

Narrating the stories of leaked data

Gianluca Miscione, University College Dublin

Daniela Landert, University of Zurich

Journalism has always developed in close interplay with the available communication technologies. In recent decades, it has been undergoing major transformations in relation to information infrastructures like the Web. Especially user generated content, aka Web 2.0 and social media, has posed new challenges to journalism (Boczkowski 2005; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Landert, 2014; D. Lewis 2003; S. C. Lewis, 2012; Newman, Dutton, & Blank, 2012; Ostertag & Tuchman, 2012; Wardle et al. 2014; Wardle and Williams 2008). One of the latest developments consists in content-sharing platforms that allow sources to submit information anonymously, like Wikileaks. Over the past years, such platforms have been used for leaking large amounts of highly confidential data by whistleblowers such as Manning and Snowden (Benkler, 2011; Bruns, 2014, Chadwick and Collister, 2014, Miscione, 2014). These cases had far-reaching political consequences, and – we argue – they affected the practices of journalistic reporting. Before the widespread use of the Internet, whistleblowers needed journalists to make information accessible to the general public. This is no longer the case, since online platforms such as Wikileaks aim at taking over this function. In our study we investigate how this new type of whistleblowing changes the interaction between whistleblowers, journalists and the audience. We show that the role of journalists has not necessarily diminished. Instead, it consists in facilitating the sense-making process of the audience. Our central claim is that journalists play a crucial role in turning leaked data into narratives that have the power to influence the public and political sphere. Our study is based on an analysis of the Guardian's coverage of two whistleblowing cases, the release of the Afghan War Logs, which were leaked by Manning, and the Prism files, which were leaked by Snowden. We study how the news reports explicitly refer to and integrate the leaked data, how they make the data accessible to the readers, and how they frame the events for the audience. In both cases it is evident that the released data do not speak for themselves, but that there is a need for someone to tell their story. By comparing how the Guardian covered the two events, we are able to show that there are different ways in which such a story can be told, and that these different narrations are related to the mode in which the leaked documents were released. In the case of Manning, all data were made public by Wikileaks in an unredacted form. One important aspect of the Guardian's coverage of the Afghan War Logs was the explanation of how this immense mass of data could be accessed in a meaningful way by their readers. In contrast, Snowden's files were released in small portions and each release was accompanied by (well-timed) media reports that explained their significance, as the Prism example shows. We suggest that these two different modes of managing data and narrating stories show a development in the practices of dealing with new online platforms and the challenges they pose for public sense-making.

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