

From civil disobedience to networked whistleblowing: What national security truth-tellers reveal in an age of crackdowns

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Published: December 15, 2025 8:23am EDT

Across the world, governments are tightening controls on speech, expanding surveillance and rolling back rights once thought to be secure.

From anti-protest laws and curbs on workers' rights to the growing criminalization of leaks and dissent, the trend is chilling: People who speak out about government wrongdoing are increasingly vulnerable, and the legal systems that once claimed to protect them are now used to punish them.

We are researchers who study whistleblowing, which is when employees disclose information in the public interest about wrongdoing they have witnessed at work. Our new book draws on firsthand accounts from whistleblowers in national security, intelligence and government in the U.S., Australia and the U.K., among other countries. Their experiences show the limits of legal protections, but also the power of networks, solidarity and collective resistance in the face of institutional secrecy.

In this moment of democratic backsliding, whistleblowers show that civil disobedience – breaking the law to uphold the public good – remains an essential principle of political and moral life. They also show how legal reform and support networks designed to protect whistleblowers are critical for protecting accountability and democracy itself.

The limits of legal protections

The whistleblowers featured in the book, including former CIA officer John Kiriakou and Craig Murray, the former U.K. ambassador to Uzbekistan, learned the hard way that legal protections can end precisely where power begins. Both revealed grave human rights abuses – torture, kidnapping, imprisonment and complicity in war crimes – and both were prosecuted rather than protected.

Their stories underline a paradox: Even as new whistleblower protection laws have proliferated in many countries, prosecutions of national security and intelligence whistleblowers are on the rise. In national security contexts, where no public interest defense is permitted, laws meant to protect whistleblowers have become another weapon of “lawfare” – used to silence, bankrupt and criminalize.

For example, Kiriakou blew the whistle on the U.S. torture program in 2007. The Bush administration initially declined to prosecute him, but this changed under the Obama administration, which imprisoned Kiriakou in 2013 for 30 months. Kiriakou’s refusal to participate in the CIA program of “enhanced interrogation” of terrorism suspects, which included waterboarding, and his later decision to publicly confirm the CIA’s use of torture were acts of conscience. Yet it was he, not the torturers, who went to prison as a result of his disclosures.

The pattern is familiar. From Chelsea Manning in 2010 to Edward Snowden in 2013 and Daniel Hale in 2016, prosecutions under the U.S. Espionage Act and equivalent statutes elsewhere signal a broader shift: Making the powerful transparent is redefined as treason. The prosecution of national security whistleblowers who reveal crimes of the state continues to be an ongoing problem, as highlighted by more recent cases, including Reality Winner and David McBride.

When the law is used to enforce secrecy and punish dissent, the moral terrain shifts. Civil disobedience becomes not only justified but necessary. Human rights lawyers have commented that whistleblowers and journalists who work with them are being subjected to increasingly harsh treatment by the state, including imprisonment and on occasion torture.

From traditional media to networked whistleblowing

Historically, whistleblowers relied on the press to act as an intermediary between them and the public, as well as a protector because of the publicity they offer. But as investigative journalism has been hollowed out – starved of resources and constrained by political and corporate pressure – this model has faltered.

As journalist Andrew Fowler, one of our book’s contributors, wrote, “It may not be long before it will be impossible for journalists to have confidential sources.” Across the globe, attacks by governments on journalists criticizing strongman leaders become more brazen.

In 2010, Manning blew the whistle on U.S war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many major outlets turned Manning away before WikiLeaks provided the infrastructure to publish what mainstream media would not. Her disclosures raised the public’s awareness of government complicity in war crimes in Iraq and elsewhere. Such stories also reveal how reluctant mainstream journalism can be when confronted with power.

More recently, in 2016 McBride blew the whistle on members of the Australian SAS who murdered civilians in Afghanistan. He was sentenced to prison in 2024 and is currently serving a sentence of five years and eight months for his disclosures of war crimes.

This decline in formal protections has given rise to an ecology of “networked whistleblowing”: decentralized alliances of whistleblowers, activists and independent journalists using encrypted tools to share information and protect sources. While these networks can offer safety in numbers, they also carry risks – of being co-opted or exploited by those in power, and of being framed collectively as enemies of the state for their attempts to hold the powerful to account.

Yet they also represent a profound reimagining of public accountability in a digital age where secrecy is structural and systemic, demonstrating the force of people working together.

As the traditional institutions of democracy falter, our research shows these alternative infrastructures embody a new form of democratic practice: horizontal, distributed and defiant.

New alliances supporting whistleblowers

The whistleblowers whose stories appear in our book did more than expose wrongdoing. They built communities of care and resistance – new institutions to protect truth-telling itself.

Each of them, after suffering retaliation and exclusion, turned outward: campaigning for reform, mentoring others and building cross-sector alliances. Their transformation from individual insiders to collective activists reveals a crucial insight: Legal reform alone isn’t enough. What sustains truth-telling isn’t the promise of protection from above but solidarity from below.

Strengthening and supporting these alliances would help preserve freedom of expression and the right to know. That means supporting cross-border networks of journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders who can collectively safeguard disclosure when national laws fail. It also means recognizing whistleblowing as a public good.

At a time when many democracies are retreating from openness, these whistleblowers remind us that law and justice are not the same thing. When laws entrench secrecy or punish dissent, we believe breaking them can be an act of civic virtue. Civil disobedience can renew democratic life by holding power to account.

Kiriakou's conclusion in his chapter resonates beyond the intelligence world: "We all have to fight. It's the only way we are going to change anything." His words recall a longer lineage of civil disobedience – from suffragettes to anti-war protesters to environmental activists – each confronting systems that refused to hear them until they broke the rules.

The cases in our new book illustrate how quickly law can be used to enforce secrecy rather than accountability during periods of democratic backsliding. They also highlight the practical conditions that make truth-telling possible – including collective support that extends beyond any one country's legal system.

The authors do not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and have disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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