. The digital age has made it possible for people to communicate over vast distances and has greatly increased the flow of information between people. Over the past two decades the Internet has become a “core element of our communications and information environment” (Benkler 12). In addition, newspapers and television news outlets are no longer the primary source of information about recent events and find themselves competing with online sources. This has caused an old versus new media division to emerge in recent years, in which traditional news outlets attempt to discredit the new forms of media primarily by denying their credibility and professionalism as journalistic entities. According to Yochai Benkler, the idea persists that “the Internet and the blogosphere provide misinformation, while the traditional media are necessary to provide reliable investigative reporting” even though the news media have been known to publish misinformation and retract this later (17). Moreover, news organizations make use of so-called user-generated content on the Internet themselves.

During live coverage of events, for example, tweets and *Youtube* videos are often featured in news reels. Some believe that the insurgence of new media might overshadow the role of traditional media and investigative journalism. David R. Brake has the following to say about new media, “many news organizations are cautious in their use of it, whether because of understandable concerns over verifying its accuracy, over-reliance on well-established sources or because of a more deep-seated reluctance to experiment with new models of journalism where the journalists themselves may take a less central role in news production” (244). After all, if non-journalists have access to the same sources as journalists do, this diminishes the importance and effectiveness of investigative journalism. In other words, since people have easier access to information, they are also better equipped to form their own interpretations based on this information and no longer rely on the media to dissect the information for them first.

Gathering and categorizing relevant information to be published is a key role of the traditional news media. Therefore, new digital media and the possibility of individuals to take part in this are a threat to old media establishments. Many traditional news outlets now have their own online platform, which runs alongside the paper version, in order to be able to compete with online news platforms. An example of such a threat is the *Huffington Post*. This is an online news outlet which features news articles, blog posts dealing with different themes written by individuals from different backgrounds and actively encourages internet users to engage with their content through comment sections. It is one of the most visited news websites in the United States, after *CNN*, *BBC* and the *New York Times* (Benkler 14). “Mainstream media has been able to convert their oligopoly over broadcast and print into Internet dominance. Eight of the top ten Internet news sites are owned by large media interests” (McGuire 716). Smaller organizations and individual efforts are less successful and do not enjoy the same privileges that large media companies do, not only due to limited financial means, but because the first are not an established authority. Established news agencies are able to rely on their reputation and brand name, whereas newcomers are often seen, and definitely portrayed as, unreliable and lacking credibility concerning the quality of the journalism. As a result, “there is little doubt that mass media continues to be the major pathway to public attention, even as the role of Internet news consumption rises” (Benkler 28). When wide-ranging attention and publication are required, the major news organizations are crucial. This is why *WikiLeaks* cooperated closely with newspapers in releasing and

interpreting the leaked documents they acquired from Bradley Manning. Consequently, however, *WikiLeaks* and its founder, Julian Assange, were indeed treated by the press and the US government in a way that undermined their journalistic endeavors. Media persona termed Assange a “source” or “publisher-intermediary” rather than someone who was trying to inform the public from a moral standpoint (Crowley 250). Likewise, “the U.S. government viewed Assange (and WikiLeaks) as a political actor, not a journalist” who was trying to oppose the US government (Crowley 249). By erasing the journalistic aspect of *WikiLeaks* both the news media and the government attempted to justify the negative attitude towards the organization and the necessity for journalistic investigation from news outlets specifically.

1.6 WikiLeaks and Bradley Manning

As is widely known, a large amount of classified documents belonging to the US government were leaked by a platform called *WikiLeaks* in 2010. The “about us” page on the *WikiLeaks* website details its goals and values at length, explaining how they want to spread information in service to democracy. The following statement focuses on their willingness to provide a safe environment for document leaks and conveys the idea that they are a news outlet:

WikiLeaks is a not-for-profit media organisation. Our goal is to bring important news and information to the public. We provide an innovative, secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information to our journalists (our electronic drop box). One of our most important activities is to publish original source material alongside our news stories so readers and historians alike can see evidence of the truth. (About)

The rationale also states why they provide this service by including the following, “the broader principles on which our work is based are the defence of freedom of speech and media publishing” and “we derive these principles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (About). More importantly, the organization is quite clear and adamant in their journalistic goals and ideals. In addition, it explicitly states that they consider themselves to be part of the news media:

Publishing improves transparency, and this transparency creates a better society for all people. Better scrutiny leads to reduced corruption and stronger democracies in all society’s institutions, including government, corporations and other organisations. A healthy, vibrant and inquisitive journalistic media plays a vital role in achieving these goals. We are part of that media” (About)

Yet, as mentioned previously, *WikiLeaks* is not perceived as a legitimate news source by the US government and US news media and instead treated as a threat to US interest.

Contrary to previous large-scale leaks of sensitive information pertaining to the US, the documents published by WikiLeaks were not published within the nation itself. “The key feature of WikiLeaks during this period was indeed its global, stateless nature or, more precisely, its ability to operate beyond the reach of the law” (Tambini 234). While *Wikileaks* was seen as a threat that had to be eliminated by government officials, little could be done to attack the organization itself. Attempts were made to arrest founder Julian Assange, but proved unsuccessful. Instead, the US government persecuted the source of the leaks, a former intelligence analyst in the US army named Bradley Manning, who was sentenced to 35 years in prison for, amongst others, espionage and theft. The newspapers that published material and information from the leaked documents, by contrast, were not persecuted or stopped by the government. Benkler asserts that the newspapers might have been intentionally left alone in order for the government to stay in their good favors and thereby regain some control over the flow of information (25). In addition, *WikiLeaks* “exists only as an ephemeral noncommercial venture, thereby distinguishing itself from traditional placebased journalistic authorities that operate either commercially, under state ownership, or with state subsidies” (Fenster 761). From this perspective it is not surprising that the US government and established news media feel threatened. Whereas the mainstream media “are subject to licensing restrictions and/or existing ethical codes, and ultimately the law, WikiLeaks’s own ethical procedures are self-imposed” and thus challenge the existing norm of news media and journalism in the US (Tambini 235).

WikiLeaks presents itself as an alternative news source, which is morally superior to other news sources, because it is not commercial in nature or bound to state laws. *WikiLeaks* is able to operate outside of the norms by existing in the digital space of the elusive internet sphere, but the latter does have its limits. That is to say, as Benedetta Brevini and Graham Murdock point out in their chapter for *Beyond Wikileaks*, major parts of the Internet are controlled by commercial corporations. For example, web hosting, search engines and social media are mostly in the hands of companies that exploit the Internet for financial gains. Consequently, when one wants to use the mainstream internet it is not as free and anonymous as many make it out to be. In fact, it “should not be seen as a public sphere, but rather a ‘quasi public sphere’ that is ultimately managed by private interests” (Lynch, L. 59). This certainly

proved to be the case for *WikiLeaks*, who used services from *Amazon* for their web hosting and services from *Paypal* for financial means. When *WikiLeaks* became a threat to the US, the government urged these companies to stop providing services, resulting in the temporary disablement of the *WikiLeaks* site and financial troubles for the organization behind it (Brevini and Murdock).

This attitude from the government reveals how they viewed *WikiLeaks*, because “the similarities between the campaigns against terrorist websites and *WikiLeaks* are unmistakable. Both were ostracized by public declarations that the organizations were criminal, both were targets of shaming campaigns that led companies to remove services from them, and both were attacked by private embargos encouraged by government figures” (Cannon 323). Clearly, the US did not think of *WikiLeaks* as a journalistic platform intent on exposing American wrongs to improve society, but as a platform intent on discrediting and harming the US out of anti - American sentiments. Likewise, Benkler claims that “the media organizations that were the most openly associated with the Wikileaks scoops, and therefore felt most threatened, were the most critical of Wikileaks” (26). A similar approach was evident in the treatment of, then suspect, Bradley Manning. The soldier was detained under harsh conditions and “outside the prison walls (...) the US government officials were presenting him as a disloyal soldier who had betrayed his country,” drawing heavily on the unpatriotic angle to discredit his reputation amongst the public (Thorsen, Steedharan and Allan 109).

Furthermore, as stated before, the involved media were not persecuted the same way. Rather, their approach and objectivity were praised by both government officials and the general media environment. As Thorsen, Steedharan and Allan point out in their study into the news framing of Bradley Manning “their efforts to help redact sensitive information from the leaks and protect civilians were emphasized” (109). As such, a narrative was being formed in which the alleged whistleblower had wrongly and recklessly published information, while the news media did their best to interpret and distribute this information in a responsible manner. Even though the information would not have had such a big impact without the involvement of the media in the first place. In addition, the study found that Manning was mostly framed as a victim or at least in a way that might evoke sympathy for him. For instance, by emphasizing that he is a whistleblower, which holds positive connotations, rather than someone who stole government secrets or did not serve his country correctly (Thorsen, Steedharan and Allan). In any case, it can be said that while the news media made attempts to

appease the government by handling the information carefully, it did not act in the best interest of the government. Not only because the news frame was much less critical of Manning than the US government attitude was towards him, but also because the news media knowingly published incriminating evidence against the US government when it was quite clear that the government strongly objected to this. As such, it might indicate that the news media are the dominant actor where it concerns government leaks.

In short, while the three actors interact with each other and theoretically help one another, the news media seem to gain most from potential leaks of classified information. That is to say, the government has the duty to act in the best interest of the public and is supposed to be transparent. This transparency is best ensured by pressure from both whistleblowers and media. However, the government is threatened by leaks and whistleblowers, because it compromises the integrity of the government. Whistleblowers, in turn, are met with skepticism, because they are outsiders to society. The news media, though, can work together with both whistleblowers and the government without a single threat. In fact, it allows them to do their exact job.

Notes

¹ The so-called fourth estate in the US “exists separate from the executive, legislative, and judicial estates, and watches over them for the public good and the good of democracy” (Willis 138) and has historically been attributed to the mass media.

Chapter 2 – Media Presence of Edward Snowden

The infamous whistleblower Edward Snowden, who leaked information and files from the NSA in June 2013, is currently residing in Russia in order to avoid persecution from the US government. Despite the constant threat of being apprehended Snowden has given numerous interviews to various platforms and for diverse reasons. These interviews and public addresses range from in-depth interviews pertaining to his motives and ideals with reputable newspapers and magazines to online conferences about related topics. As such, they offer an interesting view on not only his motives and personality, but also on how he wants to be perceived. The analyses of the interviews and public addresses show that Snowden is deliberately portraying himself as an individual who felt obliged to act in the interest of US citizens, in order to give them the power to decide whether the NSA and US government were doing right or wrong. In addition, the findings of this chapter serve as a contrast to the findings of chapter three, which will allow for a comparative study of Snowden's portrayal in the US news media.

2.1 Biography

Edward Snowden is a computer programmer who worked in the US intelligence branch for several years, from 2006 to 2013. At the time of the leak he was 29 years old and was working as an infrastructure analyst for the NSA, via outside contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, in Hawaii. In the past, he filled several similar positions for both the CIA and NSA as he states in a video interview with the Guardian (Surveillance Revelations). The leaks caused Snowden to flee the United States and seek asylum elsewhere to avoid persecution. As was to be expected, the US has charged Snowden with “theft of government property”, “unauthorized communication of national defense information” and “willful communication of classified communications intelligence information to an unauthorized person” (America v. Snowden). His first temporary residence was in Hong Kong, but he currently lives in Moscow where he received a three-year residence permit in August 2014. His exact location and whereabouts are kept as much of a secret as possible (Anishchuk).

2.2 Interviews

Personal interviews with Snowden are numerous. Mostly conducted under circumstances that can vouch for the safety of him and the involved journalists. They were often done via e-mail,

or other secure forms of contact, and were edited or rewritten by the respective journalists. A number of video interviews have been released to the public, however, and they convey Snowden's narrative and personal convictions in an almost unilateral way.

The first interview, in which Snowden revealed his identity, was with the British newspaper the *Guardian* on 6 June in 2013. It was published in two parts on 9 June and 8 July of that year. He explained how his motives were guided by a sense of both privilege and civic duty. As an NSA employee, and as generally involved in the intelligence industry, Snowden had access to significantly more information than the average person and was therefore equipped to obtain an "awareness of wrongdoing" (NSA Whistleblower). Because of this he felt morally obliged to talk about it, but was met with ignorance and indifference from within the intelligence community. In addition, when asked why he chose not to remain anonymous Snowden replied by inferring that anonymity is detrimental to the core of democracy. Instead, he stressed that he is not an opponent of the US government and that by publicly acknowledging his actions they become more authentic (NSA Whistleblower). Thus, he clearly offered a narrative in which his actions were intended to aid the US government and US citizens to both strengthen and defend their democratic rights due to a moral sense of obligation. This narrative was expanded when Snowden talked about the consequences of his actions. While he claimed to be afraid of what his future will bring him, he quickly flipped the question by inferring that he had no choice but to come forward. Snowden explained that this was because his work activities were against the public interest and by continuing to work for the NSA he was personally responsible for creating an environment that opposed the American democratic ideal (NSA Whistleblower). As he detailed in the second part of the interview, by working for the NSA and having access to real facts he became aware of how "propagandized" people's news consumption is. As a result, he also realized that his work involved "misleading the people, and misleading all people" (Enemies). Not only did he suggest that the leaks are for the good of American citizens and the United States, but also that they are of global importance because the NSA was involved in foreign surveillance. Moreover, Snowden states that his "biggest fear is that nothing will change" (NSA Whistleblower). Apparently, he wants the audience to believe that he was more concerned with what the leaks would accomplish in terms of public safety and privacy rights than what the negative consequences would be for himself. This lends credibility to his narrative, because it serves to focus the public's attention on the actual leaks and problems, rather than

on Snowden's background and personal motives.

This focus on public interest and moral righteousness is a core feature of the narrative in other interviews as well. Snowden repeated the same sentiments about 6 months later in an interview for German television channel NDR in January 2014. One of the first statements Snowden made was "I don't lose sleep because I've done what I feel I needed to do. It was the right thing to do and I'm not going to be afraid" (Seipel). He followed up by saying, "There's no saving an intelligence community that believes it can lie to the public and the legislators who need to be able to trust it and regulate its actions. Seeing that really meant for me there was no going back. Beyond that, it was the creeping realization that no one else was going to do this" (Seipel). Interestingly, Snowden mentions again how his colleagues did not feel like they had to take action after he raised concerns, but Snowden remained adamant in his convictions nonetheless. This way, he distanced himself from the organization in the wrong, without losing his authority over the subject matter.

Furthermore, Snowden is open about his knowledge and very willing to share information that might benefit the public. He did stress that this should be done in a manner that does not endanger anyone or anything. Snowden suggested that any real responsibility lies with the journalists who published the secret information, which allowed him to shift any reproach about the aftermath away from himself. Additionally, Snowden's attempt at moving the focus away from him also highlighted some advantages the news media enjoy. For instance, in the NDR interview he is asked about what he knows about foreign government officials being monitored by the NSA. His answer included the following, "I prefer for journalists to make those decisions in advance, review the material themselves and decide whether or not the public value of this information outweighs the sort of reputational cost to the officials that ordered the surveillance" (Seipel). This allowed Snowden to redirect the responsibility to others, while upholding the narrative of acting in the public interest. In addition, this illustrates how powerful the news media are. Snowden had the same access to the leaked documents as the journalists that chose to work with him. He did not, however, have the same means of spreading this information or, as he suggested, determine whether this information was useful or in the public interest. This indicates that the news media have more authority and know-how on handling the flow of information than him. As such, Snowden was able to transform his individual actions into the actions of a group.

One more interesting detail from this specific interview is that when Snowden was

asked about his previous work for the CIA he declined to answer by saying “I don’t think I can actually answer that one on the record” (Seipel). This statement, which seems dismissive at first, actually strengthened the effort of Snowden to be perceived as a person who is acting out of civic duty due to morals and patriotism. That is to say, he was explicitly refusing to say something that might negatively impact the opinion of the audience regarding a part of the US government and managed to keep the focus on the NSA affair. This ensured that his conduct would not be judged on anything unrelated to his whistleblowing and thereby supported his narrative. This was strengthened even more when the interviewer inquires how Snowden feels about allegations of him working for other governments. His response was as follows, “If I am a traitor who did I betray? I gave all of my information to the American public, to American journalists who are reporting on American issues” (Seipel). Repeating the word “American” highlighted his patriotism and the question about whom he betrayed emphasized that he essentially did nothing wrong insofar as the public interest was concerned.

One interview that stands out is a recent one with John Oliver, which aired in April 2015. Interestingly, the show that the interview was featured on, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, is one that offers a “satirical look at the week in news, politics and current events” (hbo.com). As such, its purpose is to inform the audience in an entertaining way. For a person who is currently under charges of espionage it is rather remarkable to agree to an interview that has such a comedic undertone. However, the show has many viewers both offline and online in addition to being well-received by critics. Thus, presenting himself on this program can be a way for Snowden to connect with the public and humanize himself. While the interview consisted mostly of crude jokes, it succeeded in simplifying the issues at hand and it gave Snowden a chance to strengthen his narrative. Oliver introduced Snowden as “the most famous hero and or traitor” and cut Snowden off whenever his answers were too long or complicated (Oliver). Despite this, Snowden managed to morally justify his action by claiming that the NSA was unnecessarily monitoring organizations such as Unicef, which is a name that people will automatically connect to good morals and a sense of justice. Moreover, he repeated that the leaked documents are no longer being handled by him, but by journalists and whoever feels compelled to take action as a result of the publications. In short, this television appearance is in line with the narrative of previous interviews and also allowed Snowden to illuminate a complicated issue in a lighthearted, entertaining fashion.

2.3 Conference Participation

Another way Snowden has been present in public discourse is by participating in conferences via an online presence. For example, he appeared and debated via video screen at the 2014 edition of *South by Southwest*, a popular multiday festival in Austin, Texas. Snowden also spoke at the *Amnesty International Human Rights Conference 2014* in Chicago. Most notably, though, he participated in a TED talk, which is a hugely popular conference platform offering lectures and presentations for free on a variety of topics that is also available online.

Snowden's TED appearance was in March 2014 for a talk titled "Here's how we take back the Internet". The talk mixed an interview with debate and allowed him to convey that he still considers himself an American, who acts in the best interests of the American people, which is why he chose to oppose what the government was doing. Snowden explained his motives in a way that emphasizes the good it has caused and tried to appear as a sympathetic person. He was asked to describe himself and offered the following, "If I had to describe myself, I wouldn't use words like 'hero.' I wouldn't use 'patriot,' and I wouldn't use 'traitor.' I'd say I'm an American and I'm a citizen, just like everyone else" (Anderson). Interestingly, while he distanced himself from the key words usually used to describe him he did stress that he is an American citizen and expressed kinship by including the phrase "just like everyone else".

The talk itself discussed the issues that were revealed by the NSA leaks and the consequences these have had or changes they have caused. Snowden said a couple of things that are interesting regarding how he has presented his case. For instance, he often talked about the positive outcome of the leaks for the public and the contradictory attitude of government officials concerning the information. At one point, the discussion focused on the relationship between American internet companies and the NSA. Snowden mentioned the PRISM slides, a collection of PowerPoint slides he shared with the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*, which revealed the names of several companies that were cooperating with the NSA. He said the following, "we need our companies to work very hard to guarantee that they're going to represent the interests of the user, and also advocate for the rights of the users. And I think over the last year, we've seen the companies that are named on the PRISM slides take great strides to do that, and I encourage them to continue" (Anderson). This implies that the leaks have caused a positive change and thereby implicitly justifies them. Snowden also attempted to justify the leaks by saying, "The public interest is not always the

same as the national interest” (Anderson). In this instance, the discussion is focused on what US officials were saying about Snowden and the NSA leaks when the affair began. By saying this, Snowden pointed out that it is okay for the public to contest the government’s agenda. Moreover, because the leaks gave the public the means to do so, this statement also serves to justify the leaks. The talk also discussed whether some NSA programs can be justified due to their intended use to diminish terrorist threats, which is what the NSA and US government claimed they were for after the leaks. Snowden posited the following, “do these programs have any value at all? I say no, and all three branches of the American government say no as well” (Anderson). Indeed, official investigations revealed that the NSA programs did not perform this duty properly. As such, Snowden referred to the revelations made by official US institutions in order to add credibility to the narrative that his actions were morally justified.

Most important, though, is Snowden’s response to a more personal question about the risks he is facing. He explained his motives, but also pointed out that he is being blamed of crimes without a fair trial and appealed to the public for help:

I don't want to harm my government. I want to help my government, but the fact that they are willing to completely ignore due process, they're willing to declare guilt without ever seeing a trial, these are things that we need to work against as a society, and say hey, this is not appropriate. We shouldn't be threatening dissidents. We shouldn't be criminalizing journalism. And whatever part I can do to see that end, I'm happy to do despite the risks. (Anderson)

Snowden managed to present himself as an honorable person who wants to support his government, but cannot do so because they are neglecting their democratic duties. In addition, Snowden referred to the popular beliefs of being innocent until proven guilty and freedom of the press to support his claims and actions. By doing so, he stressed the necessity of the public’s involvement in order to help him uphold these quintessentially American values. In addition, Snowden emphasized the fact that he is willing to fight this battle no matter what the consequences will be and this serves to lend himself credibility, justifies his actions and can even evoke sympathy.

2.4 Awards, Prizes and other Honors

For his efforts, Snowden has received numerous prizes and awards from platforms, institutions and similar groups who advocate for the importance of privacy and freedom and

speech. This includes the *Sam Adams award* in 2013, the *Ridenhour Truth-Telling Prize*, the *Right Livelihood Award* and the *Stuttgart Peace Prize* in 2014. Notably, many of the other awards were given out by groups which are mostly backed and influenced by the public. In addition, Snowden ranked high in lists such as the *Foreign Policy's* top Global Thinkers and *Time's* Person of the Year in 2013, respectively first place and second place behind Pope Francis [rightlivelihood.org]. Moreover, he was officially instated as Rector of the University of Glasgow in 2014 and is on the board of directors for the *Freedom of the Press Foundation*¹.

Since it is too risky for Snowden to accept any of these honors in person, he often accepts them via a video message and talks profusely about his motivations while emphasizing the moral aspects of his act and attempting to be seen as part of some grand scheme. Interestingly, his rhetoric and narrative reveal much about his ideology, motives and personal beliefs. For example, when he and Alan Rusbridger had been awarded the Right Livelihood Award, Snowden recorded a short video reaction. In one minute and 40 seconds he calmly stated that it was a “vindication, I think, not only for myself, but everyone who came before me to raise awareness about these issues” (Reaction). This statement clearly conveys that he believes his actions were justified. In addition, in both the short reaction video and his actual acceptance video Snowden emphasizes the notion that his actions are being supported by many. For example, he said “Initially I thought I would do this alone and that the attacks against me would isolate me, but I’m surrounded by more people than I have ever been” and thanked the public for standing behind him (Reaction). In his acceptance speech he stated, “Awards are by nature individual, but I can only accept this collectively” (Acceptance). Moreover, he stressed the fact that others performed similar feats to his in the past and how the struggle for human rights is a historic battle. Snowden used the word “sacrifice” to describe what he and others have done, followed by the statement that he “would do it again” (Acceptance). This rhetoric serves to lend credibility to his own narrative and motives by emphasizing how it impacted him and others negatively, without deterring them from doing the right thing. Furthermore, in his acceptance speech for the Ridenhour Truth-Telling Prize, Snowden repeated the same sentiments when he said, “I did it because I thought it was the right thing to do. Now, what's important about this is that I'm not the only one who felt this way” (TheNationInstitute). This statement is followed by an anecdote about Snowden talking to some of his NSA colleagues who shared his concerns, but were too afraid

to come forward with it. He stated that his job “had departed from the fundamental principles of what our US intelligence community is all about – serving the public good” and again stressed how his risky act of leaking information was not only in line with the thinking of others, but was ultimately an act of public service (TheNationInstitute). Notably, in the acceptance speech for the Right Livelihood Award he mentioned how the NSA leaks had already resulted in more awareness among the public and critical debates in governments and political institutions. In short, the ramifications were mostly positive. And this despite the fact that, when the leaks had first entered the public sphere, many US officials warned the public of the negative impact the leaks would have and the danger they posed to public safety (Acceptance Speech Livelihood). Due to the fact that the immense consequences that the public was warned of did not occur, this undermined the narrative in which Snowden’s leaks were harmful to US national security public, and instead strengthened Snowden’s narrative in which the leaks have proven to be useful to the American public.

To summarize, Snowden’s focus when addressing a public that supports his cause, seems to be on highlighting that the NSA leaks affair was not solely caused by him. Rather, it was a morally justified team effort, aided by historical and current activism. In addition, he emphasizes the role that the public has played and can still play in the future.

Notes

¹ There are 9 other members on the board. Three of these have both supported and worked with Snowden publicly. Namely, former whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, *Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald and journalist and filmmaker Laura Poitras.

Chapter 3 – Snowden’s Portrayal by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*

As discussed in chapter 1, the news media apply specific angles and favor certain perspectives in order to frame the news and offer a dominant analysis of the available information. Subsequently, public awareness and opinion is manipulated to adhere to certain norms. This chapter will outline how both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* framed Edward Snowden in their news stories during 2013 and 2014, when the NSA affair was at the height of its impact, and how this complies with or rejects the theories discussed in chapter 1 and 2. The articles that will be discussed have been selected on the criteria that Snowden is explicitly described in the text, resulting in 51 articles for the *Times* and 76 for the *Post*. In addition, since the *Washington Post* was one of the newspapers that received documents from Snowden and was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for their journalism concerning the affair, the main question is whether this shows in the respective news frames.

3.1 Descriptive Keywords

In the numerous news articles that both newspapers published various words and phrases used to describe Snowden and his actions have a recurring character. For instance, Snowden is often introduced or described as a “former National Security Agency contractor”, or sometimes merely as a “contractor”. Both papers use this description in roughly 70 percent of the articles. While this denominator is a factual one, it is interesting that most articles focus on Snowden being a contractor, instead of simply mentioning that he worked for the NSA. Arguably, the description does two things, firstly, it informs the public about his former profession. This confirms and strengthens the legitimacy of the leaked documents because the leaker worked at the targeted company. Secondly, however, by stressing the fact that he was a contractor, rather than a regular NSA employee, the description also serves to distance Snowden from the agency and other employees, ultimately portraying him as an outsider. As such, the description is able to inform the audience about Snowden’s job, while also conveying that he did not actually work for the NSA directly. Consequently, this separates his ideals from that of the NSA and might evoke questions about his loyalty and motives.

Another recurring descriptor is the word “leaker”, which is often seen in titles and the introduction paragraphs. The term indicates that the individual was not authorized to have or distribute the documents, invoking a sense of illegality. In the case of the *Post*, the articles

sometimes label him as “admitted leaker”. As a result, it is implied that being a leaker is not something one would generally ascribe to and needs to be confessed too. Thus, the description serves to question the morality of the person. However, it also strengthens the legitimacy of where the leaked documents came from and can even convey the idea that Snowden is brave to confess to an act of leaking. In a similar fashion, Snowden is often labeled as a “fugitive”. The somewhat ambiguous word evokes the sense that someone is running from something or can imply that the subject is wanted. In any case, the term is usually not associated with positive traits or occurrences and without proper context the word simply indicates that something is or has gone wrong. As a result, while describing Snowden as a fugitive is not directly negative, or untrue, it does negatively impact his portrayal.

Most notably, both papers rarely label Snowden as a “whistleblower”. *The Times* refers to him as a whistleblower twice, a “self-described” whistleblower once and a “self-appointed” whistleblower once (Leaker’s Flight and Job Title). The *Post* refers to Snowden as a “whistleblower” five times. In a few instances, the term “whistleblower” is used only to deny that Snowden is one. As such, the papers seem to mimic the stance of the U.S. government, which has vehemently denied that Snowden is a whistleblower. However, the word is occasionally used to describe Snowden when people are being quoted or former whistleblowers are mentioned in comparison. This could mean that the papers are attempting to remain objective, but let others speak for them in order to highlight Snowden’s whistleblower status by quoting sources. For example, it is often noted how not only Snowden considers himself a whistleblower, but his supporters, the majority of the public and historical whistleblowers, such as Daniel Ellsberg, as well.

3.2 The Portrayal of Snowden in the New York Times

From the beginning, while the Times offered varying perspectives on Snowden’s actions, it ultimately portrayed Snowden as someone who acted on behalf of the public interest. The first article to mention Snowden by name was published on 10 June 2013. This was just after he had revealed his identity and motives in an interview with *The Guardian*. The author noted that Snowden spoke “calmly” during the interview and introduced him as a “well-compensated government contractor” (Ex-C.I.A. Worker). The latter conveys to the audience that his motives were likely not fostered by monetary goals. It is also mentioned that Snowden “said he had been selective in what he disclosed, releasing only what he found to be the greatest abuses of a surveillance state that he came to view as reckless and having grown

beyond reasonable boundaries” (Ex-C.I.A. Worker). This quotation serves to show the morality of his motives. Furthermore, the article offers a statement made by Snowden’s former employer. An excerpt of it goes as follows, ““News reports that this individual has claimed to have leaked classified information are shocking, and if accurate, this action represents a grave violation of the code of conduct and core values of our firm”” (Ex-C.I.A. Worker). This quotation serves to offer a different perspective on that same morality and paints Snowden as a person who did something illegal, rather than noble. These differing perspectives are common throughout the news articles, but as a whole a dominant frame can be deduced. For instance, on 12 June an editorial mentions “If Mr. Snowden had really wanted to harm his country, he could have sold the classified documents he stole to a foreign power, say Russia or China or Iran or North Korea” (Snowden’s Disclosures Treason) and on 16 June “Along with denunciations in Congress as a traitor and a manhunt by the F.B.I., he has already won public acclaim from a diverse group of sympathizers, from the left-wing filmmaker Michael Moore to the right-wing television host Glenn Beck” (Life of Ambition). The first defends the morality and justification of Snowden’s leaks and the second does the same by calling on the testimonials of supporters. Moreover, these sentiments were repeated on 18 June with the following, “Mr. Snowden also suggested that his decision to leak the information about United States government surveillance was influenced in part by the Obama administration's harsh crackdown on leakers; the administration has filed charges in six cases, so far, compared with three under all previous presidents combined, and several of those charged have been portrayed as heroes and martyrs by supporters” (Secrets to China) and on 22 June, “Mr. Snowden, who has said he was shocked by what he believed to be the N.S.A.'s invasion of Americans' and foreigners' privacy, told *The Guardian* that he leaked the documents because he believed the limits of surveillance should be decided not by government officials in secret but by American citizens” (Violating Espionage Act). The narrative that is being constructed relies heavily on how previous whistleblowers were perceived and strongly implies that Snowden was doing it for the greater good, that is to say, the American people and democratic values.

During the first month of coverage, a few more articles strengthened the narrative in which Snowden was aiding the American public. Such as on 23 June, when the following was written, “unlike others accused of leaking, Mr. Snowden went public with his own explanation of his actions before he was charged, telling *The Guardian* that his leaks were an

act of conscience intended to give Americans a chance to decide the appropriate limits of spying. He has drawn support from a wide swath of the political left and the libertarian right in the United States” (Extradite N.S.A. Leaker). By now, the *Times* had repeated the exact same motivations and justifications regarding Snowden’s decision to leak classified documents over a period of two weeks, on an almost daily basis. In addition, the reader was presented with different news stories, ranging from Snowden publicly admitting to the leaks, him being criminally charged for this, avoiding extradition in Hong Kong and being accused of espionage on behalf of China. While the topics of the news articles differ, they all include a similar narrative and seem to fit a specific frame. On 24 June, news outlets informed the public that Snowden had managed to arrive in Russia and was now stranded at a Moscow airport because his passport had been revoked. During Snowden’s stay at the airport, some news regarding his person was published. On 27 June online chat logs of Snowden, from 2009, were published, which revealed new, contradictory, information about Snowden. The following is an excerpt from the article that discusses the logs, “Mr. Snowden's casual and profane, but apparently strongly felt, condemnation of leaks is an intriguing clue to his political evolution” (’09 Chat). The chats revealed that Snowden thought very ill of leaked, classified documents being published in the news that year. Rather than focusing on the contradiction or hypocrisy of this information, the *Times* stresses that the NSA leaks are proof of Snowden evolving past this mindset. As such, the importance of the chats and how they might discredit Snowden’s own justification of his actions were downplayed.

Another revealing aspect of how the news regarding Snowden was being framed is when the articles discuss or mention President Obama and other government officials. While these articles appear objective at first, they do seem to favor Snowden’s side of the story. For instance, the article from 10 June states that the “United States must set up a strategy for prosecuting a man whom many will see as a hero for provoking a debate that President Obama himself has said he welcomes -- amid already fierce criticism of the administration's crackdown on leaks” (Ex-C.I.A. Worker) and on 11 June the following was written, “American officials cited the continuing inquiry as the reason for the low-key approach. By keeping silent on Mr. Snowden and his case, the Obama administration also avoids elevating his status, even as whistle-blower advocacy groups championed him and his disclosures” (U.S. Preparing Charges). The *Times* conveyed that the government rejected Snowden’s whistleblower claim but simultaneously stressed that the administration has reacted strongly

to previous, recent leaks and how Snowden was already being celebrated by other parties. Articles from 22 June and 23 June mimic this narrative. For example, the first stated “The charges against Mr. Snowden, first reported by the *Washington Post*, are the seventh case under President Obama in which a government official has been criminally charged with leaking classified information to the news media. Under all previous presidents, just three such cases have been brought” (Violating Espionage Act) and the second stated that the debate surrounding Snowden “could prove uncomfortable for the Obama administration. His revelations have provoked new criticism of the N.S.A.'s eavesdropping and data collection, and a drawn-out legal struggle could put a harsh spotlight on the tension between Mr. Obama's pledges of transparency and civil liberties and his administration's persistent secrecy and unprecedented leak prosecutions” (Extradite N.S.A. Leaker). By emphasizing the increased persecution of leakers, the author could have been suggesting that there was previous federal wrongdoing to expose. In any case, it places Snowden into a context where many others have done what he did. The second excerpt highlights how Snowden's leaks have already proved useful and that the government has not adhered to its promises to the public.

Interestingly, on 28 June an article was published which discussed some statements Obama made regarding Snowden. This particular talk was the first time the president made any significant remarks about Snowden. The *Times* noted the following, “President Obama sought Thursday to minimize the significance of a fugitive former national security contractor wanted for leaking government secrets, calling him a ‘29-year-old hacker’ and suggesting that American frustration with China and Russia for apparently helping him evade extradition was not worth damaging relations with those countries” and mentioned how the leaks “embarrassed the administration and raised debate about the government's invasion of privacy. Mr. Snowden and his supporters, including *WikiLeaks*, the anti-secrecy group, have called him a whistle-blower and a hero. Federal prosecutors have charged him with violating espionage laws, and some American legislators have called him a traitor” (Obama Seeks). Despite the fact that, at this point, the *Times* had discussed and revealed information about Snowden in numerous articles over the course of three weeks the article's introduction paragraph does not mention him by name, which might be an attempt to remain objective. In addition, it points out that some view Snowden as a spy and traitor. However, it is again mentioned that Snowden's cause had garnered many supporters. Moreover, the phrase “sought to minimize the significance” seems to imply that Snowden is indeed an important,

influential figure or at least was considered to be before these statements were made.

The Snowden affair continued while he was awaiting his fate in Moscow. During this time, most articles focused on Snowden's request for asylum and how the Obama administration responded to this. The articles strongly suggested that Snowden's leaks had proved justified. For example, an article from 1 July stated that the president of Ecuador was approached and ordered to reject Snowden's request for asylum (Asylum Bids). This highlights the aggressiveness of the administration, which had been discussed in earlier articles. During this same period, some articles discuss how Snowden was able to obtain the documents in the first place. It is mentioned that even though Obama made an attempt to diminish Snowden's value, the latter was in effect "part of the United States' biggest and most skilled team of hackers" (Job Title). The following are taken from an article dated 5 July, "Although federal officials offered only a vague description of him as a 'systems administrator,' the résumé suggests that he had transformed himself into the kind of cybersecurity expert the N.S.A. is desperate to recruit, making his decision to release the documents even more embarrassing to the agency" and "Mr. Snowden's ability to comb through the networks as a lone wolf -- and walk out the door with the documents on thumb drives -- shows how the agency's internal security system has fallen short, former officials say" (Hacking Skills). These statements serve to discredit the NSA, due to which Snowden's actions are more justified. That is to say, by emphasizing that Snowden was exactly the right kind of person for the job and that former officials are criticizing the agency, the NSA's values and overall agenda are offered up for public scrutiny. In a way, the blame is partly shifted away from Snowden onto the NSA, thereby weakening the narrative that Snowden gathered the documents for immoral reasons. This view is strengthened by an article that discusses the ties between the NSA agency and large companies when more documents had been released, this time exposing the PRISM program. The text discussed how companies, such as Microsoft and Facebook, had "already been forced to address questions about their cooperation with the agency following Mr. Snowden's disclosure of the Prism surveillance program" and that these questions first arose after earlier documents were leaked by Snowden, which was the reason that the Obama administration had surrendered to the "privacy concerns" and would be "willing to drop" the program altogether (Microsoft). These are testimonies to the success of the leaks, thus also of Snowden's actions. In addition, these findings also prove that the leaks were necessary since changes were being called for by

legislative parties.

Over the next period of time, Snowden was granted temporary asylum in Russia and the *Times* not only continued to support Snowden, but also emphasized how well-supported Snowden's cause was. After some time, news reports started coming out claiming that Snowden had been on the radar of the CIA for suspicious behavior in the past based on a work evaluation during one of his former jobs. The *Times* published an article about this on 11 October, which states "While it is unclear what exactly the supervisor's negative report said, it coincides with a period of Mr. Snowden's life in 2009 when he was a prolific online commenter on government and security issues, complained about civil surveillance and, according to a friend, was suffering 'a crisis of conscience'" (C.I.A. Noted Suspicions). The article offers basic information, but this statement seems to convey that during that time in his life, Snowden was already concerned about the issues surrounding the NSA affair. Interestingly, though, the article also discusses an event in which Snowden was honored for his efforts. The article discussed that Snowden received an award "given annually by a group of retired C.I.A. officers to members of the intelligence community 'who exhibit integrity in intelligence'" (C.I.A. Noted Suspicions). The award was presented to Snowden, in person, by four former whistleblowers. This inclusion into an article that discusses something that could potentially negatively impact how Snowden is perceived is telling. Once again, Snowden's act is justified by linking him to previous whistleblowers, which in turn adds credibility to his own claim of being a whistleblower. In addition, the name of the award is left out, which suggests that the author intended to alert the reader to it because it underscores how well-supported Snowden's actions are¹.

The next day, an article was published stating that the CIA denied having suspected Snowden of any foul play in 2009. Moreover, most articles from this period echoed the same sentiments and on 2 January in 2014, roughly six months after the leaks first surfaced, the *New York Times* published an editorial in which they explicitly supported Snowden and simultaneously defended their own actions. For example, it was stated that "considering the enormous value of the information he has revealed, and the abuses he has exposed, Mr. Snowden deserves better than a life of permanent exile, fear and flight. He may have committed a crime to do so, but he has done his country a great service" (Whistle-blower). The tone remained critical by admitting the illegality of the leaks, but the main sentiment is that it was justified in the grand scheme of it all. Another passage is the following, "In

retrospect, Mr. Snowden was clearly justified in believing that the only way to blow the whistle on this kind of intelligence-gathering was to expose it to the public and let the resulting furor do the work his superiors would not” (Whistle-blower). It was implied here that the NSA, and perhaps even the government, neglected their duties and, therefore, Snowden rightly considered it necessary to fulfill that duty himself. As such, the illegality of the act is outweighed by the morality of it. In the following passage, that morality is asserted even more. “The shrill brigade of his critics say Mr. Snowden has done profound damage to intelligence operations of the United States, but none has presented the slightest proof that his disclosures really hurt the nation's security” (Whistle-blower). Not only was it implied that those who question Snowden’s actions are in the minority, it was also strongly asserted that the leaks have had only positive effects. The editorial managed to convey that the reasons for leaking secret intelligence information are obvious now that the documents have been properly analyzed and its contents sufficiently discussed and presented to the public. Of course, the news media had a large part in the latter. Thus, it can be argued that the editorial team of the *Times* is suggesting that they too are justified in sharing the leaked information.

For the next couple of months, news regarding the NSA programs remained a hot topic, but new information about Snowden’s person was scarcer. Interest in him spiked again when government officials made statements in which it was implied that Snowden had been spying for Russia. The *Times* repeatedly suggested that Snowden’s perspective was more reliable than that of the US government. An article from 20 January reports on some U.S. officials who accuse Snowden of sharing the leaked documents with both China and Russia. It is also mentioned that the FBI has found no evidence of this in their investigation. In addition, the *Times* repeated that throughout the affair Snowden was adamant that only documents related to wrongdoing were to be publicized. That is to say, he insisted that information that could potentially harm public interest or national security should remain secret and only information that the public would benefit from should be released. The following passage is about a statement Obama made, namely that the positive outcome of the leaks did not excuse the negative ramifications. “His own aides acknowledge that if Mr. Snowden had not made so much information public, it was doubtful that the president would have announced the reforms and further studies of N.S.A. actions that he spoke about” (Link to Russia). The narrative of this article seems to suggest that the officials are not to be believed, because the newspapers Snowden worked together with all testify that he has a strong moral compass and

even government workers are starting to acknowledge that the leaks have been beneficial. A follow-up article on 22 January is devoted to Snowden's response to the accusations and it concludes with "'it's not the smears that mystify me,' Mr. Snowden told *The New Yorker*, 'it's that outlets report statements that the speakers themselves admit are sheer speculation'" (Spy for Russia). While this statement may seem to criticize news outlets, it actually serves mainly to highlight that the suspicions voiced in the earlier article, which would still have been circulating in the news media sphere at this time, are not based on fact. This suggests to the reader that those accusations are likely false. In addition, by having included a statement from Snowden which criticizes the news media, the *Times* remained objective in their reporting, while simultaneously emphasizing the notion that Snowden's claims are more believable.

Stories about Snowden allegedly working with the Russians, or the Chinese, were reported on a few more times and the frame remained the same. New stories emerged when Snowden stated that he had voiced his worries regarding the legality of what the NSA was doing. An article from 8 March discusses this. For instance, it is mentioned how "Mr. Snowden's comments, in written answers to questions by members of the European Parliament that were released on Friday, amplified previous assertions that he initially tried to raise concerns internally about surveillance collection he believed went too far" (Concerns Before Leaks). The same article includes statements made by Obama, who said that more secure, official channels were available to Snowden and that laws were in place that would have guaranteed protection. However, Snowden claimed that "Obama's directive covers only intelligence agency employees, not outside contractors, so 'individuals like me were left with no proper channels'" (Concerns before Leaks). It is suggested that Snowden had no other choice but to leak the documents through unofficial channels. This suggestion serves to point out that Obama's statements about Snowden having had other options to expose the NSA are untrustworthy and, as a result, the reasons behind Snowden's actions are justified.

Once again, the information and news frame over the next period of time was centered on the same facts and statements. That is, until NBC aired an interview with Snowden conducted by Brian Williams. On 29 May, the *Times* discussed this televised interview and seemed to criticize Snowden. The article begins with the following introduction paragraph, "Edward J. Snowden said that he still considered himself to be an American patriot even after leaking thousands of classified documents, and that he was frustrated to be 'stuck in a place' - - Russia -- that did so little to protect individual rights when he was trying to help protect

American freedoms” and quotes Snowden as saying “‘How can it be said that I did not serve my government when all three branches have made reforms as a result of it?’ he asked. ‘Being a patriot doesn't mean prioritizing service to government above all’” (Snowden Defends Actions). In addition, it is stated that Snowden “was eerily composed, well spoken and dispassionate” (Snowden Defends Actions). In this article, Snowden was introduced as a person who loves and respects American core values, but was also portrayed as out of the ordinary. That is to say, the *Times* noted how his composure is not what one might expect of someone who is avoiding persecution by one of the most powerful governments in the world. The first two passages are in line with how Snowden was framed in previous articles, but the word “eerily” in the third passage has a somewhat negative connotation. As such, it seems that the *Times* was at least a little critical about how Snowden portrayed himself in this interview. Furthermore, the follow-up article on 30 May appears to break with the dominant frame so far and questioned Snowden’s truthfulness in response to a question about working with the Russian government. “Mr. Snowden said he didn't bring any classified documents with him to Russia and insisted that Russian intelligence wasn't paying him, coercing him or relying on his expertise. But he's been Russia's house guest for almost a year, so it's hard to believe he hasn't been exhaustively debriefed or just soaked with endless vodka toasts” (Self-portrait). Even though the comedic undertone downplays the severity of this sentence, Snowden is criticized by way of suggesting that it is very unlikely that he has not shared anything with the Russians, willingly or unwillingly.

Overall, the *Times* was mostly supportive of Snowden. It focused on the good that the leaked information had done for the American public, rather than debating whether or not he should have leaked the information.

3.3 The Portrayal of Snowden in the Washington Post

The *Washington Post* reported on the NSA affair and Snowden’s share in this more extensively than the *New York Times*. In addition, one of the journalists who works for the *Post* had been approached by Snowden when the latter was contemplating the leaks and later received some of the classified documents. As such, it had more access to information than the *Times*. This is immediately evident in the fact that the *Post* published multiple articles about Snowden on 10 June 2013, whereas the *Times* published one. Not only was it reported who the person behind the leaks is, the *Post* also focused on his motives, what this outing meant for Snowden’s future and how the government had responded.

It is suggested that Snowden acted justly, but the paper also criticizes a few aspects of Snowden's actions so far. For example, one article began with Snowden stating that the documents had already made a difference for the public, because "they have the power to decide for themselves whether they are willing to sacrifice their privacy to the surveillance state" (Explains Secrets). In addition, he was also quoted as saying "President Obama has failed to live up to his pledges of transparency" and "my sole motive is to inform the public as to that which is done in their name and that which is done against them" (Explains Secrets). These passages clearly highlight the morality of Snowden's act, by emphasizing that it was done for the greater good and due to negligence of the administration. The *Post* then discusses some of the responses that Snowden's coming out had garnered and the role of the news media, which was also under scrutiny from U.S. officials due to the leaks (Explains Secrets). In another article, Snowden is quickly compared to Daniel Ellsberg and it is stated that "The fact that Snowden stepped forward to acknowledge his leaks to the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* newspapers rather than wait for the FBI to find him impressed others who have disclosed government secrets" (Self-outing). By linking him to other whistleblowers and allowing proponents to vouch for his cause, the *Post* strengthens Snowden's credibility and the justification of his actions. Yet another article repeats the same sentiments regarding Snowden's motivations and in the fourth one, the *Post*'s recipient of the documents details how the partnership with Snowden came about. While this too highlights Snowden's just morals it is interesting to note that the journalist mentions the following, "I told him we would not make any guarantee about what we published or when. (The *Post* broke the story two weeks later, on Thursday. The *Post* sought the views of government officials about the potential harm to national security prior to publication and decided to reproduce only four of the 41 slides)" (Personal Risks). While the *Post* focuses strongly on Snowden's morals and motivation, it also asserts its own by revealing that not all documents were deemed safe enough for publication. In addition, it points out that the *Post* cooperated with the government to a certain extent. All in all, the first reports regarding Snowden are extensive and suggest that he acted rightly and selflessly while expressing some points of criticism here and there.

During the next two weeks, when Snowden was residing in Hong Kong, the *Post* published numerous articles. One from 11 June discussed and questioned the access Snowden claimed to have had at the facility in Hawaii. Then, on 13 June, an article was published that questioned Snowden's actions. It starts with the following statements, "Journalists have a

professional commitment to the idea that more debate is better, so we instinctively side with leakers” and “Snowden has described his actions in idealistic terms” (Snowden knows Best). The author proceeded to point out that the programs that were exposed are considered legal and summed up a few arguments that could explain the leaks. This was followed up by this statement, “we should be wary about endorsing any contention that it's okay to violate laws because you're acting on higher authority” (Snowden Knows Best). As such, it is suggested that although Snowden was, in his own mind, doing it for the right reasons, that alone does not prove that it actually was the best solution. In addition, it was pointed out that previous intelligence leaks have resulted in a “far more aggressive” and more secretive intelligence agency (Snowden Knows Best). That is to say, the argument here is that leaks do not ensure transparency, which is presented as Snowden’s core motivation, but instead result in less transparency. As such, it counters Snowden’s main argument and conveys the idea that he did wrong by exposing the information in the way he did.

Over the next period, the articles conveyed that while the leaks had positive effects, Snowden was wrong to release the information. On 13 June, an article discussed claims made by the NSA regarding the usefulness of the exposed programs. Included was the following, “the Obama administration has defended its extensive surveillance, and President Obama has said he welcomes a public debate about the programs.” (Dozens of Attacks). Both statements from U.S. officials and Snowden were offered and followed by “Snowden's assertions could not be verified, and U.S. officials did not respond to requests for comment” (Snowden Knows Best). Surprisingly, this downplays the narrative of the entire, rather lengthy, article. The one thing, therefore, that stands out from this text is the assertion that the leaks were already having a positive effect by forcing the government to discuss intelligence programs. On 15 June, a somewhat critical article is again published, focusing on the persona Snowden has ascribed to himself. Interestingly, it mentions that there are better channels for whistleblowing and ends with “the Guardian has called his leak ‘the spy story of the age.’ But the mere impulse to martyrdom is not in and of itself evidence of wisdom. Nor is it evidence of the righteousness of the martyr's cause” (Martyrdom). As such, it contrasts with some previous narratives presented in the articles and offers a fresh perspective on the affair. Namely, that the way Snowden presents himself or his cause are not credible enough on their own standing.

An article from the next day, 16 June, discusses this very idea and the language is telling. For instance, the phrases “who took it upon himself to expose”, “announcing to the

world that he was prepared to be prosecuted for breaking his pledge” and the passage “Although Snowden has repeatedly insisted that the documents he revealed are the story and that his life is of no interest, questions about his motives and rationale inevitably colored the debate over his decision to violate his oath” all convey that leaking the documents was wrong (). It was strongly asserted that Snowden entered into a contract, willingly, where he would deal and handle this secret information discreetly. Furthermore, the article discussed revelations made about Snowden based on chat logs and his online persona from the past and it is explicitly stated that he “sought to keep his online activities hidden, posting under pseudonyms even as a teenager” (Leaker of Secrets). This suggests that he had knowledge of the Internet and technology early on and likely valued his privacy. This is arguably proof of his own motivations for exposing the privacy concerns caused by NSA programs. However, the article also focused on the fact that Snowden appears to enjoy being in the spotlight and criticizes some of his past behavior (Leaker of Secrets). On 20 June, an article discusses official means for people to blow the whistle and notes that these are severely lacking (Snowden case). Snowden, his supporters and U.S. officials are given a voice, but the article ends with “Obama didn't promise to protect those who broke the law, even if for a worthy cause” (Snowden Case). This clearly frames Snowden, specifically his act of leaking, as fundamentally illegal and, consequently, as something that should be interpreted as wrongdoing.

When Snowden managed to travel to Moscow, many articles covered the topic to some extent. As a whole, the articles were critical of Snowden, mainly due to his past behavior, the paradoxical aspect of his proclaimed patriotism and his allegiance with *WikiLeaks*. One date stands out, as multiple articles were published on 25 June. One of these, which informed about the switch from Hong Kong to Moscow, portrayed Snowden as someone who is dependent on his computer, perhaps suggesting that he is not fully immersed in real life (Hong Kong Stay). An article that discussed the impact of any documents Snowden might still have had with him stressed that he might now be working with *WikiLeaks*. While many articles in the *New York Times* did the same, this one from the *Post* casts *WikiLeaks* in a somewhat negative light with the following statements. Firstly, “in relation to publishing such material, of course *WikiLeaks* is in the business of publishing documents that are supposed to be suppressed,” Assange said. He declined to say whether Snowden had shared any of the material” and secondly, “Assange said: “Mr. Snowden's

material has been secured by the relevant journalist organizations prior to travel.’ Asked if he could elaborate, he said, ‘I’m afraid I cannot’” (Security of Documents). The almost nonchalant tone is reminiscent of the careless way in which the documents leaked by Bradley Manning were handled, which are generally considered to have done some damage to national security. This was in turn emphasized by mentioning that many of the unreleased documents could indeed prove to be damaging. In addition, Assange’s unwillingness to offer full answers might be construed as dishonesty or deception. Considering how the news media constantly reported on Snowden working together with *Wikileaks*, this also conveys that Snowden might have been subject to the same evasiveness, which raises questions about his statements so far.

Interestingly, one article discussed how the focus should not be on Snowden, but on what the leaks exposed. However, most of the text seems to have been centered on whether Snowden could have gone about his actions in a different way. For instance, it was stated that “whistleblower advocates acknowledge that he might have committed a crime, yet they firmly identify Snowden as a whistleblower” and ““current policies actually encourage leaks, given there is no meaningful legal system for whistleblowing in the intelligence community”” (Government Secrecy). These implied that, despite the illegality of it, the leaks were justified since there simply was no other means to expose the programs. In addition, Snowden is again compared to Ellsberg and the *Post* noted “Ellsberg was charged under the Espionage Act but not convicted” (Government Secrecy). In other words, if Snowden is indeed like Ellsberg, as many supporters claim he is, the suggestion is also that Snowden should not be convicted of any crimes. An article on 27 June had the following to say about Snowden’s flight path, “The maneuvers have left the 30-year-old open to charges that the idealism he first professed has given way to self-preservation” (Denounced Leakers). The criticism here is that someone who publicly professed to be a patriot and claimed to do it all in the name of the American public was doing all he could to avoid accountability to the U.S. government. In addition, the article mentioned how “Snowden's libertarian and dogmatic online persona adds to the emerging portrait of a shape-shifting young man whose motivations and decision-making remain in flux” (Denounced Leakers). In other words, recent revelations about his past statements and behavior and his current movements are paradoxical, which downplays both his morality and credibility. A different article from the same day even suggested that “we may trust the U.S. government in the abstract, but the evidence suggests we can't trust the malcontents and self-appointed do-gooders who may get security clearances” (Fallout Leaks). That is to say, in

theory the intelligence programs and agencies are proper tools, but the people who are handling the subsequent information, might not adhere to the intended use of these programs and information or interpret them properly. It was strongly suggested that Snowden falls into that category.

At the beginning of July, the *Washington Post* began passing explicit judgment on Snowden and his actions in print and it published an editorial on 2 July, which is slightly biased. It begins with “The costs of the Edward Snowden affair continue to mount for the Obama administration - though so far the visible damage is primarily political, rather than national security-related” (Plug these Leaks). Strikingly, it follows with “Documents published so far by news organizations have shed useful light on some NSA programs and raised questions that deserve debate (...) But Mr. Snowden is reported to have stolen many more documents, encrypted copies of which may have been given to allies such as the *WikiLeaks* organization” (Plug these Leaks). It was suggested that the news organization, of which they are one, did good work. In addition, it was highlighted that Snowden still had more to reveal and that he might have shared them with an organization that is not a news organization. They offered no evidence of it but did imply that Snowden had likely been forced to share information with the Chinese and Russian governments. Finally, it ended with “The best solution for both Mr. Snowden and the Obama administration would be his surrender to U.S. authorities, followed by a plea negotiation. It's hard to believe that the results would leave the 30-year-old contractor worse off than living in permanent exile in an unfree country. Sadly, the supposed friends of this naive hacker are likely advising him otherwise” (Plug these Leaks). Apart from the condescending tone towards Snowden, calling him naive, it also implied that some of his supporters might not have his or the American nation's best interests at heart. By advising Snowden to return to the U.S. and to cooperate with the government they asserted that they do know what the best solution for both him and the government is. An article the next day, repeats the exact same sentiments and ends with “if he is not the traitor he is accused of being, he will come home” (Sabotaging). Most importantly, considering how one of their own journalists worked with Snowden and possessed classified documents, it is remarkable how they portray themselves as unaffiliated in these articles and seem to favor the interest of the government. Arguably, it could have been an attempt to distance themselves from the negativity that was starting to cloud the leaks at this time. Not entirely surprising then, on 9 July an article titled “Snowden's links to

WikiLeaks and journalists raises questions” was published. What is striking about this article is not the contents, which aims to discredit *WikiLeaks*, but the fact that of the three people Snowden shared documents with, only two are linked to *WikiLeaks*. The person that is not linked to the organization is Barton Gellman, the journalist that works for the *Washington Post*. Moreover, it was stated that “Snowden's releases reflect another *WikiLeaks* technique: directing materials to suit specific audiences at specific times” (Links to *WikiLeaks*). This suggests some manipulation at the hand of Snowden and his consorts at *WikiLeaks*, but not on the part of the journalist writing for the *Post*. As such, this article can be considered somewhat biased.

In the following period, a few articles stand out with regard to the news frame and the *Post* adopted the notion that Snowden’s action had proven to be justified after all. The first one is from 27 July and discussed a letter in which the Russian government was ensured that Snowden would not receive the death penalty if prosecuted. The *Post* includes the following, “Snowden has suggested in news reports that he could be tortured or face the death penalty if returned home” (Death Penalty). This inclusion serves to illustrate that the things Snowden says are sometimes exaggerated or based on misconceptions, which in turn lessens his credibility. However, the article also discusses a letter that Snowden’s father wrote as a plea to president Obama. The following is included in the article, “we also find reprehensible your administration's Espionage Act prosecution of Edward for disclosures indistinguishable from those which routinely find their way into the public domain via your high level appointees for partisan political advantage,” the elder Snowden wrote, along with his attorney, Bruce Fein” (Death Penalty). This passage, in which Snowden’s actions were defended by his father and an attorney, is in contrast with the frame, in which Snowden was morally wrong to leak classified information, which had been constructed over the past two months. Arguably, it could have been featured to show the hypocrisy of the government and to allow the *Post* to appear objective, despite their tendency to favor the administration’s side in the Snowden affair.

Another article that stands out is from 30 July, in which it was clearly stated that the government had no intention of being transparent about the NSA and was only doing so then due to force, for which everyone should thank Snowden (Gift). An article from 31 July presented an interview with Snowden’s father and thereby offered an account of Snowden’s positive qualities and values (Firm Defense). An editorial from 11 August criticized Obama’s

statements on intelligence reform and implied that no reform would have been instigated at all if Snowden had not been in the picture (Security vs. Liberty). On 13 August, the *Post* reported on Obama's statements about the official whistleblower channels Snowden could have used. It was stated that these would not have been open to Snowden and suggested that if Snowden had chosen to voice his concerns to higher officials "he likely would have been frustrated immensely with the lack of results" (Obama's Comment). In other words, if Snowden had chosen to expose what he considered wrongdoing legally, the information would not have had the same effect. Namely, instigating reform in intelligence gathering and privacy rights, which the *Post* had already labeled as necessary and significant. As such, the article seems to defend Snowden.

On 11 October, the *Post* reported on the Sam Adams award that was given to Snowden, thereby showing that former whistleblowers supported him and that he was considered to have performed important deeds. Finally, on 22 October an opinion piece strongly argued on behalf of Snowden. It stated, "Whatever Snowden is, he is curiously modest and has bent over backward to ensure that the information he has divulged has done as little damage as possible. As a 'traitor,' he lacks the requisite intent and menace" and "he has been careful with his info, doling it out to responsible news organizations - *The Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, etc. - and not tossing it up in the air, *WikiLeaks* style, and echoing the silly mantra 'Information wants to be free'" (Traitor). It attributes some positive traits to Snowden and distances him from *Wikileaks*, thereby contradicting the frame constructed in the previous weeks. As an endnote, the following was offered "He may have been technically disloyal to America but not, after some reflection, to American values" (Traitor). What this article is hinting at is that the values Snowden had violated according to the government do not necessarily comply with the values of the American people. As such, in hindsight, the benefits of the leaks have outweighed any negative impact they have had and Snowden's cause gained a sense of morality.

Soon after this reports started coming out about Snowden having used log-in credentials from his co-workers to access the documents he leaked. The *Post* started shifting the blame away from Snowden and showed support for his cause while remaining critical. An article from 8 November discussed this and it included the following, "the revelation is the latest to indicate that inadequate security measures at the NSA played a significant role in the worst breach of classified data in the super-secret spy agency's 61-year history" (Conned

Passwords). This seems to suggest that much of the blame can be attributed to shortcomings in NSA business culture, thereby downplaying the role of Snowden who was being accused of having unlawfully used other people's passwords. Then, on 19 December, an article reported on the many documents Snowden could potentially still have after comments by a U.S. official sparked new debate. The article explicitly mentioned that Snowden was always careful and consistent in expressing his desire that only information that was safe to be revealed, information that would help the public understand what was going on without endangering national security, should be published (U.S. Adversaries). Rounding out the year, on 24 December, an article by Gellman was published, which discussed Snowden at great length, based on talks Gellman had with the latter. It was stressed that after the initial leaks "dozens of revelations followed, and then hundreds, as news organizations around the world picked up the story. Congress pressed for explanations, new evidence revived old lawsuits and the Obama administration was obliged to declassify thousands of pages it had fought for years to conceal" (NSA Revelations). This served to remind the reader of the impact and significance of the revealed documents, which the author and the *Washington Post* helped analyze and select. It was also mentioned how Snowden "consistently steered the conversation back to surveillance, democracy and the meaning of the documents he exposed" (NSA Revelations). This conveys a sense of selflessness on Snowden's part and strengthened his claim of primarily leaking for the sake of the American public. In addition, the government is critiqued of which the following passage is a good example. "For months, Obama administration officials attacked Snowden's motives and said the work of the NSA was distorted by selective leaks and misinterpretations. On Dec. 16 (..) U.S. District Judge Richard J. Leon described the NSA's capabilities as 'almost Orwellian' and said its bulk collection of U.S. domestic telephone records was probably unconstitutional" (NSA Revelations). Interestingly, it was also stated that "It is commonly said of Snowden that he broke an oath of secrecy, a turn of phrase that captures a sense of betrayal" (NSA Revelations). The *Washington Post* used this, and similar phrases, several times in their coverage of the early period of the NSA and Snowden affair. Lastly, it is said that "Some news accounts have quoted U.S. government officials as saying Snowden has arranged for the automated release of sensitive documents if he is arrested or harmed. There are strong reasons to doubt that, beginning with Snowden's insistence, to this reporter and others, that he does not want the documents published in bulk" (NSA Revelations). This is a bold statement to

make, considering the fact that the *Post* had implied previously that the other two reporters were not very reliable due to their ties with *Wikileaks*. All in all, the piece offers lots of insight into Snowden's mind and motivation, while remaining critical, albeit a little contradictory to previous reports on occasion.

Unlike the *New York Times*, who focused on the debate sparked by the leaks and based their judgement of Snowden mostly on that debate, the *Washington Post* initially focused on whether or not Snowden was justified in leaking the information in the first place. This resulted in a news frame that began as unsupportive and condemning, but gradually evolved into a narrative in which the Post, too, conveyed the notion that the impact of the leaks could be considered enough justification for Snowden's actions.

Notes

¹ The award Snowden received was the *Sam Adams Award*, which is awarded to “a member of the intelligence community or related professions who exemplifies Sam Adam's courage, persistence, and devotion to truth – no matter the consequences” (samadamsaward.ch).

Conclusion

This thesis has set out to determine how three actors, the US government, the news media and whistleblowers, work with or against each other in terms of cooperation, transparency and civil responsibility. By focusing on these key factors the relationship between the three actors became evident. Findings about the relationship between the government and news media reveal that the latter control which officials are given a voice and how the subsequent statements are interpreted, but no conclusive evidence could be deduced from the analysis of articles alone. This might be because the research was limited to only two newspapers and further research would need to incorporate more sources, preferably with different cultural and political backgrounds, as this might confirm or disprove, for instance, the significance of news corporations being owned by a few large companies. In addition, the research was also limited to articles in print. It could be interesting to also analyze articles that were solely published online, especially considering the notion that the Internet is how most people consume the news nowadays and the online version of the *Times*, for example, might aim for a different, younger, audience than the print edition.

Nevertheless, the research does show that Edward Snowden's personal main narrative revolved around the notion that the entire NSA affair, and the classified information that had been published, was a dignified team effort aided by the role of the public. In addition, the leaks were meant to ensure that that same public was fully informed about their government's actions. This is in line with the theories outlined in chapter one concerning whistleblowers in three ways. Firstly, whistleblowers are a useful tool in guaranteeing transparency. Secondly, a proper whistleblower must have knowledge of what the information that is leaked means or will reveal. Thirdly, a whistleblower must be able to determine whether leaking the information will be worth any hazardous outfall that might occur. The narrative that Snowden constructed adhered to these requirements. He quickly revealed that he worked for the organization that was being exposed for wrongdoing and also revealed that he had a lot of working experience in the US intelligence community. Moreover, Snowden continually and adamantly expressed that he wanted to help American society and would not publish any information that could cause harm.

Chapter three revealed that the journalism of the *Post* was more extensive and offered more criticism of Snowden than that of the *Times*. The news frame of the latter was quite

unilateral, emphasizing how Snowden's actions were ultimately in the best interest of the public, which excuses the illegality of leaking classified information. The *Post*, however, used a more bilateral frame and offered many different perspectives before it too arrived at the conclusion that perhaps the leaks were justified after all. This confirms the suspicion that the coverage of the *Post* might be more critical and diverse than that of the *Times*. What is more striking, though, is that, at first, the *Post* attempted to discredit Snowden, *WikiLeaks* and its associated journalists. As was discussed in chapter one, one theory was that the journalists who worked together with *WikiLeaks* were also very critical in their reporting about *WikiLeaks* and associates, because the association could be threatening to the integrity of a newspaper. As such, it is not surprising that the *Washington Post* would adopt this frame and be hesitant to explicitly support Snowden when the affair first broke out, because they could be linked to the accused leaker. This would also explain why the *Times* was quick to criticize the Obama administration in their coverage, while the *Post* seemed keener on presenting the government's perspective.

In addition, an analysis of keywords used by both the *Times* and the *Post* revealed that Snowden was often labeled as an outsider and the papers refrained from explicitly terming him a whistleblower. As discussed in chapter one, this is often done intentionally to discredit the leaker, but can result in strengthening the credibility of what the whistleblower is trying to convey. However, research into the news framing of Bradley Manning revealed that he was often termed a whistleblower in order to emphasize the morality of his actions and to portray him as a victim. The fact that the *Times* and the *Post* did not frame Snowden in the same way as Manning could indicate two things. Firstly, that the newspapers did not consider Snowden's case to be morally equal to Manning's case. However, the analyses of news articles revealed that Snowden was often compared to Manning and associated with *WikiLeaks*, which makes this an unlikely reason. Secondly, the difference might have to do with the administration's aggressive prosecution of whistleblowers and leakers over the past years and the severe punishment Manning received. That is to say, the more ambivalent attitude towards Snowden than towards Manning is to ensure that the newspapers will not be criminalized in the same way.

Finally, it was shown that a mutually beneficial relationship between whistleblowers and the news media is crucial. This is attested by the fact that Snowden, who insisted on sharing his documents with legitimate news outlets and asked them to determine

the worth and potential risks of the information, is generally framed as being morally justified, whereas Bradley Manning and *WikiLeaks* were criticized for dumping all of their information onto the open internet. Moreover, since both Snowden, the *Times* and the *Post* emphasize the aggressiveness of the government in persecuting Snowden it is evident that the relationship between whistleblowers and the US government is not one that motivates the latter to be more transparent. On the contrary, the relationship can only force transparency if the whistleblower is willing to make serious sacrifices in freedom, for the latter will either have to flee the country, like Snowden, or face prosecution and a possible jail sentence, like Manning. The news media seem to be the only ones that benefit from working with a whistleblower, because it not only awards them with information that they can control as they see fit, but potentially also with an actual prize. While the *Washington Post* certainly was critical and offered their readers many perspectives to choose from, it was essentially biting the hand that fed it by initially disapproving of Snowden's actions.

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