

## Justice, Change and Technology: On the Limits of Whistleblowing

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This chapter is about social change, and the means we go about achieving it. Social change is fundamentally just that: *social*. It is about different ways of relating to each other, and the different kinds of people we might be as a result. Vitrally, the work of making this change happen – of working towards a world in which people relate and reflect in different ways – is just as social. It consists of ways of changing or enabling those relations, ways of reflecting on ourselves and each other, and ways of forming and reforming collective movements and identities. Social change is social, and so is the work of producing it.

Confusingly, some of the archetypes and personas we celebrate as representing activism at its purest are fundamentally asocial. One of those is the “truth-teller”: the whistleblower, the critic, the iconoclast. In this chapter I argue that the way we frame truth-telling, and the figure who does it ignores the social nature of change, and risks celebrating and mimicking ideals that not only do a poor job of getting us closer to a better world, but in many respects *undermine* efforts for social change through the voices and attitudes they do (or do not) make space for.

### Ideas and Ideals of Social Change

The techniques to be used in activism or social movements - what approach makes the most sense given a particular problem or situation - is endlessly contested. To adapt a Yiddishism: if you have three activists, you have nine opinions. But one particular cluster of archetypes and people stands out. I’m thinking specifically of the “whistleblower”; the critical thinker and practitioner of critique; the iconoclast (literally: smasher of false idols).<sup>i</sup> Each of these archetypes is distinct, but what brings them *together* is the idea of a person who tells “dangerous truths”,<sup>ii</sup> and through doing so, catalyses and generates change in how we see the world – individually, and collectively – and how we behave towards it.

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Each of these archetypes are individually valorised – particularly in progressive and leftist spaces. Whistleblowers are described as the “saints of the secular age”; as “extraordinary heroes” of “exceptional courage”.<sup>1</sup> Snowden, Ellsberg, Manning – we give them awards, we praise their bravery and impact, we hold them up as a very particular idea of what people should be. And at the risk of assuming my audience: the perceived “purity” of critique, the value of the scholar Rita Felski vividly describes as “suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly vigilant”,<sup>2</sup> goes almost without saying. For individual activists, this is never one-sided – Snowden or Manning are portrayed as traitors as frequently as they are heroes, if not moreso. But critics portray them as traitors *rather than* whistleblowers; the link between whistleblowing and heroism remains intact.

I don’t want to come off as entirely unsympathetic; truth-telling *does* create avenues for change, and there are very good reasons (particularly on the left) to be suspicious, and to value suspicion.<sup>iii</sup> More broadly, in a society that centres the pursuits of truth and authenticity (Foucault, Taylor), truth is the currency of the day.<sup>3</sup> If you want to create change, reformist or radical, revealing hidden truths is a familiar way of doing it. The problem is not truth-telling, but the status we give to it and the very odd way we see those who do it – specifically, our failure to attend to the *social relations* of the very methods we’re using to seek changes to social relations. I’m thinking of three things, in particular; the vulnerability of truth-telling to existing social inequalities, the way lauding and atomizing “truth-telling” creates unjust and perverse incentives for the forms of activism we value and engage in, and the actual impact that this mentality of suspicion, of unmasking, of taking nobody’s word for it, has on the ability of us – activists – to build community. I will unpack each of these in turn.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kenny, Kate, Marianna Fotaki, and Wim Vandekerckhove. "Whistleblower subjectivities: Organization and passionate attachment." *Organization Studies* 41, no. 3 (2020): 323-343; Grant, Colin. "Whistle blowers: Saints of secular culture." *Journal of Business Ethics* 39.4 (2002): 391-399, Mansbach, Abraham. "Whistleblowing as fearless speech: The radical democratic effects of late modern parrhesia." *Whistleblowing and democratic values* (2011): 12-26 and Brown, A. J. "Whistleblowers as heroes." *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership* (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Felski, Rita. *The limits of critique*. University of Chicago Press, 2015, 7

<sup>3</sup> See Taylor, Charles. *The ethics of authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1992 and Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen. *Truth & truthfulness: An essay in genealogy*. Princeton University Press, 2002.

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Whose truths?

In 2018, Alex Stamos – the Chief Security Officer of Facebook – publicly began disassociating himself from the company, and making plans to leave. The central reason for his departure was misinformation: specifically, the feeling that Facebook had done a poor job in controlling it during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the increasing certainty that the changes he felt were necessary would not be tolerated by the company.

Three years later, Doctor Timnit Gebru – a senior researcher at Google – went just as public with concerns, writing a paper that took issue with the societal and ecological consequences of large-scale machine learning systems (including those built by her employer). The two's stories diverge entirely at that point. Alex Stamos, a white man with an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering, is now the director of the Stanford Internet Observatory and a visiting professor at Stanford University. Doctor Gebru, an Ethiopian woman with a PhD *from* Stanford, is unemployed. response to her work was to fire her.<sup>4</sup>

These are not unusual injustices: white man lauded, Black woman is fired. Stamos's complaints were within what the game allowed: Gebru's were her getting above her station, and forgetting her place – a place characterized not only by the gendered and racialized inequalities that are endemic to U.S. society in general, but the specific, additional inequalities and presumptions of ignorance and incompetence that come from the social character of the technology sector. Indeed, as someone who followed along both controversies, I cannot help but notice the ways in which Dr Gebru's technical skills and brilliance are undercut and belittled precisely in order to delegitimize her experiences of racism and misogyny – and the way that the debate over those experiences has come to overshadow the concerns she first intended to go public about. In technological critique, it seems, Black women can (maybe) speak as Black women. But they better not dare to speak as scientists.

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<sup>4</sup> Lyons, Kim, "Timnit Gebru's actual paper may explain why Google ejected her". *The Verge*, 2021. URL: <https://www.theverge.com/2020/12/5/22155985/paper-timnit-gebru-fired-google-large-language-models-search-ai>

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I highlight these disappointing yet unsurprising disparities here to emphasise that one way in which truth-telling is social is that it occurs *in society*: that it is undertaken under the conditions of society as it stands. These conditions include widespread epistemic injustice: inequalities in whose knowledge counts as knowledge, or as truth; inequalities in who is listened to, or permitted to speak without punishment.<sup>5</sup> This goes double for *technological* critique: not only is there the general air of illegitimacy about the knowledge of women, queer people, disabled people and people of colour, there is the particular prominence and history of excluding such people from technology in particular.<sup>6</sup>

If truth-telling is merely one of a sheaf of approaches, and the truth-teller one of many actors, then this is not a *major* limitation: all tactics are flawed and partial. But my worry is that in our rhetoric and imaginaries, truth-telling becomes centred as the primary, or only, way of effecting change. If this is the case, then we are going to end up with imbalanced and *unjust* ideas of social change itself: we will end up prioritising those concerns that are taken up by those who are already listened to, and diminishing the rest. This is inarguably the precise opposite of what injustice-focused activism should be doing.

## Collective truths

Beyond the question of who gets to tell truths, there is also the question of what work goes into doing so – and how our centering of not just truth telling but the truth-teller, singular, obscures much of the labour that social movements depend on to thrive. As an illustration of

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<sup>5</sup> See Code, Lorraine. *What can she know?: feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Cornell University Press, 1991; Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge, 2002; Prescod-Weinstein, Chanda. "Making Black women scientists under white empiricism: the racialization of epistemology in physics." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45.2 (2020): 421-447 and Dotson, Kristie. "How is this paper philosophy?." *Comparative Philosophy* 3.1 (2013): 121-121.

<sup>6</sup> See Hicks, Mar. *Programmed inequality: How Britain discarded women technologists and lost its edge in computing*. MIT Press, 2017; Keyes, Os. "Automating autism: Disability, discourse, and Artificial Intelligence." *The Journal of Sociotechnical Critique* 1.1 (2020); Dunbar-Hester, Christina. *Hacking diversity: The politics of inclusion in open technology cultures*. Vol. 21. Princeton University Press, 2019.

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precisely this, we can look at media portrayals of WikiLeaks, and the figures involved in operating it.

Following the disclosures of Edward Snowden – specifically, the information on NSA surveillance practices – WikiLeaks became practically a household name. Public and media attention rapidly focused on those working at the organisation, one of whom was Sarah Harrison. Originally a journalist, and a researcher for the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Harrison quickly became a vital part of WikiLeaks, playing a central role in the decision to publish the U.S. diplomatic cables and in organising Edward Snowden’s escape to Hong Kong, as Angela Richter recounts in her introduction to “Women, Whistleblowing, WikiLeaks”:

“[Harrison] had travelled to Hong Kong for the organization and had helped Edward Snowden escape after his announcement that he was the NSA whistleblower. She intervened as his situation was becoming increasingly difficult. By the time she arrived in Hong Kong, Snowden was on his own...She stayed with him after the successful escape to Moscow, first for weeks in a windowless room in the transit zone of Moscow’s Sheremetyevo airport, and then for many more months in the city. She did not leave for her voluntary exile in Berlin until she knew that Snowden was safe.”<sup>7</sup>

This “voluntary exile” continues to this day: as a consequence of her work for WikiLeaks, Harrison has been unable to return home since 2014. The centrality of Harrison’s work according to those who were actually *involved* in WikiLeaks and its disclosures contrasts strongly with how media coverage discussed her. Harrison, *Der Spiegel* wrote, was simply the “assistant” or “friend” of Julian Assange – and this was the coverage by WikiLeaks’ media *partners*, nevermind venues more hostile to the disclosures.

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<sup>7</sup> Avila, Renata, Sarah Harrison, and Angela Richter. *Women, whistleblowing, WikiLeaks: A conversation*. OR Books, 2018, pp.1-2.

What is the point of me telling this story? Is this not just misogyny, already discussed in the last section? No doubt, misogyny plays a massive part of the diminishing of Harrison's role, as highlighted by both Richter and Agostinho & Thylstrup.<sup>8</sup> But I would argue that there is something beyond, or perhaps intertwined with, misogyny, here. Specifically, there is a certain *atomisation* and *individualisation* of WikiLeaks, with a particular focus on (in this case) Snowden and Assange.

Stories of truth-telling heroes, like stories of heroes more broadly, are stories of unusual individuals. Truth-telling comes from the *one* person in a situation to be brave enough (or insightful enough, or lucky enough, or mad enough) to say the unspeakable. Truth-telling is an individual practice, and if truth-telling is the idealised mechanism of social change, then social change, too, is an individual practice. Such a perspective makes a lot of sense; not only does it fit the broader individualist narratives of neoliberal society in general, there is a grain of truth to it. Social movements and social change often do begin with individual awakenings, and individual efforts.<sup>9</sup> But the key word, there, is *begin*: even truth-telling often involves multiple parties, and turning those truths into action always does. The "collateral murder" video would not be what it was without the editing of Birgitta Jónsdóttir; the escape of Snowden may have failed without the presence of Harrison. But our framings of truth-tellers are so individualised, and so focused on singular heroes, that we ignore these wider networks and the more mundane work required to keep them running.

Writing about the failure conditions of mutual aid networks, Dean Spade warns that one prominent vulnerability is the way in which "we are used to being part of groups that ignore ordinary caring labor, much of which is seen as women's work...while celebrating only the final, outward-looking evidence of production: the big protest march, the finalized legislation, the release of someone from prison, the media coverage...many of us think 'process is boring'. Everyone wants a selfie with Angela Davis at the big event, but many people are less interested

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<sup>8</sup> Agostinho, Daniela, and Nanna Bonde Thylstrup. "If truth was a woman!: Leaky infrastructures and the gender politics of truth-telling." *Ephemera* 19.4 (2019): 745-775.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the interviews with organizational founders in Nownes, Anthony J. *Organizing for transgender rights: Collective action, group development, and the rise of a new social movement*. SUNY Press, 2019.

in the months of meetings where we coordinate how to pull off that event”.<sup>10</sup> The result of this perceived “boringness” is that the work of coordination, of editing, of administration, is devalued, and so are those who do it. Yet this work is also *vital* if groups are to be sustainable, and sustained – if they are to have a shot at making real change, and doing so without being deeply miserable for those participating.

To link this back to our example here: what is telling about the treatment of Harrison is not simply the misogyny that led to her being dismissed as an “assistant” or a “friend”, but that classification as an assistant or friend is the same as dismissing the importance of their work. The individualised nature of “the truth-teller” implicitly carries with it a certain *solitary* component; an intentional ignorance of (or, assumed absence of) the communities and networks needed to make truths matter, and the less “heroic”, but no less vital, work undertaken by those networks. By individualising change, and associating it only with heroic, public work, we risk kicking the chair out from under ourselves. Change needs communities, collectives, and networks, and organising them rarely involves work that is heroic. But it is work that matters, nonetheless.

## After truth

Finally, there is the issue of how these imageries not only misrepresent the relational nature of change, but sometimes actively *damage our ability to form those relationships*.

This section is personal for me, and is the reason I was first drawn to writing about this topic. Over the last four years, I fell – in some ways accidentally – into the role of the “teller of dangerous truths”. I was the critic, the exposé, the whistleblower, the walking, talking stereotype. My work – originally focused on facial recognition and its harms and inequalities<sup>11</sup> - centred on exposing falsehood, in unmasking shallow thinking. By most accounts, it was fairly successful, with publications, press coverage, and growing public awareness. As I write, in fact, a collective of activist groups and individuals are preparing draft legislation to ban the

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<sup>10</sup> Spade, Dean. *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during this Crisis (and the Next)*. Verso Books, 2020, pp.65-6

<sup>11</sup> Keyes, Os. "The misgendering machines: Trans/HCI implications of automatic gender recognition." *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction* 2, no. CSCW (2018): 1-22.

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technology I wrote about in the European Union. Presumably I should be rather happy with this; I pointed out that the emperor had no clothes and people are moving pretty fast to get him some underwear.

But the fact of the matter is that I am *not* happy, not now, and certainly not while I was doing the work. What I mostly remember is being miserable, and being exhausted, and being the source of profound hurt for a lot of other people. What I mostly feel is regret – regret for how I behaved, for how I went about my work, for how some of the same phenomena I highlight above (inequalities in who gets to speak, and an ignorance of the work needed to make change *sustainable*) absolutely snookered me. Many people from that time simply no longer talk to me, and while I hold out hope that the few who promised they would return will keep that promise, I consider it entirely understandable if they do not.

The reason for this all is psychic, affective; it is about the *mindset* of truth-telling, the persona and personality of that figure we valorise so much. Critical analysis is (as discussed above) a particular species of truth-telling, and the critic a type of truth-teller. Watkins describes the critic as one whose role is of “heroic resistance to all the social pressures toward conformity, mass culture homogeneity, utilitarian demands and the bureaucratization of knowledge”<sup>12</sup> Felski, as mentioned earlier, articulates the mindset of the critic as “suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly vigilant”,<sup>13</sup> deploying these attitudes to unmask falsehood and shout truth.

Truth-tellers, as these descriptions make clear, certainly make bad enemies. But they make far more atrocious friends. I was this stereotype, and believed I had to be; I was suspicious, knowing, vigilant, hardheaded (definitely hardheaded). And if truth-telling truly was an individual, heroic practice, maybe this would have been okay. But it is not: it is, as we have discussed, *social*, involving whole networks of people collaborating to shape and endorse and publicise a truth, and even more vitally, ensure that something is *done* with it. And suspicion is a terrible basis on which to build a friendship. It is also, given the implicit and paradoxical dogmatism that comes with it, arguably a terrible basis to build truth.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Watkins, Evan. "The Self-Evaluations of Critical Theory." *Boundary 2* (1984): 359-378, quoted in Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, eds. *Critique and postcritique*. Duke University Press, 2017, p.7

<sup>13</sup> Felski, “The Limits of Critique”, 7

<sup>14</sup> See Code, “Epistemic Responsibility”, Chapter 1.

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When truth-telling becomes a mindset and a personality – and when exposing truths becomes the highest value you adhere to – relationships become damaged, and impossible. Damaged, because when the only tools you have are destructive, building things – spaces, hopes, relationships – becomes incredibly hard, and incredibly alien. Impossible, because nobody can truly be that person all the time; we are all riven with contradictions, insecurities, little white lies that slowly blossom and less-white lies that metastasise like a cancer. Hanging your hat entirely on the truth means disappointing and hurting those around you when you fail to live up to that impossible standard – and it means lacking any useful tools for repairing relationships when this inevitably happens. Suspicion does not allow space for vulnerability; vigilance does not allow space for trust.

Perhaps if we treated truth-telling as an activity for anyone, rather than truth-tellers as stand-alone “heroic” figures, things might be different. We would hold ourselves to more generous standards, we would have greater humility, less paranoia, and less fear; we would build precisely the kinds of relationships within our activism we are hoping for our activism to make possible for *everyone*. Perhaps not. But if we believe that there is a moral duty to aid efforts for social change – to build a better world, of better people, relating in better ways – then we have a duty to undertake this work *prefiguratively*: to embody the very values we wish to see.<sup>15</sup> To trust, though trust is a risk;<sup>16</sup> to offer solidarity, though we might be disappointed. To understand that no one person can lead us to a better world, and that – as Debs put it – if they could lead us in, it would mean someone else could just as easily lead us out. To work collectively, not individually.

As I have learned the hard way, the valorisation of the truth-teller – the truth teller as an individual, as a *heroic* individual, as a *cynical* individual – trips us up in doing just these things. If truth-telling is what matters, then the questions of whose truths are listened to does not fit the frame. If truth-telling is *individual*, the work that scaffolds social change and makes it sustainable is wasted. And if truth-telling is a *mindset*, rather than a *technique*, then we can only

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<sup>15</sup> Drouhard, Margaret, Josephine Hoy and Os. "Human-computer insurrection: Notes on an anarchist HCI." *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Baier, Annette. "Trust and its vulnerabilities." *Moral prejudices* (1994): 130-151.

be that cynical, paranoid, vigilant person. And frankly, a world of insecure cynicism that dismisses the value of “boring” work and glosses over the silencing of marginalized voices is an odd goal to have. We don’t need to go there; we already live there.

What we need is not more iconoclasts, or judgment; what we need is more understanding, more recognition. What we need is more appreciation of the bonds between us, the work that goes into sustaining them, and the need to *prioritise* sustaining them if we are to mirror the values we want to see in the world as a whole. We need well-rounded people, and well-rounded ideals of people, to have well-rounded spaces. As “well-rounded” hopefully makes clear, I am not suggesting that negativity or suspicion are bad, or have no place in our formation and undertaking of collective organizing. Both can be productive, and necessary: there is often much to be angry about. There is often an “aptness of anger”,<sup>17</sup> a justified basis of suspicion and unmasking. As Eve Sedgwick notes, the tendency towards “paranoid readings” in segments of activism and academia is often entirely understandable: many of us start from positions in which there is much to be furious about.<sup>18</sup>

What I am suggesting is, perhaps, simply that if we care so much about toppling false idols we should start with those in our midst. The idea of an atomized, suspicious, destructive hero as the sufficient conditions for change is one such idol. If we want a better world, one built by all of us, one for all of us, we cannot fall back on imaginaries about a single person tearing down the old. Such imaginaries preserve as much of the here-and-now as they claim to destroy. We have to learn how to build better ways of relating, and better ideas of what it means to be a good activist – and we have to do so together. Enough people want to be Edward Snowden; we need more people who want to be Sarah Harrison. Whole networks, collectives, communities of Harrisons.

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<sup>17</sup> Srinivasan, Amia. "The aptness of anger." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26.2 (2018): 123-144.

<sup>18</sup> Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you." (1997).

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<sup>i</sup> Related, more niche archetypes include Lorraine Code's evocative idea of the "epistemic gadfly". See Code, Lorraine. *Epistemic responsibility*. SUNY Press, 2020.

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- <sup>ii</sup> This framing is a riff on and echo of Foucault's concept of "parrhesia" and the "parrhesiac"; see Foucault, Michel. *Discourse and truth and parrhesia*. Chicago Foucault Project, 2019. Without getting too into the weeds, however, the two cluster concepts are very different in their relation to social and communal dynamics, rather than simplistic ideas of the speaker and listener existing in a vacuum together – although they do both suffer from obvious gendered flaws. See Maxwell, Lida. "The politics and gender of truth-telling in Foucault's lectures on parrhesia." *Contemporary Political Theory* 18.1 (2019): 22-42.
- <sup>iii</sup> Consider the long history of state government oppression of left-wing movements, in particular. COINTELPRO, the post-WTO crackdowns, and the current hyperfocus of policing resources on movements responding to white supremacy make for good reasons not to trust new people or information. My local and much-beloved anarchist bookstore, Left Bank Books, features a sign to the tune of: talk here as if the FBI is bugging it, because they probably are.

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