

# 3Qs: The evolution of whistleblowing

June 14 2013, by Matt Collette

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The leak of classified government documents last week revealed the existence of a massive National Security Administration program of bulk surveillance in which telecommunication and Internet companies are providing the government with broad access to private user information. Northeastern University news office asked Stephen Burgard, chair of Northeastern's School of Journalism in the College of Arts, Media, and Design, to examine the leak by Edward Snowden, a

tech specialist who was contracted by the NSA, and the practice's place in the journalism landscape.

## **How does Edward Snowden fit into this new era of leaks that began when Army soldier Bradley Manning leaked classified diplomatic cables to the online organization Wikileaks, which publicized them?**

Both Manning and Snowden were relatively low-ranking figures who, thanks to digital, online records, were able to access a lot more [information](#) than has ever been possible. The Internet is changing how information becomes available—you no longer need to have Daniel Ellsberg photocopy thousands of documents by hand in the way we did with the Pentagon Papers leak. We're in an era where information is much more accessible and far easier to share.

We're also now seeing how these leaks now operate on a global stage, where this release of information takes place beyond the boundaries and reach of the United States. Snowden fled to Hong Kong before he leaked his information to *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*; [Julian Assange](#) operated [Wikileaks](#) from outside the U.S. Once you're outside of the country, the American government is a lot less capable of reaching you, which is why we've seen that Snowden plans to go to Iceland and Assange has sought asylum from Ecuador. The Internet is an entity that goes beyond nation-state borders, which raises new questions for journalists and the government alike.

## **How do news organizations handle the publication of classified information? How do they balance the public interest with the government's national security concerns?**

The press, especially reporters in Washington, has historically been mindful of national security concerns and willing to give serious attention to the government's concerns. In these cases, the whistleblower would come forward with information, then the news organization would make its own assessment of the information, go to the government with that information, then make its own judgments about what should be published.

I think most mainstream news outlets in the United States that are presented with this kind of information do step back and take [national security](#) concerns into account; they won't just throw the information out there. And in this NSA case, Snowden himself actually said he made judgments about what should and shouldn't be out there—something that didn't happen with the Wikileaks cables, when leaked information had names and other details that the government said could put people at risk.

What's changing now is the global nature of these leaks. The agreements between the government and the press become a lot less relevant when a figure like Julian Assange can just make leaked documents available on the Internet according to his own timetable and interest. It becomes a much broader canvas.

**The Obama administration has become increasingly active in prosecuting leaks and has conducted more investigations into leaks than any recent administration. How does this culture of enforcement impact the field of journalism?**

There are concerns that the Obama administration has shown especially chilling behavior in its search for whistleblowers; we've already seen a

lot of people indicted on prior cases. The result is that many people are less willing to come forward to the press for fear that they would lose their jobs. And we're hearing increasing complaints from within the press establishment that more and more reporters are being bounced to administration officials who put their own spin on the news. Now the administration itself is even bypassing the traditional outlets, using social media to get its own story out.

We've recently seen the president come out in favor of a federal shield and say he'd like to see policies that govern the release of information reviewed. It's easy to say these things, but it's entirely different to do something.

I think the press has done a good job with this balancing act. The big issue now is whether reporters will be subpoenaed themselves to reveal their sources. While that isn't the case with this NSA leak—Snowden came forward—there are real concerns that the Justice Department will bypass its own guidelines, which allow, encourage, and in fact require it to negotiate with the press, in favor of the kind of approach we saw with the case of Valerie Plame, the former CIA agent whose identity was exposed. case. There are mechanisms in place that allow for negotiation between the government and the press in regards to protecting [classified information](#), and that should be preserved.

Provided by Northeastern University

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