



The ethico-politics of whistleblowing: Mediated truth-telling in digital cultures

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Introduction

As addressed in previous issues of *ephemera*, in contemporary political economy, the conjunction of openness and closure, visibility and invisibility, and transparency and secrecy of information is precarious (e.g. Bachmann et al., 2017; Curtis and Weir, 2016). Information and ‘truth’ have been turned into objects of contention, and it is increasingly contested what is considered sound information and truth, who has access to which type of information, and who is in the position to shape and control information and promote truth(s) (Munro, 2017). The struggles and complexities of negotiating information, truth and the ‘politics of truth’ (Foucault, 2007) are also accompanied by the fact that, in a society in which mass communication and media gain in importance, organisations have become ‘leaky containers’ (Lyon, 2002). This is evidenced in an exemplary way by the NSA affair and Edward Snowden’s revelations of mass surveillance, the WikiLeaks-disclosures, commonly associated with the names of Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange, and, more recently, the Panama Papers leak, often associated with the name of Caruana Galizia¹ and the *International Consortium Investigative Journalists*.

In the context of leaking information and ‘disclosing truth’, the figure of the whistleblower, who ‘speaks out about illegal or unethical behaviour within his or her organization’ (Alford, 1999: 266), adopts a specific, discursively constructed position that is rife with ambivalence (Kenny, 2019; Perry, 1998). In public

1 Caruana Galizia has been a Maltese investigative journalist and anti-corruption activist who has regularly reported on political events. She was murdered nearby her home in 2017 (The Greens/European Free Alliance, 2018).

debates, whistleblowers are on the one hand portrayed as ‘heroes’ and role models that speak up against ethically problematic or corrupt organisational or institutional systems (Near and Miceli, 1985), with the aim to point to or prevent ‘public harm’ (Andrade, 2015: 328; see also Breit et al., 2015). In such ideal-typical representations, it is assumed that whistleblowers take into account and accept the variegated personal costs accompanying acts of ‘telling the truth’ – for the ‘common good’ including, e.g., transparency, openness and, above all, the protection of democracy. On the other hand, however, whistleblowers are presented as dubious figures and ‘traitors’ who threaten the moral integrity of organisational or institutional systems by violating extant codes of conduct. By refusing devotion, compliance and loyalty to the employer, or by disclosing ‘secret’ or sensitive (‘classified’) information, they appear as dangerous ‘troublemakers’ (Grant, 2002, Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016; see also Sampson, this issue). Irrespective of the positioning and evaluation of whistleblowers and their acts of ‘truth-telling’ (Foucault, 2001), we notice that whistleblowers and whistleblowing attract increasing attention both in public debate and research (Lewis et al., 2014).

Looking at existing research on whistleblowing in fields such as organisational studies, business ethics and law, we notice that research into this area is often rather positivist and prescriptive. It examines, for instance, the likelihood of whistleblowing to occur and related implications (Bjørkelo et al., 2010; Miceli, 2004; Miceli et al., 2008); or it assesses whistleblowing in relation to the question whether predefined legal and organisational rules or ethical codes have been followed (Bowie, 1982; Hoffman and Schwartz, 2015). The creation of typologies of whistleblowing and whistleblowing policies is also common (Loyens, 2013), as is the oftentimes empirical-quantitative analysis of those factors and variables that affect the intentions and practices of whistleblowing (Dozier and Miceli, 1985; King and Hermodson, 2000; Near and Miceli, 1996). Overall, such studies often seek to predict or prescribe ‘how to blow the whistle’ in different institutional and organisational contexts. Other whistleblowing studies have focused more specifically on exploring the identity of whistleblowers, including the personal motivations, rationales and impacts that whistleblowers experience and suffer, both within and outside of organisations (Alford, 2001; Ciulla et al., 2007; Trevino and Nelson, 2014). Such studies are valuable in that they enhance and enrich insights into whistleblowing as a personal experience; yet where the focus is exclusively upon micro-level, individualistic accounts and issues, such as beliefs and motivations, there is a tendency to overlook the wider political struggles, the cultural and institutional settings and the socio-material ‘infrastructures’ in which acts of speaking out occur and are shaped (Oleson, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this special issue of *ephemera* and the contributions to it seek to situate the experience of whistleblowing not in the realm of the individual whistleblower, but in the context of the wider political economy. As such, the experience of whistleblowing is considered to be shaped by discourses, such as security, anonymity, transparency and accountability, by institutional and organisational norms, including legal frameworks, organisational structures and procedures that regulate the speaking (out) of members and non-members of organisations, as well as by social identities and subject positions. In other words, whistleblowing is not seen as an individual ‘autonomous’ act (Alford, 2001), but as a social practice that emerges from and is informed by a specific ‘normative matrix of behaviour’. It is a ‘focal point of experience’ in which ‘forms of possible knowledge, normative frameworks of behaviour, and potential modes of existence for possible subjects are linked together’ (Foucault, 2010: 3). In view of this, this special issue is particularly interested in the exploration of the specific conditions, possibilities, mediations and regulations of truth-telling (Lee and Heinrichs, this issue, Sampson, this issue). Furthermore, it seeks to address the still under-explored ethical and political dimensions and implications of practices of whistleblowing. According to the perspective adopted, the ethico-politics of whistleblowing cannot be reduced to rule- and code-based institutional and organisational regulations and prescriptions. On the contrary, the ethico-politics addresses the possibilities of questioning and problematising established practices and the ‘moral-rules-in-use fashioned within the personal and structural constraints of one’s organization’ (Jackall, 2010: 5). By this means, it explores how individual and collective subjects reflect on their positions and ways of relating to self and others and (re)organise existing relations and practices.²

Some whistleblowing studies in the fields of organisational research, political science and sociology, STS and media studies have already examined contextual issues enabling, constraining and, generally, underpinning whistleblowing and acts of truth-telling (e.g. Di Salvo, 2016; Nayar, 2010; Olesen, 2019; Aghostino and Tyhlstrup, this issue). Among other things, they have analysed the nexus between whistleblowing, power and politics, thereby understanding whistleblowing as a political act or a form of resistance that aims at challenging established social, institutional or organisational practices and orders, in which whistleblowers are, like other political actors, embedded (Contu, 2014; Mansbach, 2007, 2009; Monk et al., 2015; Rothschild and Miethe, 1994). Referring to the work of Foucault (2001), whistleblowing has further been addressed and conceptualised as a modern form of *parrhesia*, the courageous and

2 The idea for this special issue emerged from a workshop on ‘Speaking truth to power? Theorising whistleblowing’ that has been organised by Kate Kenny, Meghan Van Portfliet and the *ephemera* collective in Belfast in 2016.

risky act in which the speaker ‘dares’ to speak truth to power (Folkers, 2016). Like the *parrhesiastes*, the whistleblower speaks truth to power ‘from below’, and thereby takes a high risk of being excluded, ostracised, stigmatised (see Foxley, this issue), or otherwise punished in the process of doing so (Kenny et al., 2018; Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013; Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). Especially recent research into parrhesia has explored it as a specific modality of truth telling that goes beyond the individual whistleblower or parrhesiastes and micro-political acts of resistance. Concepts such as ‘parrhesiastic networked spaces’ (Aghostino and Tyhlstrup, this issue) or ‘networked parrhesia and truth-telling’ (Munro, 2017) point to the multiple actors, practices and technologies that are involved in the social, discursive and digital mediation of whistleblowing (see also Chun and Friedland, 2015; Morais, this issue).

In the next section, we discuss the historical changes and contingency of whistleblowing and the mediation and regulation of practices of truth-telling. We will focus on the role of intermediary organisations, infrastructures and technology in digital cultures, which increasingly shape acts of ‘speaking truth to power’ (Nayar, 2010; Walters, 2014). We will then further elaborate on our understanding of the ethico-politics of whistleblowing and its mediation, before we introduce the different contributions to the special issue.

The regulation and mediation of truth-telling: Changes over time

Foucault (2001, 2011) has shown that the practice of truth-telling has a long history, in which it took many different forms in different contexts. While Foucault evoked the contingency of ‘truth-telling’ by demonstrating how it was problematised in different ways in Greek Antiquity, the term ‘whistleblowing’ is of much more recent origin. The US-consumer advocate, Ralph Nader is usually given credit for inventing the term in 1971. Nader presented whistleblowing – insiders in big organisations and bureaucracies going public with their knowledge of malpractices – as a form of resistance and democratic intervention, that is grounded ‘in the right to information, (and) the citizen’s right to participate in important decisions’ (Nader, 1972: 7). Nader was particularly concerned about destructive potentials and the often live-threatening hush ups, for example, in the chemical industries, but also with ‘powerful organizations’ that ‘penetrate deeper and deeper into the lives of people’ (*ibid.*). In the specific US context of the early 1970s, to which Nader referred, it was not only the (life-threatening) power of big organisations, the decline of authority (Oleson, 2018), and the problematisation of the virtues of the ‘organization man’ (Whyte, 2002/1957), but also the overall negative image of whistleblowers as ‘snitches’,

'rats', 'traitors', and the relative lack of whistleblower regulation and protection that characterised the situation.

Since then, the situation has changed in many respects. Today – at least in Western democracies – whistleblowers are often celebrated and presented as positive figures. Cultural representations in popular movies (e.g. Steven Spielberg's *The Post*, 2018, or Larysa Kondracki's *The Whistleblower*, 2011), documentaries (like Laura Poitras' *Citizen Four*, 2014), awards and prizes testify this. At the same time, whistleblowing has become a highly regulated field. Vandekerckhove (2006) and Vandekerckhove and Langenberg (2012) have observed an increasing 'institutionalisation' of whistleblowing over the past 30 years. Accordingly, proliferating rules and regulations shape the speaking out of the whistleblower, both in legal terms and in terms of organisational whistleblowing policies (see also Brown et al., 2014; Vandekerckhove and Tsahuridu, 2010). On the other hand, in the context of contemporary 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2019), Nader's concern with invasive organisations that 'penetrate' the lives of citizens has become even more pressing. Digital technologies are increasingly subsumed under economic imperatives and thereby intensify surveillance and control in all spheres of life. They permit organisations to 'know' employees, customers, voters and citizens – and (potential) whistleblowers and dissenters – in depth and detail. New surveillance practices based on information processing 'permit a new transparency in which not just citizens, but all of us, across the range of roles we play in everyday life, are constantly checked, monitored, tested, assessed, valued and judged' (Lyon, 2013: 12). Paradoxically, the emerging digital infrastructures that intensify surveillance also made leaking of large amounts of information much easier as, e.g., Snowden's leaks on NSA spying and mass surveillance (Lyon, 2014; Snowden, 2019) and Christopher Whyllie's exposure of the manipulative and monetising use of Facebook profiles vividly illustrate (Cadwalladr, 2018; see also Curtis and Weir, 2016).

Because our contemporary societies are increasingly regulated and mediated with and by these digital infrastructures and their basis of networking information, we are facing new questions of how truth-telling, whistleblowing, or leaking of state secrets are entangled with media-technological conditions. In particular, this requires an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of truth-telling, associated with new communication technologies and digital infrastructures. While the 'mediated visibility' (Thompson, 2005) has attracted the attention of media scholars (Uldam, 2016) and critical scholars of transparency who have theorised digital technologies as 'mediating technologies' (Flyverbom, 2016) that influence and shape what becomes visible, for whom and in what form, the variation of 'speakability' has gained less attention from organisational scholars.

This being the case, let us look more closely at the role of digital transformation in truth-telling (see also Agosthino and Thylstrup, this issue; Morais, this issue; Nayar, 2010).

Obviously, the shift towards digital infrastructures is not purely technological (Bowker and Star, 2000). Digital infrastructures are also entangled with particular socio-material practices and affect people, organisations and processes of organizing alike (Berlant, 2016). They include some people and exclude others, and they afford some processes and forms of exchange, while making others less likely or effective. While some people, e.g., know how to encrypt their emails, or how to identify users of these apparently anonymous conversations, others speak neither any computing language nor English (Wiedemann, 2014). While some actors are considered to be legitimised to blow the whistle and are supported by their networks and infrastructures in the process of doing so, others lack this support and the legitimacy to 'speak truth to power' (Foucault, 2001). While some actors dare to speak the truth and know how to make themselves heard, other, less privileged actors, including e.g. persons of colour, women and, generally, members of non-white, non-elite minority groups, are often ignored, silenced or (self-)censored (Agosthino and Thylstrup, this issue; Fanchini, this issue; Liu, this issue). People have to *know* how to play the *game of truth*, which is based on 'a set of rules by which truth is produced' (Foucault, 1997: 297). As rules change, new players enter the game and the trumps are redistributed. It seems that certain whistleblowers know how to play the game of truth in an effective way, how to use prevailing rules and infrastructures, or how to change the game in a particular way. As discussed in the interview with Micah Lee (Lee and Heinrichs, this issue), computer engineering and especially computer security is increasingly important in this regard. The production and protection, and the distribution and dissemination of truth are mediated by technologies and dependent on the values that are 'folded' into the 'code' (Introna, 2007). In this context the term code refers to both its technical and cultural meaning. Following Wiedemann (2014: 19), 'code is the basic technological process, the set of rules and instructions that, for example, govern the permutations of all the 0s and 1s that lie behind user interfaces; yet code is also the cultural framework, which is directed and interpreted socially and performatively' (see also Berlant, 2016). Put differently, out of the reciprocal power relations of digital infrastructures and social practices emerges a 'socio-technical coding', which constitutes a central basis for the 'game of truth' in digital cultures.

In addition, the speaking out of the whistleblower is shaped by interactions and collaborations with journalists, media organisations and their rules of production, as well as new media in general. Consider Snowden's exposures of

the surveillance practices and inner workings of the NSA as a paradigmatic example (Lyon, 2014): Snowden's speaking out – and in fact, Snowden as a public figure – is difficult to imagine without the collaborations with the journalist Glenn Greenwald, the filmmaker Laura Poitras, media organisations like *The Guardian*, as well as digital technologies and infrastructures that have enabled (encrypted) communication (see e.g. Greenwald, 2014; see also Lee and Heinrichs, this issue).

Whistleblowing is, moreover, not only mediated by institutional and organisational infrastructures, (non)governmental policies and discourses, but also by 'intermediary organisations' that mobilise, amplify and channel the truth-telling of whistleblowers, often in the name of transparency, democracy and justice. We can think here of classical whistleblower protection and support organisations like the *Government Accountability Project (GAP)*, which was created in 1977 in Washington with the aim 'to help whistleblowers who – through their individual acts of conscience – serve the public interest' (Devine, 1997: 159), or of organisations like *Transparency International (TI)*, the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)*, or *WikiLeaks*. *TI* sees the 'speaking up' of the whistleblower as one of the most important tools for 'shining light on corruption or other malpractice' (TI, 2015: 14). So-called *Advocacy and Legal Advice Centers (ALACs)*, further, provide an infrastructure for truth-telling and support concerned citizens with (legal) advice and effective tools to speak out and reveal misuse of power. The *ICIJ*, a global network of 249 Journalists in more than 90 countries, coordinates investigative journalists from around the world and encourages 'whistleblowers to securely submit all forms of content that might be of public concern' (ICIJ, 2019) through secure online channels. *WikiLeaks*, furthermore, has established itself as an online platform for leaking classified information and documents, provided by insiders of corporations and governments (Brevini, 2017). Most importantly, *WikiLeaks* seeks to provide an infrastructure of disclosure, which allows geographically dispersed individuals to leak critical information in a safe and anonymous way. As such, it can be understood as an instance of 'networked parrhesia' (Munro, 2017). Based on hacktivist principles and an 'anarchist macropolitical agenda' (*ibid.*: 519), it seeks to delegitimise established institutions and create a space for dissent and transformation.

All the above-mentioned actors, components and elements (re)shape the space for whistleblowers and truth telling in various ways. We argue that this socio-technically mediated space is also an *ethico-political* space, in which institutional and organisational practices, discourses and truths are (re-)negotiated, reflected and potentially transformed (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016). Acts of whistleblowing are, in our understanding, embedded and situated in complex

relations of power, which shape whistleblowers as political actors as well as subjects of ethics and morality (Foucault, 2001). Given the special issue's interest in gaining a better understanding of the political and ethical dimensions and questions that are implicated in mediated practices of whistleblowing, we will now further elaborate on the ethico-politics of truth-telling.

The ethico-politics of truth-telling and whistleblowing

In his historical investigations, Foucault noticed that, as a mode of truth-telling, the term parrhesia was 'first of all and fundamentally a political notion' (2010: 8). It referred to speaking truth in public, in front of the assembly. Later, from Socrates to the Cynics, parrhesia increasingly played an important role in the context of ethics and ethical self-formation (Catlaw et al., 2014; Luxon, 2008). Political and ethical parrhesia differ in many respects, but what they share is the 'parrhesiastic function' of disrupting and opening up established (organisational) practices, rather than reproducing them. In the political context, the parrhesiastic function is to 'introduce the difference of a truth-telling into the debate' (Gros, 2010: 382), and to produce a *dissensus* that is a condition of possibility for the 'democratic game' to be played. In the sphere of ethics, the parrhesiastic function is to allow for reflection on habitualised practices and modes of life; constituting in this way the basis for ethical self-formation and transformation. In this sense, parrhesia is an ethico-political practice that opens up possibilities of new ways of relating to the self and others (*the ethical dimension*), and new ways of negotiating and organising relations to others (*the political dimension*). In the practice of parrhesia, ethics, politics and truth are 'indissolubly bound together' (Lazzerato, 2014: 237).

The entanglement of ethics and politics also characterises modern forms of truth-telling or whistleblowing. Let us take Daniel Ellsberg and the leaking of the *Pentagon Papers* – one of the first cases of truth-telling that was later called 'whistleblowing'³ – as an example. As an expert in strategic decision-making and member of the RAND corporation, Ellsberg worked for the Pentagon in the late 1960s. Having had access to classified documents, which in his view proved the systematic deception of the public on matters of the Vietnam War by the US government, he leaked the papers to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*

3 As mentioned above, the US consumer advocate Ralph Nader is usually given credit for coining the term 'whistleblower'. In January 1971, five months before Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, Nader organised a conference with the aim of invigorating the role on whistleblowing and strengthening the impact and position of 'insiders' who speak out on malpractices (Nader et al., 1972). Ellsberg himself preferred the term 'truth-teller'.

in 1971. Ellsberg's leaking had tremendous effects both on a political and on a personal level. The leaking of the papers ultimately led to Nixon's resignation, it contributed to the further delegitimisation of the Vietnam War, and it provoked intensive debates not only on the legitimacy of state secrets, but also on the legitimacy of Ellsberg's acts in terms of undermining organisational loyalty and violating organisational rules more generally (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). He was labelled as 'the most dangerous man of America'. Ellsberg's decision to leak the papers, to intervene in the course of events and to speak out against what he saw as a crime, however, implied many difficult and hard decisions. Ellsberg struggled with conflicting loyalties and had to question his 'duties' and obligations associated with his organisational position and role as expert, adviser and 'president's man'. In a long process of struggle, which he vividly describes in his memoirs (Ellsberg, 2003), he did not only have to take responsible decisions in relation to various others; he also transformed himself from a loyal 'president's man' to a radical critic of this very president and the whole 'regime of practices' that protected state secrets from public scrutiny and debate (Ellsberg, 2004). In this process, we notice a shift from what Kant called the 'private use of reason' (which made Ellsberg a loyal 'organisation man') to the 'public use of reason' (which led Ellsberg reflect on his involvement and the organisation's practices from a more universal point of view). As Ellsberg put it, he was exchanging his personal loyalty to the president, career and influence to what he calls 'higher loyalties' (*ibid.*: xiv), i.e., loyalties to the constitution, obligation to truth and other human lives. In this process, Ellsberg constituted himself as an ethical subject in the sense of becoming the subject of his own moral action (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013).

The tension that is created by conflicting 'loyalties' is also reflected in the definition of the 'whistleblower' that Snowden (2019) provides in his recently published autobiography. The whistleblower, he says there,

[is] a person who through hard experience has concluded that their life inside an institution has become incompatible with the principles developed in – and the loyalty owed to – the greater society outside it, to which that institution should become accountable. (Snowden, 2019: 238)

The above accounts by Ellsberg and Snowden illustrate the irreducible interweaving of the ethical and political dimensions of whistleblowing, prompting us to speak of the 'ethico-politics' of whistleblowing. By understanding ethics as 'the considered practice that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (Foucault, 1997: 284), the concept of ethics which is implied here, is distinct from normative, often utilitarian or deontological concepts of ethics. Such concepts seek to develop universal, normative frameworks for judging acts of whistleblowing (e.g. Bowie, 1982; Hoffman and

Schwartz, 2015) Often, they assess whistleblowers relative to the question whether they have complied with pre-defined institutional regulations and policies that define the 'right' and 'correct' mode of speaking out (Vandekerckhove and Langenberg, 2012). Our concept is also distinct from concepts of virtue ethics, which tend to attribute specific moral qualities to whistleblowers or relate acts of whistleblowing to specific 'qualities which individuals possess or fail to possess qua individuals' (Macintyre, 2004: 317).

Conspicuously, whistleblowing is also inherently political. While this is widely accepted, we pursue here an understanding of the political, which is linked neither to a specific political agenda nor to specific institutional politics. In our view, whistleblowing is political in the sense that the speaking out of the whistleblower can open up a space for potential transformation. Thus, the questioning, 'de-naturalisation' (Fournier and Grey, 2000) and problematisation of pervasive practices and 'business as usual' can open up established routines and normative arrangements and create a pressure for change.

Whistleblowing has been described as an 'act of field transgression' (Oleson, 2018). As such it violates, transgresses or oversteps specific rules, regulations, logics of specific organisations or organisational fields. Whether it occurs in private companies (Armenakis, 2004), public institutions like the EU (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016) or governments (Delmas, 2015), in health care organisations (Mannion and Davis, 2015), the finance industry (Kenny, 2019), in companies at the heart of 'surveillance capitalism', like Cambridge Analytica (Cadwalladr, 2018), in military organisations or in 'national security' institutions (Ellsberg, 2004; Harding, 2014; see also Bushnell et al., this issue, Lee and Heinrichs, this issue), 'blowing the whistle' will take context-specific forms and variations. None of them is the result of a simple, straight-forward strategic plan of reforming organisations or society as a whole, but all of them may 'initiate powerful democratic dramas in contemporary societies' (Oleson, 2018: 9).

The 'politics of truth-telling' is complex, and contemporary forms of whistleblowing are wide-ranging. Some of them may be triggered by an immediate confrontation with practices that are experienced as intolerable and in need of change, such as, e.g., the speaking up against cultures of gendered violence we have observed in the context of the *#metoo* movement (Morais, this issue). Other forms may seek to change structures of specific work organisations and are 'moved to speak publicly and candidly...in defense of substantive purposes of the organization that employs them' (Rothschild, 2013: 886); still others may go beyond specific organisations and be linked to an 'anarchist macropolitical agenda', as Munro (2017: 536) argued in the case of WikiLeaks.

How the 'act of field transgression' is valued is contingent on the cultural, institutional and organisational context in which it emerges and connected to a specific *Zeitgeist*. The ethical, moral and political judgment is often controversial, and it changes over time. Taking up the Ellsberg example from above: While he was first labelled by the government as 'the most dangerous man of America' and threatened with 115 years of prison, he was later reframed as a democratic hero and awarded the 'Right livelihood award', among others. We see similar shifting evaluations and constructions in all the major (and minor) cases. Snowden, for example, is in some parts of the world recognised and praised as a 'truth-teller', hero of democracy and an exemplary case of 'civil disobedience' (Scheuerman, 2014);⁴ in other parts of the world (particularly in his home country), he is, however, seen as a 'traitor' (Murphy, 2014) who deserves 'severe punishment' or even death penalty.⁵

The positive or negative framing of the whistleblower is important since it affects the credibility of the speaker and the effectiveness of whistleblowing (see also Liu, this issue). While such framing is a potential (political) weapon against whistleblowers, it is not a one-sided process in which whistleblowers are simply passive victims. This especially applies in the digital context where social media and other information and communication technologies also provide whistleblowers with new possibilities to present themselves as truth-tellers. The case of Snowden is again illustrative in this regard: Snowden first presented himself to the public via a video-interview, which was posted on the website of *The Guardian*. It became one of the most viewed videos in *The Guardian's* history. Snowden was interviewed by Glenn Greenwald, and the interview was filmed and arranged by Laura Poitras. While the interview questions gave Snowden the possibility to present himself as a 'truth-teller', Laura Poitras' specific documentary style also shaped the framing of Snowden as a truth-teller who sacrifices himself for the public good (notably Poitras received an Oscar for the documentary *Citizen Four*). Glenn Greenwald's reflections on the situation substantiate this:

4 Snowden has received numerous awards, including the Right Livelihood Award, the German Whistleblower Prize, the Ridenhour Prize for Truth-Telling, and the Carl von Ossietzky Medal from the International League of Human Rights (Snowden, 2019).

5 In an interview, given in February 2016, Mike Pompeo, the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and current US secretary of state, said: Snowden 'should be brought back from Russia and given due process, and I think that the proper outcome would be that he would be given a death sentence for having put friends of mine, friends of yours, in the military today, at enormous risk because of the information he stole and then released to foreign powers' (<https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2016/11/trumps-pick-for-cia-director-has-called-for-snowdens-execution/>).

Laura's work was brilliant – the video was spare and the editing superb – but mostly the power lays in hearing Snowden speak for himself. He cogently conveyed the conviction, passion, and force of commitment that had driven him to act. His boldness in coming forward to claim what he had done and take responsibility for his actions, his refusal to hide and be hunted would, I knew, inspire millions. (Greenwald, 2014: 122)

Contemporary, digitally mediated forms of truth-telling hence reveal the complex and contested framing, valuation and entanglement of the ethical and political dimensions of speaking out. How discourses around transparency and the 'free flow of information', incorporating e.g. visions of a 'free virtual cyberspace' and elements of the 'Californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996), effectively influence ideas and practices of truth-telling and 'digital disobedience' (Scheuerman, 2016), can be further illustrated with reference to yet another example.

Among the groups, which propagate internet freedom and free access to software and knowledge, the 'hydra-collective' *Anonymous* can be seen as an expression of the *Zeitgeist* of our digitalised world (Coleman, 2013a, 2013b). *Anonymous* is a group of hacktivists who deliberately conceal the personal identity of those who participate in its 'operations'. Using various forms of public interventions, like hacking of websites or street protests, the collective seeks to counteract political and economic grievances by exposing repressive forms of surveillance and losses of privacy and freedom (Bachmann et al., 2017). However, while *Anonymous*' 'operations' can be considered as communicative acts that intervene in the world (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015), not all of *Anonymous*' activities can be understood as whistleblowing or parrhesiastic truth-telling. Yet the example of *Anonymous* raises interesting questions with regard to the conditions and limits of truth-telling in the digital context.

The specific technological conditions of the internet play a constitutive role for the collective and shape the modality of truth-telling. While parrhesia as a form of truth-telling requires that the speaker 'personally signs...the truth (s)he states' (Foucault, 2011: 11) and thereby binds her- or himself to that truth, *Anonymous* escapes the logic of a personalised and individualised truth-teller. Though it shares the spirit of the cynical form of parrhesia in criticising predominant conventions of society. The Cynics did so by bringing their *bios into play*, i.e., by publically demonstrating their provoking and dissident way of living (*ibid.*: 165-174). *Anonymous*, by contrast, keeps any individual *bios* secret while developing an organisational identity and actorhood of a constantly changing collective (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015). Alongside the various political actions, *Anonymous*' fluidity, structural ephemerality and concomitant anonymity can be interpreted as a critical statement against the progressive 'disappearance of

disappearance' (Haggerty and Erikson, 2000: 619) in contemporary 'cultures of surveillance' (Lyon, 2018). Where massive data gathering of private companies and national secret services, the profiling of individuals for multiple purposes, and self-presentations and -profiling become the norm, anonymity constitutes a new mode of political subjectification or a 'technique of de-subjection' (de Lagasnerie, 2016: 104; see also Bachmann et al., 2017; Scheuerman, 2016). *Anonymous* intervenes politically in various ways and stands for collectively produced content and actions, rather than single individualised celebrities. Incidentally, in the production of common content within the constantly transforming collective, humor plays a significant role (Coleman, 2014). The most controversial form of humour is thereby the so-called *lulz*. The short form *lulz* means *Schadenfreude*; a dark form of humor, which sticks with *Anonymous* since its beginning in the online forum *4chan* (*ibid.*). The term evolved from the acronym *lol* (laughing out loud or lots of laugh), which is typically used in online chat rooms (Bardeau and Danet, 2011). Whereas *loling* became a popular term for internet chat in general, *lulzing* embraces specific, well-versed technical knowledge and enjoyment of the technology itself.

Essentially the *lulz* plays with the exposure of all kinds of data that seem to be 'personal', 'secure' or 'inviolable': targets receive unpaid pizzas at their home address or have their social security, credit card or phone numbers leaked and private communications posted (Coleman, 2014). Overall, the *lulz* addresses current issues of anonymity and information control and poses the key question: who is able to know what about whom? As Coleman (*ibid.*: 33) puts it:

Lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, and our aesthetic sensibilities. Any presumption of our world's inviolability becomes a weapon; trolls invalidate the world by gesturing toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it – to pull the carpet from under us whenever they feel the urge.

Such 'puncturing of consensus' can be understood and performed as a disruptive form of truth-telling that seeks to make the fragility of anonymity and people's privacy in digital cultures visible and, and by doing so, helps to protect it. Yet, without doubt, there are forms of *lulzing* that violate boundaries that are worth being protected and defended within the ethico-politics of truth-telling. An example for a particular problematic form of *lulzing* is the posting of pictures of cruel accidents or bloody scenes of crime on the Facebook profiles of the victims or their relatives (Phillips, 2011). In view of this, *lulzing* violates the boundaries of ethics and legality and, more specifically, often involves trans- or homophobic and racist insults, or forms of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. It seems that the collective and anonymous act of transgression is accompanied by a lack of accountability of a truth-telling subject. While some radicals affirm the

'liberation from the stage of ethics' (de Lagasnerie, 2015: 109) and stress the transformative potential of anonymous acts, we would stress the indissoluble entanglement of ethics and politics. Hence, the example of *Anonymous* does provoke interesting questions with regard to the conditions and limits of truth-telling in digital cultures, including the problematic consequences that may accompany the 'lack of limits' of leaking and speaking out.

In all: In our understanding, the ethico-politics of truth-telling recognises that acts of whistleblowing are fundamentally ambivalent (Perry, 1998). They are neither intrinsically good nor bad. They are often contradictory, complex, multidimensional or even 'undecidable', as well as unforeseen and unpredictable (Kenny, 2019; Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013). Their evaluation is frequently controversial and contingent on the socio-economic, institutional and organisational discourses that frame them, the procedures that govern them, and the power relations that shape the sense-making process in specific temporal and geopolitical contexts. Accordingly, the valuation of truth-telling acts varies widely across cultures, regions and countries (Vandekerckhove et al., 2014). Consequently, the ethico-politics of whistleblowing is not about universal judgment or about prescriptions of political programmes. It is not a set of principles or rules of behaviour but, on the contrary, understood as a process to be unfolded in a space constituted by the questioning and 'breaking' of established structures, rules and orders. Such spaces are always contested, but they seem to have the immanent potential to effectively reshape and reconfigure extant practices and relations to power and the knowledge and 'truths' that such relations create and seek to occupy (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch, 2016; Rabinow and Stavrianakis, 2014). The ethico-politics of whistleblowing requires understanding singular cases in their complexity and exploring the 'aporias' (Andrade, 2015) and paradoxes in the whistleblowing process (Monk et al., 2015). This implies to understand the 'conditions of possibility' of truth-telling, to explore their constraints, and to possibly transform them (Kenny et al., 2018).

The contributions to this special issue share an interest in exploring whistleblowing as an ethical, political practice that is mediated in multiple ways. Acknowledging that forms and mediations of truth-telling are complex and changeable over time, they examine questions such as: Who, in contemporary culture, is considered to be qualified to 'speak out' and blow the whistle, under which conditions, about what, in what forms, with what consequences, and with what relations to power? Some contributions are, more specifically, interested in how the figure of the whistleblower is currently constructed and positioned, and whether this position/ing implies a specific relation to gender, race and ethnicity. Furthermore, attention is paid to the question how whistleblowers constitute themselves as political and ethical subjects, willing to take risks and pose a

challenge, to others and themselves. In this context, reflections on the ‘costs’ of whistleblowing and its implications for the individual ‘truth-teller’ are also introduced. In what follows, the contributions to the issue are presented in some more detail.

Contributions to the special issue

This special issue starts with Mahaut Fanchini’s paper, ‘Those who listen: On the role of external recipients in whistleblowing cases’. In her contribution, Fanchini explores whistleblowing as a relational process and practice that does not only include the individual whistleblower, i.e., those who ‘speak truth to power’, but also those who listen, the external recipients of whistleblowers’ narratives. By critically reflecting on the role recipients of such narratives, including e.g. researchers, the media and the ‘general public’, have in ‘classifying’ and constituting a whistleblowing case as legitimate and ‘acceptable’, the author makes an important contribution to existing studies of whistleblowing. More specifically, Fanchini’s discussion of the ‘conditions of reception’ of whistleblower narratives, stemming from people who disclosed illegal or unethical organisational practices in the financial services sector, exemplifies the essential role of external recipients in defining a whistleblowing case as ‘real’ and legitimate – or in dismissing it as illegitimate. In this context, the author pays close attention to the construct of ‘general interest’ (and its upholding and safeguarding), which effectively informs decisions on whether whistleblowing cases are considered legitimate, or not. Fanchini’s contribution, overall, foregrounds the powerful mediating role recipients can adopt in acts of ‘truth-telling’ (by supporting or limiting such acts) and thereby reinvokes the unstable and contested status of whistleblowers. ‘By focusing on *what can be heard* instead of who is saying it or why it is said’ (716), Fanchini’s paper casts a different, much welcome glance at the political dimension and ‘charge of whistleblowing’ (*ibid.*).

The paper by Sara Morais, ‘Naming and shaming or “speaking truth to power”?’, is related to Fanchini’s paper in that it also refuses to situate whistleblowing and its experience in the realm of the individual whistleblower. Morais’ contribution explores from a critical feminist perspective the emergence and circulation of a crowd-sourced list of alleged sexual harassers in Indian academia. Adopting a prominent position in India’s #metoo ‘moment’, the anonymous list, referred to as *LoSHA*, has led to contested discussions of feminist strategies and tactics of exposing sexual harassment and violence. Instead of engaging with the pervasive problem of sexual violence, extant discussions mainly focused on the ethicality of the list and its concern with ‘naming and shaming’. By referring to Foucault’s

concept of parrhesia, Morais' paper addresses the question whether there is legitimacy in what has widely been dismissed as 'naming and shaming'. In doing so, the author defines the list *LoSHA* as a political act of 'digital and networked parrhesia' (723), which challenges and seeks to re-create established power structures and 'truth games' in Indian academic institutions (and beyond). Following Morais, the 'list becomes the infrastructure for institutional critique' (724) and, as such, a way of addressing, problematising and altering prevailing cultures and structures of gendered violence. By situating the paper within the (trans)national feminist *#metoo* movement and highlighting how extant powers and truth games might be modified through digital, networked forms of 'truth telling', Morais' paper is not only highly timely and topical; it also resonates well with the special issue's interest in how truth-telling as an ethico-political practice is mediated within contemporary digitalised society.

Elaborating on feminist infrastructure studies, the contribution 'If truth was a woman: Leaky infrastructures and the gender politics of truth-telling' is connected to Morais work, by demonstrating how gendered and sexualised imaginaries determine what counts as truth, who counts as a truth-teller and, accordingly, what counts as truth-telling practices. Daniela Agostinho and Nanna Bonde Thylstrup show how truth-telling is entangled with socio-technological imaginaries where gender and sexuality are symbolically and materially implemented in media technology. They argue that a leak is 'a gendered infrastructural imaginary of the passive female's failure to contain truths' (766), while 'whistle-blowing and hacking are gendered imaginaries pertaining to active gestures of truth-telling through spectacle and transgression' (*ibid.*). At the same time, they demonstrate how these binaries can be subverted by queer subjectivities. The article points out that the leak is not a failure in networked systems, it is how the system works. With a critical approach to the case of *Cambridge Analytica* the authors emphasise that this has also become a lucrative business model for social media platforms and illustrate how truth-telling intersects with political and economic regimes in a broader sense. The article subsequently makes the point that analysing and questioning predominant imaginaries can not only help us to understand how the gendering of truth-telling is mediated by a socio-technical apparatus, but can also support us in developing 'improved' conditions for truths to be told in all organisational contexts. Therefore, the work is an important reminder that infrastructures matter, because they fundamentally determine 'whose knowledge and labour are valued, and which subjectivities, voices and bodies come to count in social and public life' (769).

The last paper is by Steven Sampson. As already the title suggests – 'Citizen duty or Stasi society? Whistleblowing and disclosure regimes in organisations and

communities' – the disclosure of knowledge is both ambivalent and highly political. Sampson starts from the idea that knowledge is never fixed, stable or neutral. It always, at least potentially, escapes the confines of organisations, departments, groups and other 'containers'. Sampson reminds us that every social group and organisation seeks to ensure that private, internal, confidential, etc. knowledge is protected and does not reach the wrong eyes or ears. 'Knowledge must be protected or controlled. Escaping knowledge is dangerous' (779). Every society, Sampson argues, develops specific norms and practices that regulate how, when and in what form knowledge is allowed to circulate. The important concept of the 'disclosure regime' basically comprises all the practices that formally or informally regulate the escape of knowledge. They define legitimate and illegitimate channels for escaping knowledge, and they comprise possible incentives for disclosures, punishments or retaliation against tellers of secrets or whistleblowers. Disclosure regimes are dynamic, they may change over time and become institutionalised, and they may have very different effects. Sampson provides two exemplary case studies: the US government whistleblower programme(s) and the citizen 'informing systems' in Denmark and Sweden. As different as these examples are, in both cases knowledge of internal or private wrongdoing is exposed to an outside authority. In comparing these systems, we gain some insights into the contingency of disclosure regimes and their working. As such, the concept of disclosure regime opens up and broadens the field of whistleblowing research. Organisational whistleblowing, from this perspective, is part of a much broader disclosure regime, which includes personal revelations, truth-telling, leaking of information, whistleblowing and other forms.

Alongside the four full papers, this special issue includes two interviews and two notes.

In the interview, 'How to protect the truth? Challenges of cybersecurity, investigative journalism and whistleblowing in times of surveillance capitalism', Randi Heinrichs discusses with the investigative journalist, cybersecurity specialist and privacy activist Micah Lee the challenges of truth-telling in the contemporary age. Before Edward Snowden became a whistleblower in 2013, Snowden contacted Lee and asked him for support in building a secure system to communicate with the press, without being caught in the middle of it. Although Snowden himself is an expert on cybersecurity, he needed the cooperation from the receivers' side to protect the information and his own anonymity. By telling the back-end-story of the 'NSA leaks', the article shows how the act of truth-telling is deeply entangled with a crisis of information security: it results from it, acts against it and has to consider it during the process of revelation. Therefore new expertise in the area of cybersecurity is needed, and new players evolve. As whistleblowers and journalists raising their voices against issues stemming from

conditions of the powerful global surveillance apparatus are increasingly criminalised, Lee reminds us that the disclosure of classified state information 'is suddenly a signature of our time (and) seems not to demonstrate a criminal destructiveness of single dissidents. Instead, it seems to be a sign of disruption within the security apparatus structured by the economic rules of surveillance capitalism' (822-823).

The note by Alexis Bushnell, Kate Kenny and Marianna Fotaki, 'The battle for the whistleblower' presents an interview with CIA whistleblower John Kiriakou. The note highlights the complexities of whistleblowing, defined as acts of 'speaking truth to power', and engages, more specifically, with the struggles over 'establishing a voice and gaining legitimacy' (825) as a whistleblower. The insightful accounts given by John Kiriakou illustrate in an exemplary way the unsettled and unsettling status and position whistleblowers occupy. Bushnell et al. foreground the political dimension of truth-telling and, specifically, address how acts of truth-telling are shaped and organised by different mediums and actors, such as contemporary media, which foster (or counteract) the legitimacy of those who speak out. The note, overall, provides important empirical and theoretical insights into the complex politics surrounding whistleblowing, into questions of framing acts of speaking out as legitimate and into the, oftentimes precarious and challenging, effects of such framing for the individual whistleblower. By this means, the note reflects and at the same time extends the issue's focus on the ethico-politics of truth-telling and the specific conditions and effects of its mediation.

The second note by Ian Foxley explores the ethico-politics of whistleblowing through the lens of 'stigma'. Foxley looks at the practices of stigmatisation, which are often used as a weapon for silencing whistleblowers or a specific technique for undermining their credibility, integrity and trustworthiness. While this destroys the very basis of the efficacy of whistleblowing, it also creates a 'humbling experience' for those who speak out. Based on his own experience and an empirical study conducted at the *Centre of Applied Human Rights* in York, Foxley illustrates how whistleblowers become victims of stigmatisation and how they respond to processes of stigmatisation by developing coping strategies. Foxley makes two interesting contributions to the special issue. First, he situates what he calls the 'whistleblower paradox' at the very heart of the 'ethico-political drama': society declares support for the 'honest disclosure of wrongdoing' (852), but it penalises those who speak out. Second, referring to Erving Goffman's classical study of social normality, he proposes to overcome the dichotomy between 'normals' and 'abnormals' by reframing whistleblowers as 'supranormals'. Supranormals are ethical subjects who step 'outside the local

norm' (860) and remind the organisation and the 'normals' of the relevance of ethical norms in society.

In the third note, 'To be a hero and traitor: A note on truth-telling and fear', Helena Liu draws attention to the affective dimension of truth-telling and speaking out in the context of academia. Liu's personal note illustrates how the subject is exposed or exposes him- or herself in acts of speaking truth to power. This makes the subjects vulnerable, and constitutes fear and anxiety as companions and 'shadow' of truth-telling. More specifically, Liu reflects in this note on her own experience of speaking out against organisational racism and white supremacy in a particular academic institution. While the rhetoric of 'academic freedom' prevails, and critique is widely appreciated and valued in this institution, Liu shows that some forms and objectives of critique are socially more acceptable than others, and that the limitations and boundaries of critique cannot be crossed without provoking alienating, unsettling and even hostile reactions from those who benefit from established and institutionalised power-relations.

The special issue is completed by two book reviews. Meghan Van Portfliet's review of the book *Women, Whistleblowing, Wikileaks* points to some key questions that organisations and whistleblowers face today with regard to how digital infrastructures and access to knowledge influence what can become truth. Following Van Portfliet, 'anyone interested in power, media or whistleblowing will find relevant and insightful' (880) accounts in the book, authored by three women who are all tied to Julian Assange and his work: the Guatemalan human rights lawyer Renata Avila, the British journalist Sarah Harrison, and Angela Richter, a Croatian-German theatre director. While the conversations of the authors open up important points of discussion, some of them are not elaborated in much depth like, for example, the wide absence of the gender aspect in whistleblowing research – something to which this issue seeks to respond.

The final contribution to this special issue is Rasmus Johnsen's review of *Whistleblowing: Toward a new theory* by Kate Kenny. In his review, Johnsen follows Kenny in calling for studies of whistleblowing that are more sensitive to the display of affects and emotions, because 'such displays and the relationships they emerge in can help us shed light on the variety of attachments people who speak up develop' (888). For Johnsen, Kenny's book is a manifestation of such 'sensitive' research on whistleblowing, whistleblowers and the accounts they give. Such research allows the development of a more accurate and nuanced understanding of whistleblowers and thereby undermines extant black-and-white oppositions. The latter eventually echoes a main objective of this special issue on the ethico-politics of whistleblowing: to go beyond a positioning of

whistleblowers and whistleblowing as either good or bad, and to emphasise instead the ambiguity and intricacies that are, and remain, inherent in whistleblowers' acts of 'truth telling' and their complex mediation.

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