

Whistleblowing

Definition

the action or exposing illegal or immoral practices in society in order to sound the alarm and raise public awareness to injustice

Famous cases

- in 2004, a British Court acquitted a government translator, Katherine Gunn of all criminal charges after she had been prosecuted for breaking the *Official Secrets Act*. She had leaked information about alleged illegal phone tapping of UN officials by the US gov. in the run up to the Iraq war. Hailed as defender of justice.
- Katharine Bigelow, controversial American film producer included in her movies explicit scenes of torture perpetrated by the US army in order to obtain vital intelligence information so as to locate and eliminate Osama Bin Laden.
- Michael Moore, producer of *Sicko* and *Bowling for Columbine*.
- magazine *The New Internationalist*, website *Wikileaks* (Julian Assange), rocked the boat on several occasions, despite legal attempts to muzzle his organisation. Major target : the US government (sensitive intelligence information about Army operations and prisoner details from the high security Guantanamo Bay camp).
- BBC questioning Tony Blair's belief in Saddam Hussein's WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction), a false claim used to justify the war in Iraq.
- Rosa Parks.
- Edward Snowden, July 2013, a young American intelligence officer and computer analyst, working for the NSA went into hiding after having made damning revelations about routine phone tapping and hacking by American intelligence services against US citizens and close allies. International arrest warrant against him, prompting him to seek asylum in Russia first : dubbed a traitor who furthered the cause of America's enemies such as Al Qaeda by informing the world of America's anti terrorist methods.
- Julian Assange, wanted man, faces 17 years in jail. Trump had him charged for espionage for encouraging Bradley Manning (now Chelsea Manning) to leak classified documents. In 2021, UK judges rejected US pleas for his extradition on the grounds of poor mental health.
- Chelsea Manning (born Bradley Edward Manning, December 17, 1987) American activist and whistleblower. She is a former United States Army soldier who was convicted by court-martial in July 2013 of violations of the Espionage Act and other offenses, after disclosing to WikiLeaks nearly 750,000 classified, or unclassified but sensitive, military and diplomatic documents. She was imprisoned from 2010 until 2017 when her sentence was commuted by President Barack Obama.
- Oct 2021, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee claimed Facebook amounted to a threat to US democracy and harmful to children, corroborated by news outlets like the NYT, WP or NBC : documents detailing misinformation and conspiracy theories on the platform, especially related to the 2020 elections. According to *the Times*, the company failed to address the problems : the platform's recommendation tools pushed users toward extremist groups, prompting warning that some managers and executives ignored.

Factors : technology + recent legislation like the *Freedom of Information Act* : faster more complete access to often sensitive information

Effects : undermine a country's credibility as a beacon of freedom, information synonymous with power-sharing, whistleblower's insider information can help curb the power of misinformation

which has proliferated thanks to social media, including from official sources

Criticism :

methods are called into question (ex : *Supersize Me* by Morgan Spurlock, accused of propaganda and of failing to present a balanced argument, similarly Mickael Moore often gives a one-sided argument).

« Naming and shaming » : fail to remain neutral. Campaigns can be very damaging.

when Wikileaks disclosed the identities of 100 members in the far-right BNP, 2 of them who were civil servants were made redundant for their political affiliations

tabloid press often leads hate campaigns, against paedophile offenders for instance, revealed by scaremongering informers leading to attacks and harassment by the general public.

in 2013, a self-confessed whistleblower and police captain was jailed for extortion (wanted to reveal information to *News of the World* about phone tapping, but broke the law in the bargain).

Risks for whistleblowers :

being demoted, losing one's job, and in undemocratic states, suffering imprisonment, torture, or even death

in South Africa, activist Steve Biko managed to use the arena of a trial to denounce the injustices and inhumanity of the Apartheid system. His reward was to be secretly and brutally beaten to death in prison

Birmingham, judge recently vindicated a women's group who had fought for years to denounce the unjust pay gap : seen as troublemakers before

Trump presided over 4 times as many arrests of whistleblowers as his predecessors

Paradox : *Whistleblower Protection Act* passed in 1989 in the USA, but sensitive issues such as use of drones, illicit dealings with hostile foreign powers such as Russia seem out of bounds and those who flag them up are liable to prosecution.