

Assange, Manning and Snowden, Standing with the Conscience of Truthtellers



“Whistleblowers are true defenders of democracy,” the author writes. (Photo: Tony Webster/flickr/cc)

By Nozomi Hayase | [Common Dreams](#)

Last week, Oliver Stone’s biopic “[Snowden](#)” hit the theaters. The film illuminates the life of Edward Snowden between 2004 and 2013, aiming to humanize one of the most wanted men in the world. Just before its release, a public campaign [was launched](#) urging President Obama to pardon this renowned NSA whistleblower.

The massive US government persecution of truthtellers over the past years has exiled conscience from civil society, locking it behind bars and driving it into asylum. Yet, despite these attacks, it refuses to die.

From prison where she is serving 35 years, Chelsea Manning is standing up for her dignity. Recently, she [protested](#) her dehumanizing treatment by engaging in a hunger strike. All the while, WikiLeaks editor in chief Julian Assange keeps publishing, giving asylum to the most persecuted documents, while [being arbitrarily detained](#) in the Ecuadorian embassy for the last 4 years. As this struggle continues, the torch for transparency and courage that kindled hearts and has sparked public debate keeps shedding light on the state of the world we live in.

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In a debate with executive director of Freedom Press, Trevor Timm, which addressed the question of pardoning Snowden, National security attorney Bradley Moss [expressed](#) his disdain over the former NSA contractor providing information to the Press. He criticized Snowden's act, noting how journalists are unauthorized to possess government information:

"There's approximately 4 million people who also hold clearances. It is a sacred trust and Snowden broke it by giving these documents to people who were not authorized to have it."

Moss's statement revealed the culture of the Intelligence community that permeates the life of not only U.S. citizens, but of people around the globe. What is this "sacred trust" that Moss referred to that would give exclusive privilege to a certain population? Implied in Moss's comment is that honoring this trust would take precedence over the right to free speech, requiring journalists to ask for permission to engage in activities that are supposedly protected under the First Amendment of the US Constitution. This signals the existence of an invisible governance that claims superiority over the highest law of the land.

Government Secrecy

There are some who have come to see the internal working of a patronage network that is bound within this exclusive trust. In his 2006 seminal writing *Conspiracy as Governance*, Assange [noted](#) how secrecy was used by political elites “as the primary planning methodology behind maintaining or strengthening authoritarian power”. He then [assessed](#) how “collaborative secrecy, working to the detriment of a population is enough to define their behavior as conspiratorial”.

In his latest book, *The WikiLeaks Files*, Assange [described](#) how through seeing “a level of hysteria and non-corporeality” displayed by the intelligence community in reaction to WikiLeaks’ disclosures, he observed something “that is not easily captured by traditional theories of power”. He recognized how classified documents function as a tangible object that symbolizes a bond among those who are inside this secret network, in a similar way that “many religions and cults imbue their priestly class with additional scarcity value by keeping their religious texts secret from the public or the lower orders of the devoted”. He [pointed out](#) how US government employees who have been cleared to read classified documents are forbidden to read the same documents when published by journalistic organizations like WikiLeaks:

“If cleared employees ever come across them, they are expected to self-report their contact with the newly profaned object, and destroy all traces of it ... The implication is that there is a non-physical property that inhabits documents once they receive their classification markings, and that this marginal property is extinguished, not by copying the document, but by making the copy public. The now public document has, to devotees of the national security state, not merely become devoid of this marginal property and reverted to a mundane object, it has been inhabited by another non-physical property; an evil one.”

With over-classification, high ranking government officials maintain secrecy and a sense of exceptionalism. Once one goes through the clearance of this embedding process, one is invited into the inner circle to participate in a ritual to conspire. Here, elites who cut their ties from the rest of humanity have formed an exclusive allegiance to one another. They are essentially secret brotherhoods, who have elevated themselves above the law, claiming unearned authority and entitlement.

This conspiratorial governance floats above Congress. These self-selected elites have their own laws. They have their own secret judicial proceedings with the likes of the FISA Court. This state within a state can act as an empire of all states, making [sealed court orders](#) and commanding private payment companies to engage in for example the extra-judicial [banking blockade](#) against WikiLeaks. It exercises its power in virtually any jurisdiction in the world, going after anyone they deem a threat to their structure of power. This is shown in the case of Kim Dotcom, founder of Megaupload, who was branded a fugitive and [subject to](#) an egregious civil asset forfeiture process by the US government.

Like the Dark Riders in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth legendarium, major media outlets, political parties and candidate are bound to this sacred trust to act as servants for its elusive core. This became apparent with [the DNC leaks](#), revealing the organization and media's efforts to undermine the democratic process, along with the New York Times [blatantly acting](#) as a mouthpiece for the Hillary Clinton campaign.

This unaccounted authority has been magnified with a complete double-standard toward other leaks. Retired US Army General and former CIA director General David Petraeus [revealed](#) classified national security information to his mistress with little consequence and more recently, Hillary Clinton's mishandling of classified materials [was given](#) leniency. All the while, whistleblowers who released information responsibly

in the public interest, causing no harm have been aggressively prosecuted.

Entrapment through Deception

With government secrecy and propaganda, super-villains inside the ring of power have exploited the youth's idealism and their genuine devotion for the country, making them serve their selfish interests. The USA Patriot ACT, a bill that gave intelligence agencies wide-ranging power in the post 9-11 world unleashed a tyrannical monster that is blind to the terror it is creating, swallowing information indiscriminately.

Under the ubiquitous prying eyes of the NSA, the influence of this unelected power has expanded around the world. This invisible force of governance has been blending into the fabric of our culture through the private sector. With the growing market in mobile phones and Internet services, companies like Google have become agents to snare the masses into their vision of the future.

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In his book *When Google Met WikiLeaks*, Assange [revealed](#) Google's ties to the US State Department and to the former secretary of state, who will likely be anointed the next president. Assange brought attention to how this Internet giant is not as innocent as many think. He [elucidated](#) Google's participation in mass surveillance and its political aspirations that is "firmly enmeshed within the foreign-policy agenda of the world's largest superpower". Through 'marketing' and chasing ads online, they prey on people, turning them into products. With friendly, progressive images offering free emails and data storage, this tech giant gains wide popularity and gets users to consent to terms and conditions of their services, making them pawns to advance geopolitical agendas.

To this priest class, whistleblowers that threaten the

security of their sacred trust are their greatest enemies. With the power of social media and Internet, technology is now used as a strategic weapon against democracy. Recently Google [was accused of](#) manipulating search engines to create positive suggestions and hide negative terms for Hillary Clinton with its auto complete, inserting bias and intruding into people's thought processes. It is not just corporate media that is used to influence national elections. Seemingly innocent and apolitical actors like Silicon Valley companies are also interfering with the democratic process by engaging in electronic manipulation and altering people's views.

Persecuting Conscience with the Espionage Act

Those with conscience remember truth and the heritage of humanity – our intrinsic obligation to one another. They can find what is stolen from the public inside the castle of those who claim to be holier than the rest. Their courage to bring back what belongs to the public opened the door into these hidden halls of power. In the wake of such unauthorized disclosures, federal agencies have tried to tighten cybersecurity to tackle these threats from within. They implemented new control mechanisms such as [insider threat programs](#) to detect and monitor those who may disrupt such exclusive lines of communication.

Many classified documents keep prestige in this rarefied air of power. Once they are unsealed by conscience, they lose this magical power. This unsealing challenges their god-like omnipotence, showing it to be a fantasy of grandeur created through collaborative secrecy, using dirty tricks, lies and manipulation. Released documents recollected in the public memory awakens a history that had been condemned to the oblivion of the hidden past.

To this priest class, whistleblowers that threaten the security of their sacred trust are their greatest enemies. Journalists who publish this material are treated as aiding

traitors. Just as unsealed documents that have lost their scent of holiness in the temple need to be destroyed, so does the conscience of ordinary man that shines light into the darkness that binds them.

We are now seeing a kind of modern witch-hunt. [The Espionage Act](#) of 1917, a US federal law created after World War I for wartime prosecutions is now being used to burn the conscience of whistleblowers. This law [does not allow](#) a public interest defense and prevents whistleblowers from having their motivations considered in court, making it impossible for them to defend their acts and receive a fair trial.

Manning was convicted and Snowden charged under the Espionage Act by the President Obama, who has been at the helm of this empire state for 8 years. Obama with [his kill-list](#) exerts sole power emanating within the Executive branch, and can act as accuser, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner all in one, completely unchecked, stripping off due process and can assassinate anyone, including US citizens.

Behind the smile of [his promised transparency](#), Obama has also [waged](#) an unprecedented war against whistleblowers, hunting down those who defend press freedom and act in the public interest.

Obama [signed](#) into law the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that greatly expands the scope of government, allowing the military to detain US citizens without due process under these new anti-terrorism provisions. This unauthorized power has escalated. In his final months in the office, Obama vowed to seal the corporate trade deals of [TPP, TTIP and TISA](#). This is a trade dictatorship by a self-selected group of rich countries where corporations can have governments completely subordinate to their interests, bringing entire populations around the globe to their knees.

Our Sacred Bond

Whistleblowers are true defenders of democracy. Both Manning and Snowden believed in ordinary people, in their ability to make vital decisions about their own lives. Manning once [wrote](#) how she wants “people to see the truth . . . regardless of who they are . . . because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public”. Snowden also [expressed](#) his sense of duty to return information to the public.

Their faith in one’s fellow human beings made them question and ultimately break what they had been indoctrinated to believe as a “sacred trust”. Snowden woke up to the fact the government that he [had believed in](#) all his life was engaged in “an extraordinary act of deception”. He now [reminds](#) government workers how their “first allegiance as a public servant is to the public rather than to the government”.

By acting on behalf of the people, these truth-tellers revealed true sacred trust that is inscribed in our hearts – the same breath that inspired the founding documents of the United States. In her request for a presidential pardon in 2013, Manning [wrote](#) how her time in Iraq made her “question the morality of America’s military presence since 9/11” and she realized that “in our efforts to meet the risks posed to us by the enemy, we had forgotten our Humanity”. She [continued](#):

“I will serve my time knowing that sometimes you have to pay a heavy price to live in a free society. I will gladly pay that price if it means we could have a country that is truly conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all women and men are created equal.”

These patriots of the Internet generation pledged allegiance to trust in the common man, reminding us of a kinship that binds us all together, regardless of religion, gender and nationality. When the system cannot self-correct according to the ideals that founded this country through its internal mechanism of checks and balances, efforts to achieve such

goals have to come from outside existing models of democracy. A call for Presidential pardon for Snowden must become a larger political resistance. Efforts to free these brave souls ask each of us to step forward to respond to their extraordinary courage.

The resilience of truth-tellers in the face of this adversity teaches us that truly nothing else will do if our courage is not to fail us. In the court of public opinion formed through our uncompromising power, we can claim that the highest law of the land is that of the commons enshrined in our own sacredness – in the conscience of ordinary people.

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