

Chapter 86

The Triumph of Fear: Connecting the Dots About Whistleblowers and Surveillance

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ABSTRACT

Edward Snowden was castigated by government officials and mainstream mass media as a traitor, spy, and international criminal when he released information about the National Security Agency (NSA) secret and massive surveillance of virtually all U.S. electronic communication. More than “wiretapping” is involved in the spin being put on Snowden’s revelations. A lot of institutional duplicity has been revealed. The reaction of United States officials can be seen as a dramatic performance to demonstrate their moral resolve and complete power (even as Snowden challenged it) in order to dissuade other whistleblowers from following suite, as well as maintain authority and a discourse of fear about terrorism that justifies surveillance and other forms of social control.

INTRODUCTION

Edward Snowden was castigated by government officials and mainstream mass media as a traitor, spy, and international criminal when he released information about the National Security Agency (NSA) secret and massive surveillance of virtually all U.S. electronic communication. More than “wiretapping” is involved in the spin being put on Snowden’s revelations. A lot of institutional duplicity has been revealed. The reaction of United States officials can be seen as a dramatic performance to demonstrate their moral resolve and complete power (even as Snowden challenged it) in order to dissuade other whistleblowers from following suite, as well as maintain authority and a discourse of fear about terrorism that justifies surveillance and other forms of social control.

The intrigue over the information released by National Security Analyst Edward Snowden illustrates how information control is increasingly difficult, yet dramatic, in an era of expanding electronic and digital media. The politics of fear and the terrorism threat justifies obtaining more digital information

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about us all. However, Mr. Snowden could digitally capture and release selected information about the latest campaign (e.g., PRISM), but was then pursued by agents following his own digital trail. None of it would have mattered if Americans were not constantly reminded that only governmental scrutiny is protecting us from terrorism. The caricature of Snowden and other whistle-blowers shows how the major American TV networks and most newspapers seldom question government sources that use the politics of fear of terrorism to justify massive surveillance of its citizens. When ABC news discussed whether Snowden should be referred to as a “whistleblower,” various opinions were offered, seeming to settle on the statement by The Associated Press that Snowden was a “leaker” and not a “whistleblower.” With the emphasis on Snowden’s status as a “spy,” the major news agencies bought the government’s narrative and focused reporting on the “most wanted man in the world,” his location, which country might hand him over, and whether Ecuador might grant him asylum. Accordingly, the American public is presented with a nightly rendition of “gonzo justice,” (Altheide, 1992) or the use of extraordinary means to demonstrate social control and moral compliance, and to demonstrate the moral resolve of those mandating the punishment. The mass media’s sensationalized focus on “capturing Snowden” enables the President and the NSA to demonstrate control over a “leaker,” while avoiding the larger, more significant issue about secret surveillance. It is shortsighted to accept the government’s narrative. A more complete and compelling story is that Snowden’s revelations show government security a (and technology) industry gone amok pursuing very questionable methodology of “fighting terrorism” that is driven by fanciful technology and an internet/digital information complex that promises “potentially complete information” of all citizens.

PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

The fate of Mr. Snowden and other creative whistle-blowers (e.g., Daniel Ellsberg) can challenge the communicative orthodoxy by understanding the nature of digital information technology. Twisting in the political winds is the meaning and status of whistleblowing, or informing others (usually those outside an organization) of untoward and usually illegal and harmful activities. Numerous federal agencies (e.g., Security and Exchange Commission (SEC), Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA),) support coming forward when illegal and questionable activity is observed, and President Obama signed the 2012 Whistleblower Enhancement Protection Act. Still, the tension between “doing the right thing” and “upsetting the apple cart” is growing, such that some people have argued there is actually a “war on whistleblowers.”

Within a matter of hours official governmental news sources and media servants dispelled the notion that Edward Snowden was a “whistleblower,” who was interested, as he claimed, in informing the American public about the unprecedented secret surveillance. Indeed, unlike revelations by WikiLeaks, he claimed to be cautious in what he revealed in order to not “hurt people.” Government surveillance agencies (e.g., NSA, CIA, FBI) joined the chorus that national security and the safety of Americans from terrorist attacks had been compromised, and that now our enemies could take steps to avoid being surveilled. The “metadata” being collected from the internet via project PRISM was said to be essential in order to “connect the dots,” an ambiguous metaphor—of dubious validity-- suggesting that total information would provide a complete picture of terrorists’ plans.

The fight against terrorism is being compromised by our faith in technology and its high-flung metaphors about “data mining,” “meta data,” and seemingly automatic connections of “dot-to-dot.” Our

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