Special Issue: Disinformation-for-Hire as Everyday Digital Labor

Whistleblower Memoirs: Deconstructing Data Consultants' Insider Stories

Charlotte Knorr [ID], **Margitta Wolter,**
and Christian Pentzold [ID]

Abstract

Whistleblowers have been instrumental in revealing the massive investments in state-sponsored and corporate digital surveillance and disinformation. Their personal accounts of what went on behind the scenes are usually presented in popular books marketed as offering insider stories. By interrogating the recapitulations of veteran data consultants, our article is interested in the way in which whistleblowers configure their role and place themselves in the context of their story in terms of agency and accountability. We examine and compare three recollections: Edward Snowden's *Permanent Record*, Christopher Wylie's *Mindf*ck*, and Brittany Kaiser's *Targeted*. Our analysis shows how these high-profile memoirs offer a look that is both intimate and distant. They at once promise to get close to and even behind what has escaped public scrutiny and in return try to dissociate themselves from their former trade. Their position of privileged precarity, which results from the casualization of digital labor, allows these data consultants to quickly become insiders while staying uncomfortable with many of the taken-for-granted ideological convictions and organizational orders. Rationalizing their involvement as disoriented diligence affords the whistleblowers the capacity to craft a story of enchantment, delusion, and subsequent awakening. Both their experiences and their position enable these disenthralled renegades to style themselves as honest moral arbiters in service of the public interest and brokers of exclusive knowledge.

Keywords

disinformation, surveillance, memoir, narrative, whistleblowing, data consultants, critical discourse analysis

There is a bright spot in the darkness of today's surveillance and disinformation industries. It is illuminated by the whistleblowers who, it is believed, have pulled back the curtain on the shadowy affairs of state-sponsored observation and propaganda channeled through digital platforms. In the decade after Chelsea Manning's disclosures in 2010, more data consultants have sought publicity. Thanks to them, the disinformation and microtargeting machinations now seem less secret, and efforts have been made to shed further light on their malpractice (Di Salvo, 2021; Stanger, 2019). However, while such dubious schemes are becoming the focus of investigation, not much critical thought has been devoted to how whistleblowers talk about themselves and try to seize control of their public image. In a somewhat ironic twist, the clandestine affairs whistleblowers reveal are increasingly becoming the subject of debate, but the stories these individuals tell remain understudied.

Whistleblowers find themselves in a struggle for representation that is usually structured by a binary. They are either figureheads for civil disobedience for the public good or traitors jeopardizing national security. The pattern reappears in the journalistic coverage of prominent cases, where whistleblowers are molded into hero-villain caricatures (Di Salvo & Negro, 2016; Qin, 2015; Thorsen et al., 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). Yet this dichotomy fails to account for the complexities of whistleblowers, whose choices may not fall neatly into categories of ethical versus unethical (Kenny et al., 2020). In fact, there is considerable ambiguity at play, since they often have had a stake in the abuse or fraud they uncover. Whistleblowers have, after all, a lot of explaining to do.

The ambiguous media framing as hero or villain and ultimately their credibility and legitimacy as whistleblowers hinges on the debunked area of data exploitation and the denounced misuse of social media power. All subscribe to the imaginary of data as powerful instruments that are

Leipzig University, Germany

Corresponding Author:
Christian Pentzold, Department for Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University, Nikolaistrasse 27-29, 04109 Leipzig, Germany.
Email: christian.pentzold@uni-leipzig.de

misappropriated but could be returned to good causes: Snowden advances a critique of pervasive underhand government surveillance; Wylie and Kaiser decry private corporations' manipulation of social media publics. Their criticism is therefore first leveled at state or private parties encroaching upon digital media data, and only second at the media platforms allowing or even supporting the malpractice. This opens up different constellations in which the whistleblowers are able to more or less firmly cast their dropout and disclosure as acts of civil disobedience. It does not shield them from being condemned as traitors rather than heroes making a sacrifice on behalf of a collective. But it enables them in their storytelling to encode such vilification as a badge of honor.

In the post-Manning world of massive data dumps and the disclosure of not a few but many documents, we find whistleblowers busy imparting their perspective while navigating complex communicative constellations involving journalists and new intermediaries. Data consultants such as Edward Snowden, Christopher Wylie, Brittany Kaiser, Frances Haugen, and Sophie Zhang have been instrumental in revealing the investments in digital surveillance, the spreading of lies, and the administration of tailored false information. With this, their spectacular confessions have informed contemporary understandings of whistleblowing (Di Salvo, 2021; Eide & Kunelius, 2018). In various capacities, these data consultants have had access to monumental amounts of data, both in commercial and administrative environments, and this unprecedented access has influenced their ability to lay bare some of the excessive operations from the lower end of an organization's hierarchy. The question then is how data whistleblowers configure their role in revealing abuses of data. Where do they place themselves in the context of their story in terms of agency and accountability?

In taking their personal memoirs seriously, we agree with Melley (2020) that "representation is integral, not secondary, to whistleblowing" (p. 225). It is in fact through its historically forged form of representation that whistleblowing can have political effects. Such representation encompasses, Melley (2020) adds, "both the description of the leaked material and the biographies of whistleblowers" (p. 225). In our analysis, we adopt a focus on production that has been pioneered by Ong and Cabañes (2019) in their deep dive into the cultures and everyday labor arrangements of disinformation workers. It enables us to eschew both the romanticization and the vilification of whistleblowers to better understand their "complicity and collusion" (p. 5773). So, we contribute to understanding the use and misuse of social media data and telecommunications and how they are grounded in the ambiguous work arrangements and personal ambitions of data consultants whose revelations gained public attention. This adds to media and journalism studies' interest in the social conditions and production cultures undergirding disinformation and surveillance. It requires an in-depth reading of what whistleblowers offer as a personal story as well as an awareness of how they position themselves in terms of accountability and agency, justify their choices, and engage with issues of culpability and corruptibility (Ong, 2020).

Concepts: The Trouble With Whistleblowers

Whistleblowers are troublemakers—not just because they dare to uncover systemic wrongdoings and thus break with organizational obligations. Attempts to define the act of whistleblowing and the figure of the whistleblower have themselves been plagued by conceptual problems (Kenny, 2019).

In the area of business ethics, whistleblowing is defined by Jubb (1999) as a "deliberate non-obligatory act of disclosure, which gets onto public record and is made by a person who has or had privileged access to data or information of an organization, about non-trivial illegality or other wrongdoings" (p. 78). This general definition applies to data whistleblowers too, yet upon closer inspection the denunciation of practices as being unethical or criminal as well as the authority and responsibility of those exposing allegedly nontrivial wrongdoings remains contested (Bushnell, 2020). Far from only being a conceptual puzzle, the definition of what constitutes whistleblowing is an enduring provocation beholden to unreconcilable value judgments and controversial legal and moral political convictions. Whistleblowers are political figures who assume a public role that centers on truth-speaking and revelation.

Enacting the Truth-Speaker Personality

In principle, the figure of the whistleblower, as it was lionized in Nader et al.'s (1972) report, published around the same time as the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate scandal, is a "person who discloses confidential information somewhat reluctantly. It is guided by the belief that public attention must be directed to perceived wrongdoing or injustice," as Thorsen (2017, p. 574) puts it. Such view from legal practice and advocacy stresses the ties between whistleblowing and calls for accountability, free speech, and transparency that have driven numerous democratic movements.

Arguably, the overly idealistic image of truth-speakers whose high-minded conviction and disinterestedness attest to the credibility and truthfulness of their claims only partly fits the actual people who come forward with unknown information or privileged knowledge (Heumann et al., 2013). It is not just that they might have a tangle of motives—some more altruistic, some more malicious—but also that perceptions of the public interest are, as Gurman and Mistry (2020) have noted, "inherently subjective, politically contested, and historically constructed" (p. 31). When scrutinized, the noble creeds fall apart, yet they are nevertheless helpful in highlighting issues of recognition and legitimacy (Bushnell, 2020). Moreover, they draw our attention to the enactment of the truth-speaker image and thus to the agency of those trying to manage their public appearance.

The agenda of whistleblowers is twofold at least: telling the truth and maintaining a public image that establishes their mandate as truth-tellers and frames their accountability. Arguably, an element of that is their identification and legitimation as a whistleblower in the first place. This purposive self-representation colludes with public interpretations and media framings, which are inevitable and must be navigated by those who choose to blow the whistle. The three memoirs we studied, alongside the stories presented by Ellsberg (2003), who disseminated the top-secret Pentagon Papers in 1971, and other whistleblowers such as Sherron Watson or Wen Ho Lee, are formidable instruments for this purpose. They anchor the intricate and nonvisible allegations in a personal narrative and lend a recognizable face to evidence that is abstract and hard to fathom (Di Salvo, 2021; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012).

Far from being "accidental celebrities," as Di Salvo (2016, p. 289) has suggested, these whistleblowers assume a high-profile position to ascertain the modalities guiding the disclosures and their public recognition. Examining the celebritization of Ellsberg in this respect, Maxwell (2020) postulates that, more than just gaining recognition from the moral principles they invoke, whistleblowers' credibility is also based on how a public comes to assess their identity and character. Ellsberg responded to this situation, in which moral justifications were necessary but insufficient to support his ability to effectively speak and be heard, by embracing celebrity culture. As Maxwell (2020) argues, Ellsberg's self-conscious enactment of the image of the truth-speaker required "not simply that he was revealing the truth but also that he could be trusted to determine that this truth was worth telling" (p. 103). Like Ellsberg, when the data consultants Snowden, Wylie, and Kaiser made their decisions to come forward, they not only emphasized the significance of their particular discoveries but also asserted their license to publicly tell these truths.

What unites the data consultants-turned-whistleblowers is that their revelations ground on access to large quantities of data next to other incriminating documents and communications. Different to previous generations of whistleblowers who usually came to disclose political corruption and business wrongdoing from the upper ranks of an organizational hierarchy, the data whistleblowers gained access to information in more precarious work constellations with not much formal training. This misfit with their professional environment seems to be a common trait of data whistleblowers. Moreover, all three enlisted the aid of journalists and media makers to publicize their stories. The memoirs we studied are emblematic for the planned roll-out of data whistleblowers. But the primordial relation between journalists and whistleblowers renders the resulting memoirs a peculiar genre that in turn becomes the subject of more newsmaking and criticism.

Whistleblowing Constellations

Although whistleblowers are generally presented as solitary figures, their revelations nevertheless hinge on a constellation of actors who have a stake in stirring public attention. When whistleblowing is not confined to the internal boundaries of an organization, it needs publicity to initiate debate and demand change. To spark "whistleblowing-originated mediated scandals" (Di Salvo, 2021, p. 256), field transgressors have to cooperate with outlets and communicators. These are not limited to the legacy press and include cross-border networks of media corporations, financial sponsors, and legal advisors, along with advocacy NGOs like the Government Accountability Project, Transparency International, or the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. Whistleblowing constellations channel and amplify the disclosures around government or corporate corruption. Moreover, in the wake of so-called "megaleaks," which involve the exposure of massive amounts of data, alternative platforms like WikiLeaks and adversarial news ventures such as *The Intercept* have begun to reshape the possibilities for whistleblowing.

Notwithstanding these new intermediaries and the loss of the legacy media's gatekeeping power, the more recent revelations of data consultants have arguably reinstated journalism's credentials (Eide & Kunelius, 2018). There is an innate affinity between the intentions of whistleblowers and the self-understandings of journalists. Yet, although whistleblowers help to bolster journalism's watchdog status and align with other intermediaries' quest for transparency, social justice, or democracy, their relationships remain tenuous (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). So despite whistleblowers' intentions to enact the image as truth-speakers, they cannot escape being framed by the media. As much as they seek to harness the growth of public attention, they cannot determine the media's focus and how they are cast in journalistic motifs. Overall, it seems that the framing of whistleblowers is, as Di Salvo and Negro (2016) summarize, "complexly balanced" (p. 815). In the coverage of whistleblowing cases, criticism, and affirmative arguments are interlaced, with differences across countries and outlets (e.g., Kunelius et al., 2017; Qin, 2015; Thorsen et al., 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012).

Material and Methods: Deconstructing Whistleblower Memoirs

A prime way in which veteran data consultants' behind-the-scenes stories of the past decade's major revelations have come to light are memoirs. Memoirs place an individual's life story in an overall context that is of political or societal relevance. They constitute retrospective, autobiographically-toned accounts—part report, part reckoning—by people who assume a public role and problematize the friction between role-based expectations and the individual behind a role (Couser, 2012). In the past years, the genre has gained prominence among politicians, celebrities, and public figures alike. The rise of this type of self-life writing has been aided by a growing concern for relating private aspects of life to public issues as well as commercial interests.

Being part of this proliferation of memoirs as "marketable commodity and a part of discourses about personal identity"

(Rak, 2013, p. 6), whistleblowers' memoirs are advertised as offering extraordinary, close-up encounters with the author. In interrogating these recollections—notably, Edward Snowden's (2019) *Permanent Record*, Christopher Wylie's (2019) *Mindf*ck: Inside Cambridge Analytica's Plot to Break the World*, and Brittany Kaiser's (2019) *Targeted: The Cambridge Analytica Whistleblower's Inside Story of How Big Data, Trump, and Facebook Broke Democracy and How It Can Happen Again*—we are interested in the strategies that help whistleblowers to craft their experiences and revelatory stances into self-focused narratives. This shifts our attention away from questions of truthfulness and authenticity, which are notoriously difficult to answer for memoirs, and toward a deconstruction of memoirs as forms of a "narratively shaped identity" (Lahusen, 2019, p. 633). In essence, a memoir makes an identity claim, with a first-person narrator as the protagonist and observer of actions carried out by others.

Our aim here is not to challenge the need for whistleblowing or negate the sacrifice of those who do so (Ong, 2020). Instead, we aim to interrogate how the memoirs' authors reflect on their position as data consultants and their contribution to the dubious schemes that they later reveal to the public. Of course, such stories do not have to be any more authentic or more correct than any other type of account; they can suffer from aporias and paradoxes, too. Rather than scrutinizing their correctness, our task instead is to deconstruct the dominant positionings and rationalizations with which they establish their self-focused pronouncements (Weiskopf et al., 2019).

We chose these three books, which came out almost simultaneously, because they epitomize the dramatic shift toward the massive collection and processing of digital data that has accompanied the advent of social media and mobile technologies. The memoirs center on the loss of transparency and accountability made possible by the ubiquitous data capture that now permeates all social arenas (Olesen, 2018). At the same time, they seek to draw attention to the different, though intricately connected, parts of the vast and secretive area of pervasive surveillance, permanent digital tracking, and the spreading of disinformation and propaganda.

In methodological terms, we employ the repertoire offered by critical discourse analysis (CDA). This method deconstructs the strategic use of language through which subjectivities are enacted and ideologies—that is, sets of shared beliefs and values—are articulated (Fairclough, 2010). By viewing them in this way, we can treat the memoirs as pronouncements in a wider discourse over the license and ability to provide a valid account of a controversy. In this struggle, whistleblowers use their memoirs to claim authority over a story to tell how things were and what their role was. Their stance is predicated on the whistleblowers' firsthand experiences, which they promise to convey as unreservedly as possible. From a CDA perspective, deconstructing the narratives' persuasive intention helps to acknowledge the efforts the authors invested in explaining and legitimating their position (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

To examine how whistleblowers see their role and how they present themselves in terms of agency and accountability, we are particularly interested in the positionings and rationalizations apparent in the unfolding of the story. Following Reisigl and Wodak (2016), positionings include discursive strategies of nomination and perspectivization. Nomination is geared toward the construction of actors and all sorts of phenomena, while perspectivization is about positioning an author's point of view so as to express involvement and distance. Rationalizations rest on predication and argumentation, that is, on the discursive qualifications of actors and all kinds of phenomena as well as on the justification and questioning of truth claims and normative rightness.

We read the memoirs in a team of three before excerpting and discussing passages of explicit positioning and rationalizing, which could range from only a few words up to a whole paragraph. The resulting excerpts, a total of $N=818$ passages (*Permanent Record* $n=291$; *Mindf*ck* $n=221$; *Targeted* $n=306$), were then imported into the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The coding procedures followed the guidance offered by grounded theory and combined steps of labeling and constant comparison. In effect, we arrived at empirically grounded concepts around role perceptions and discussions of agency and accountability. We propose two oxymoronic formulations—privileged precarity and disoriented diligence—which, we suggest, capture data whistleblowers' predicament of "complicity and collusion" (Ong & Cabañes, 2019, p. 5773). The concept of privileged precarity refers to their ambivalent employment situation where they had extensive access to data and information in contingent contractual arrangements. The concept of disoriented diligence denotes their incongruous, ill-guided but well-meaning, involvement in the affairs they later came to renounce.

Positionings and Rationalizations: "Through the Thick of the Whistleblowing"

The whistleblowers have been active in different parts of the interlocking infrastructure of datafication: Snowden's story centers on global spy programs coordinated by the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) that indiscriminately gathered people's data. In turn, Wylie's and Kaiser's accounts deal with the British consulting firm Cambridge Analytica (CA) and its CEO Alexander Nix. Although both take issue with the company's involvement in the exploitation of Facebook users' data for psychographic profiling and microtargeting, their perspectives are distinct. In part, this is due to their different positions in CA: Wylie joined the Strategic Communication Laboratories (SCL) group in 2013, a private intelligence and strategic communication agency and CA's parent company. There, he was involved in SCL's technology and behavioral research operations. In contrast, Kaiser became associated

with the company at the end of 2014, just as Wylie was departing; she was responsible for acquisitions and business affairs.

Having worked in a variety of positions and under different job descriptions, data whistleblowers are representative of a broad and incoherent cohort of what we call data consultants. They perform a critical portion of the work that sustains data-harvesting commercial, administrative, and military enterprises, for example, in the areas of engineering and research, design, management, and maintenance. The employment of data consultants varies in terms of duties, requirements, as well as pay grade. Their positions are more or less secure, gig-depended, and easy to replace. Job titles include denominations such as administrator, manager, officer, or director.

Being employed in different data consultant capacities, Snowden and Wylie had both do with technological backends, though of very different sorts, whereas Kaiser dealt with customer-facing jobs. What they had in common were their middle-range positions, neither senior management nor low-level coders or vendors, and as such they helped to carry the disinformation and surveillance ventures rendered possible by expansive datafication. Aspirations to build a career and achieve financial security fed into their exculpations of how they initially had embraced the opportunities that came with these posts and could then ignore their downsides for too long. They tolerated the jobs' quandaries and thus their complicity, so the story goes, hoping to advance to positions of power from which they could rectify the aberrance they witnessed and endured.

Positionality: Data Consultants' Privileged Precarity

The authority of the stories by Snowden, Wylie, and Kaiser is predicated on the experiences they gained in key positions in organizations that were trying to exploit the ever-growing possibilities offered by digital data and networked communications. In the process, they became privy to unscrutinized and illegal dealings and schemes around the exploitation of information—they were "face-to-face with the realities," as Kaiser (p. 3) called it. Their positions also gave them access to arcane programs and vast troves of data (McCurdy, 2013; Thorsen, 2017). Rather than gradually climbing the professional ladder, all three whistleblowers were, albeit accidentally, thrown into privileged posts and tasked with fulfilling the responsibilities these entailed. They performed consequential work in what Snowden describes as "the most unexpectedly omniscient positions . . . toward the bottom rung of the managerial ladder, but high atop heaven in terms of access" (p. 275). For his part, Wylie exhibits a vicarious enjoyment in his precocious rise and his audacity in speaking up to people who are more powerful and richer than him but also far less data savvy. On the same note, Snowden reasons that he "should never have even been let into the building, (p. 2)," while Kaiser finds herself "all of a sudden"

(p. 115) catapulted into a position where she had to handle difficult clients on her own and pitch CA's services to them.

However, none of the whistleblowers' privileged access came as part of a full-time, long-term employment but happened in more precarious work arrangements. This privileged precarity, so to say, of Snowden, Wylie, and Kaiser before their dropout illustrates a larger shift in digital economy and administration. To juggle the data they have accumulated and gain maximum insights, state agencies and corporations have expanded their workforces, often by hiring freelancers and contractors, as well as by falling back on project-based consulting. For business and administration, that casualization of labor affords them to swiftly adapt to speedy change with the help of a pool of contingent workers and also staffing agencies. This "fusion of code and human smarts," as Gray and Suri (2019, p. x) named it, happens with segments of low-pay and low-skill jobs as well as with middle-range positions. For the whistleblowers, these changes in the composition and the conditions of IT work manifested in part-time (Wylie and Kaiser) or subcontracted (Snowden) assignments. In comparison to the toil, stress, and insecurities of crowdworkers, warehouse staffers, or content moderators, the whistleblowing data consultants had some ability to negotiate the terms of their work and they sought to navigate the professional opportunities that came with the flexibilization and multiplication of employment. What is more, the precarious status enabled them to claim a liminal place where they were deeply involved in the professional milieu yet at the same time distant enough to recognize its flaws. In turn, a standard reaction of their former employers was to downplay their role as expandable, part-time or short-term hires, a strategy meant to disqualify their authority and ability to come in touch with any exclusive knowledge that these whistleblowers promised to disclose.

More than being a matter of personal qualifications and degrees, the whistleblowers understand their peculiar professional positionality as indicating a generational shift. Thus, all three perceive themselves as representatives of a generation that has grown up *in* rather than *with* networked communications. To Snowden, born in 1983, the advent of the web equals the "big bang or Precambrian explosion" (p. 42). Both he and Wylie, who was born in 1989, absorbed a hacker ethic that favors personal merits and egalitarian exchange but eschews formal titles or seniority. Being active in circles of internet enthusiasts and geeks not only fostered their technological acumen but also instilled in them a longing for an alternative life distant from power issues and obsolete social barriers. This formative period provides the idealized background against which they are able to decry the corruptness of their professional affairs while retaining a liminal position from the start. They mostly acquired the coveted skills and abilities to exploit digital data by geeking out and not primarily by engaging in formal training. To incorporate technical talent, the organizations that hired the data consultants ignored many of their formal procedures, which allowed the

consultants to quickly become insiders, "key master of the puzzle palace," as Snowden wrote (p. 275), while staying uncomfortable with many of the taken-for-granted ideological convictions and organizational orders.

Although Kaiser, born in 1988, does not share Snowden and Wylie's countercultural allegiances and is, unlike them, not a developer or data scientist, she also conceives of herself as a millennial who "had lived a digital life from my earliest years" (p. 15). For all of them, the internet, mobile devices, and platforms are omnipresent features of their environment. Their fundamental importance becomes most obvious when absent, something Wylie became especially aware of after Facebook expelled him from its services.

Rationalizations: Whistleblowers' Disoriented Diligence

The agency and accountability of data consultants-turned-whistleblowers are conditioned by ambiguities regarding their distance to the people and practices denounced in their revelations: In the memoirs, they present themselves as having been deeply involved and instrumental, yet at the same time standing outside and not fully fitting in. Besides their lack of formal occupational training, a number of inherent factors set them apart from their professional field and its protagonists and thus rationalize their involvement as disoriented diligence that was idealistic but blindfolded in its exploitation of data-intense technology.

In a sense, all three memoirs are admissions of inexperience, but this inexperience is neither treated as an avoidable defect nor manipulated to escape questions of agency and accountability. More complex than that, the whistleblowers' disoriented diligence affords them the ability to craft a story of enchantment, delusion, and subsequent awakening. Along this journey, they are driven by ambitions to use data for benign causes and work on something important. The youthful spirit of curiosity, coupled with good intentions and ignorance, acts as a kind of foil and allows them to present themselves as obsessed with exhausting technological possibilities and developing their abilities while being unable to confront the immense effects of their well-intentioned but ultimately erroneous zeal. "I moved fast, I built things of immense power and I never fully appreciated what I was breaking until it was too late," Wylie regrets (p. 17). Likewise, Kaiser laments (p. 370). "I had been one of the enablers. I helped to build up the machine . . . breaking democracy." In that respect, they come to be core components in the machinations without being the steering force. What they have done and seen around the usage of data substantiates their revelations, yet, as they give us to understand, this does not make them responsible for the entire operations and their alarming ramifications.

For Wylie, his insurmountable otherness stems from his queer identity, which distinguishes him from the chauvinistic CA executives he encounters, most notably Nix, and the bigoted associates and donors like Rebekah Mercer. More than being a matter of sexual orientation or style, being queer informed his liminal yet perceptive positionality. "Growing up queer," Wylie reasons, "you learn early in life that your existence is outside the norm . . . Queers understand systems of power intimately" (p. 249). Snowden, too, recounts his personal development in terms of being "on the receiving end of one of these clichés, and on the losing end of an imbalance of power" (p. 52). It happened to him in school, in his revolt against CIA bureaucracy, or when he returned to the United States after working abroad. Kaiser, in turn, writes about her mixed feelings of being outclassed and fascinated by Nix and his coterie, with their polish, affluence, and esprit.

According to their accounts, all three memoirists are born outsiders whose background, upbringing, and personality are at odds with the circles they find themselves in. They are techies among politicians, poor folks among the rich, gay among the uber-masculine, Americans in Europe, or Canadians in the United States. Unable to blend in seamlessly, they find that these differences give them the vantage point from which they can better see the wrongness of their trade; their innate otherness predetermines the ensuing alienation.

Hence, their alterity is multi-dimensional and gives birth to their inappropriate candor. Not fitting in also means having scruples and moral qualms that hinder them from expediting unlawful actions. As outsiders, they also lack an evil imagination, a quality that sustains their admiration for technological possibilities yet blinds them from recognizing their misuse. They hence come to refer to their initial naïveté, impressionability, and underestimation of the situation. As Wylie admits: "I don't know what else to say other than I was more naïve than I thought at the time" (p. 115); Kaiser bemoans that she had to learn "time and again how naïve I'd been" (p. 3); Snowden confesses to have been "so impressed by the system's sheer achievement and audacity that I almost forgot to be appalled by its totalitarian controls" (p. 170).

The whistleblowers articulate their agency and accountability by describing the passage from illusion to disillusion. Told in hindsight, this storyline requires them to render their contribution instrumental to the success of the organizational endeavors of which they were a part and lends them their present authority to speak out. By the same token, it makes them oblivious to the larger picture. The juxtaposition of familiarity and strangeness enables them to explain why they failed to make connections that seem obvious in retrospect: "I have been laboring under the doctrine of Need to Know, unable to understand the cumulative purpose behind my specialized, compartmentalized tasks," as Snowden concedes (p. 3). The whistleblowers do not deny their responsibility for having been part of the schemes they condemn—their complicity in fact justifies the claims they make—but they read it as an element of their own betrayal and renunciation. Sooner or later, all of them claim to have lost sight of themselves and of the purposes of their

actions. The revelations then happen as a sort of awakening from a dream-like sphere that all whistleblowers, if only in retrospect, experience as "surreal," "cartoonish," "weird," or "bizarre." Reminiscing about his moment of awakening, Wylie writes that "it was as if everything had become detached from the realities of what we were doing. But I had snapped out of the daze and was now watching revolting idea become real" (p. 145).

Allured by the technological possibilities and appalled by the immorality of their former employers and collaborators, the data consultants present themselves as having been crucial in creating and deploying powerful tools but as having possessed too little agency to change the overall parameters of their trade. It is only upon realizing how they have been used and misused that they can reacquire their full agency. This emancipation manifests in their determination to uncover the threats posed by mass surveillance, misinformation, and microtargeting: "Abuses I witnessed demanded action," Snowden determines (p. 8); meanwhile, Wylie pledges: "As one of the creators of Cambridge Analytica, I share responsibility for what happened, and I know that I have profound obligation to right the wrongs of my past" (p. 17). Seizing agency is thus described as gaining the ability to find a voice, speak out, and finally tell what they regard as a vitally important story.

Nevertheless, the question remains as to what accountability standards should whistleblowers and the stories these former perpetrators offer be held against. For one, accountability is tied to the level of control and discretion the data consultants enjoyed during their job tenure. On these terms, the whistleblowers do not seek to dodge accountability completely since this would contradict their meticulously crafted position of privileged precarity and the rationalization of their involvement as disoriented diligence. Instead, in the memoirs, they tell a story of entrenched accountability where they guilelessly contributed to operations whose ill-natured and condemnable objectives were long unbeknownst to them. This shifts the thrust of wrongdoing to the side of the organizations and their leadership—in the case of Snowden, the nameless upper ranks of the vast U.S. administration, in Wylie's and Kaiser's accounts, the camarilla orbiting mastermind Nix.

What is more, the public assessment of accountability and the perpetrators' self-presentations are also up to the risk assumed by the then whistleblowers upon going public. This risk includes legal prosecution, financial loss, social isolation, reputational issues, as well as physical harm and harassment. On these terms, Snowden is usually recognized as carrying a particularly heavy burden for living in exile due to the U.S. Department of Justice's charges against him. Although Wylie and Kaiser also faced job loss and retaliation, their appearance and publicity also open up opportunities for them to gain high profile which prompts critical remarks about their vested interests and ambition to capitalize on their publicity.

Discussion: "A Story So Tangled and Technical"

Although the whistleblowers share feelings of liberation upon finding their voice and talking about the malpractice they saw, all of them struggle with formulating their disclosures and being heard. Their problem is twofold: For one, it concerns the complexity of the information and the sheer vastness of the documents, which makes them difficult to communicate in a straightforward and comprehensible way. They might describe outrageous malpractice, yet it disappears in the overwhelmingly vast and abstract data, often only indirectly linking to specific persons and events. "The information I intended to disclose about my country's secret regime . . . was so explosive, and yet so technical, that I was as scared of being doubted as I was of being misunderstood," Snowden worries (p. 242). What is more, the standard responses whistleblowers receive range from incredulity and puzzlement to resignation. With folders and hard drives full of evidence, they face journalists, parliamentarians, and prosecutors, who only slowly begin to understand, if at all. Wylie has to accept that "my attempts to explain the intricacies of the company's operations leave everyone with puzzled faces" (p. 6), and Kaiser admits that hers is a "disjointed" narrative (p. 359).

The disclosures may be enormous, yet ironically, it is this enormity that precludes them from immediately unleashing their explosive message. Snowden therefore urges that those "seeking to report on the systemic misuse of technology must do more than just bring their findings to the public, if the significance of those findings is to be understood. They have a duty to contextualize and explain—to demystify" (p. 240). Since full transparency seems to render people unable to see the actual data scandal, all whistleblowers instead seek to manage access to the evidence and control the narrative of their involvement.

Most notably, Snowden cautiously coordinated his press relations by picking journalists he felt suitable and releasing only fractions of the full lot of evidence, as tracked by the online Snowden Archive (Thorsen, 2017). "Aligning with carefully selected journalists with specific institutional links to legacy media outlets in different countries, he created a complex dynamic," Eide and Kunelius (2018, p. 76) state. In so doing, he retained his position as a data expert in the whistleblowing constellation that his revelations helped to initiate. This seems to be a general pattern among data whistleblowers. In another recent case, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee, likewise sought to reserve the decision on what kind of data she shared with what group of newsmakers. To make sure her revelations would enter the public sphere and gain widespread attention, she combined an exclusive "boutique rollout" (Smith, 2021) by handing some documents to *Wall Street Journal* first, before inviting reporters from other outlets.

That form of strategic popularity is, however, double-edged and hard to steer. It becomes obvious when we look at how Wylie's and Kaiser's respective memoirs were critically received. Their accounts offer different angles linked to their distinct professional points of view and the different moments at which they were active in CA's brief operational history, and in line with that, their recollections have triggered quite the opposite reactions. In the press, Wylie's book received mostly positive reviews, whereas Kaiser's was mainly met with criticism. Apart from issues of style, the divergent strategies of self-representation and investigative attitude were what most concerned reviewers. Wylie's tell-all story was celebrated as "revelatory" (Liddle, 2019); Kaiser, however, was criticized for being "aggrieved and self-pitying" (Szalai, 2019) and she was suspected of obfuscating the concessions she had to make in her job: "by the end of it you get the sense that she's more concerned with her own legacy than reckoning with any wrongdoing of her own part" (Limbong, 2019).

When motives and character are taken to define the license and authority of a truth teller, whistleblowing becomes an exclusive model. Next to the accuracy and significance of the revelations, the reasons and agenda of the whistleblower personality turn into an object of public scrutiny. On these terms, all three whistleblowers present themselves as having been driven by the idealistic fallacy according to which technology may be flawed but can be repurposed for a common good. Snowden starts from 9/11 as an initial moment that instigated his eagerness to serve his country. Frustrated by the state and its administrative apparatus, this loyalty later shifts toward U.S. citizens. Wylie puts forth his hope into the transformative force of new media that lured him into a shady business. Kaiser too invokes her progressive convictions. Though they seek to elucidate different aspects of the systemic corruption of corporate and state disinformation and surveillance, all three of them give altruistic convictions.

The whistleblowers ultimately see the wrongdoings as violations of basic democratic principles they could no longer suffer. This is most pronounced in Snowden's account, which decries state failure, but it also undergirds Wylie's and Kaiser's reckonings with the moral meltdown of corporate and political accountability epitomized by CA. Their disinterestedness does, however, not remain unchallenged. An element of the reprisal pushed on by former employers works by insinuating ulterior motives and picturing the whistleblowers as avengers out for revenge and bounty hunters seeking profit, in particular Kaiser, who repeatedly gets back to her financial needs (Heumann et al., 2013). This is not just a problem of Kaiser's reputation; indeed, the whole memoir genre suffers from its close ties to moneymaking ambitions and historical associations with trashy writing. As Rak (2013) notes, with memoirs, "consumer 'hunger,' narcissism, and capitalism" (p. 15) collapse. With their mélange of motives, data whistleblower memoirs are no exception, yet here, the discrepancy between altruism and purposive celebritization particularly stands out. To become visible and politically compelling, it may be necessary for whistleblowers to actively seek celebrity; nevertheless, their pretensions arouse suspicion and undermine their credibility.

It is furthermore questionable to what extent their testimonies were ultimately helpful for getting to the substance of surveillance schemes and disinformation-for-hire operations. What they deliver are intimate accounts of the backstories and petty quarrels, the mishaps and fiascos, disappointments and unfulfilled promises as well as, in the cases of Wylie and Kaiser, the networks of obligations to investors and colleagues, plus the competition around selling products and recruiting new customers. Otherwise, the whistleblowers did not convey crucial insights that had not already been circulated by news media and on social media. Rather, they served as figures for anchoring the discourse in a personal story that could also functioned as a blueprint for emerging revelations. Trapped in a position of "public powerlessness," as Maxwell (2020, p. 117) dubbed it, the data whistleblowers have become vocal figureheads who can use the attention they receive to shine a light on issues they care about but who remain politically sterile.

Conclusion

Whistleblowing is a checkered terrain, and whistleblowers proceed under historically contingent circumstances. This renders much of their endeavors delicate, yet it also opens up spaces of opportunity in which they can call attention to malpractice and position themselves at the core of these revelations. Although all three memoirs have become associated with the notorious practices of particular organizations—that is, the NSA and CA, respectively—reading them means following the whistleblowers through their precarious occupations, part-time jobs, internships, and temporary positions. In terms of organizational hierarchies, these experts and young professionals rank low and remain peripheral to positions of power (Di Salvo, 2021). Nevertheless, due to their sought-after skill set and expertise, they gain access to sensitive information. Paradoxically, they are not especially empowered to make decisions and are only loosely affiliated with their employers, but they have the technical power to access classified or secret information. This context prefigures their disclosures. It is Snowden who most acutely ponders this situation in which "causal exploitation incentivized freelancers to find ways to hack around the system" (p. 72). His authority to know the depths of the schemes he exposed was ultimately vindicated in the form of the U.S. government attempt to undercut his stature by insinuating that he was "only" an outside contractor without the necessary level of clearance that would give him access to any meaningful secrets.

In terms of the ethical debate of how to engage with the self-presentation of perpetrators supporting and maintaining surveillance and disinformation operations (Ong, 2020), the

whistleblowers follow a strategy of purposive publicity. Speaking up about the misuse of networked communication and digital technology, the three data whistleblowers we studied aspire to know, as Weiskopf et al. (2019) state, "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" (p. 676). They persist in their attempt to assume an active part in whistleblowing constellations, negotiating the handling of the material they have gathered, and to speak for themselves. Instead of dumping the entire corpus of information and thus leaving decisions on how to digest and exploit it to investigators or the media, they are keen on retaining some sort of authority. In doing so, they are not passive extras but lead actors who endeavor to frame themselves and their position in an attempt to promote their centrality to a revelation.

Different to recent attempts to record the intentions and experiences of the otherwise unrecognized producers of disinformation and workers who foster pervasive surveillance schemes (Ong, 2020), we find whistleblowers moving into the limelight themselves as part of a quest to gain legitimacy, which is arguably needed for a disclosure to be viewed as accurate and significant (Bushnell, 2020). They are not just sources of secret or classified information who require professional communicators to tell their story yet are otherwise unable to give their experience "a narrative frame and form that allows it be successfully endured," as Alford (1999, p. 37) asserted. This might apply for some whistleblowers, especially those who report corporate malfeasance inside the walls of an organization but, apart from that, hope to avoid publicity. Others, however—particularly those who move in the realm of national intelligence and politics like Daniel Ellsberg, and the data whistleblowers we studied—have actively sought publicity.

Similar than the accounts of people busy in disinformation-for-hire and the exploitation of social media data, the stories offered by whistleblowers make us aware of the underlying professional environments that are marked by collaboration and competition alike (Cabañes, 2020; Ong & Cabañes, 2019). Like other such producers, the data consultants-turned-whistleblowers cite their aspirations and basic needs that brought them to this kind of work and made them accept its drawbacks. The peculiar positionality of privileged precarity and the rationalization of their disoriented diligence encapsulate a general predicament of "complicity and collusion." In consequence, the whistleblowers' accounts oscillate between reckoning and report. All offer a look that is both intimate and distant. They at once promise to get close to, and even behind, a phenomenon that has escaped public scrutiny and in return try to dissociate themselves from their former trade. This balancing act requires the chronology of well-intentioned aberration, moments of epiphany, and unresolved mission which reiterates memoir conventions of conversion and confession (Couser, 2012). In their stories, the

renegades—now out of thrall with the trade they once helped to build—style themselves as honest moral arbiters in service of the public interest and brokers of exclusive knowledge "through the thick of the whistleblowing."

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Charlotte Knorr https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6591-3781
Christian Pentzold https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6355-3150

References

Alford, C. F. (1999). Whistle-blowers. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *43*(2), 264–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955254

Bushnell, A. M. (2020). Reframing the whistleblower in research. *Sociology Compass*, *14*(8), e12816. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12816

Cabañes, J. (2020). Digital disinformation and the imaginative dimension of communication. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *97*(2), 435–452. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699020913799

Couser, G. T. (2012). *Memoir: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Di Salvo, P. (2016). Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. *Celebrity Studies*, *7*(2), 289–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1165022

Di Salvo, P. (2021). From Snowden to Cambridge Analytica. In H. Tumber & S. Waisbord (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media and scandal* (pp. 254–262). Routledge.

Di Salvo, P., & Negro, G. (2016). Framing Edward Snowden. *Journalism*, *17*(7), 805–822. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915595472

Eide, E., & Kunelius, R. (2018). Whistleblowers and journalistic ideals. *Northern Lights*, *16*(1), 75–95. https://doi.org/10.1386/nl.16.1.75_1

Ellsberg, D. (2003). Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers. Viking Press.

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis*. Routledge.

Gray, M., & Suri, S. (2019). *Ghost work*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Gurman, H., & Mistry, K. (2020). The paradox of national security whistleblowing. In K. Mistry & H. Gurman (Eds.), *Whistleblowing nation* (pp. 9–44). Columbia University Press.

Heumann, M., Friedes, A., Cassak, L., Wright, W., & Joshi, E. (2013). The world of whistleblowing. *Public Integrity*, *16*(1), 25–52. https://doi.org/10.2753/PIN1099-9922160102

Jubb, P. B. (1999). Whistleblowing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *21*(1), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1005922701763

Kaiser, B. (2019). *Targeted: My inside story of Cambridge Analytica and how Trump, Brexit and Facebook broke democracy*. HarperCollins.

Kenny, K. (2019). *Whistleblowing: Toward a new theory*. Harvard University Press.

Kenny, K., Fotaki, M., & Vandekerckhove, W. (2020). Whistleblower subjectivities. *Organization Studies*, *41*(3), 323–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840618814558

Kunelius, R., Heikkilä, H., Russell, A., & Yagodin, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Journalism and the NSA revelations*. I.B. Tauris.

Lahusen, C. (2019). Memoirs. In M. Wagner-Egelhaaf (Ed.), *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction* (pp. 626–635). de Gruyter.

Liddle, R. (2019, October 13). Whistleblower's account of the scandal. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mindf-ck-inside-cambridge-analyticas-plot-to-break-the-world-by-christopher-wylie-whistleblowers-account-of-the-scandal-knlk050nb

Limbong, A. (2019, October 22). Former Cambridge Analytica director says she saw company techniques "as savvy." *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2019/10/22/772082415/former-cambridge-analytica-director-says-she-saw-company-techniques-as-savvy

Maxwell, L. (2020). Celebrity hero. In K. Mistry & H. Gurman (Eds.), *Whistleblowing nation* (pp. 95–122). Columbia University Press.

McCurdy, P. (2013). From the Pentagon papers to cablegate. In B. Brevini, A. Hintz, & P. McCurdy (Eds.), *Beyond WikiLeaks* (pp. 123–145). Palgrave Macmillan.

Melley, T. (2020). The public sphere hero. In K. Mistry & H. Gurman (Eds.), *Whistleblowing nation* (pp. 213–242). Columbia University Press.

Nader, R., Petkas, P., & Blackwell, K. (Eds.). (1972). *Whistle blowing*. Bantam.

Olesen, T. (2018). The democratic drama of whistleblowing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *21*(4), 508–525. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431017751546

Ong, J. (2020). Limits and luxuries of slow research in radical war. *Digital War*, *1*, 111–116. https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-020-00006-x

Ong, J., & Cabañes, J. (2019). When disinformation studies meets production studies: Social identities and moral justifications in the political trolling industry. *International Journal of Communication*, *13*, 5771–5790.

Qin, J. (2015). Hero on Twitter, traitor on news. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *20*(2), 166–184. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161214566709

Rak, J. (2013). *Boom! Manufacturing memoir for the popular market*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2016). The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA). In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse studies* (pp. 23–61). Routledge.

Smith, B. (2021, October 25). Inside the big Facebook leak. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/24/business/media/facebook-leak-frances-haugen.html

Snowden, E. (2019). Permanent record. Metropolitan Books.

Stanger, A. (2019). *Whistle blowers*. Yale University Press.

Szalai, J. (2019, October 9). In new memoirs, two whistle-blowers offer details from inside Cambridge Analytica. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/09/books/review-christopher-wylie-targeted-brittany-kaiser-cambridge-analytica.html

Thorsen, E. (2017). Whistleblowing in a digital age. In B. Franklin & S. A. Eldridge (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to digital journalism studies* (pp. 569–579). Routledge.

Thorsen, E., Sreedharan, C., & Allan, S. (2013). WikiLeaks and whistle-blowing. In B. Brevini, A. Hintz, & P. McCurdy (Eds.), *Beyond WikiLeaks* (pp. 101–122). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137275745_7

Wahl-Jorgensen, K., & Hunt, J. (2012). Journalism, accountability and the possibilities for structural critique. *Journalism*, *13*(4), 399–416. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884912439135

Weiskopf, R., Heinrichs, R., & Loacker, B. (2019). The ethico-politics of whistleblowing. *Ephemera: Critical Dialogues on Organization*, *19*(4), 671–696.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2016). Critical discourse analysis. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods for critical discourse analysis* (pp. 1–33). Sage.

Wylie, C. (2019). *Mindf*ck: Inside Cambridge Analytica's plot to break the world*. Profile Books.

Author Biographies

Charlotte Knorr, Ph.D., is a Research Associate in the Department for Media and Communication Studies at Leipzig University. Since April 2021, she has been working on the project "Framing Big Data" where she examines the discourse around datafied processes both in professional communication and user-generated content. In addition, Charlotte is a trained mediator with a focus on transformative mediation for disputes and conflicts in private relationships.

Margitta Wolter, M.A., works as a Research Associate in the Department for Media and Communication Studies at Leipzig University. Previously, she was a Research Associate at the Institute for Media Research at Chemnitz University of Technology. She is pursuing a discourse analysis around sustainability in the fast fashion industry in Germany and Bangladesh.

Christian Pentzold, Ph.D., is Chair and Professor of Media and Communication in the Department for Media and Communication Studies at Leipzig University. He is interested in the construction and appropriation of digital media and the roles information and communication technologies play in modern society. In current projects, he looks at the public understanding of Big Data, humans interacting with robots, the smart home, the organization and governance of peer production, as well as the interplay of time, data, and media.