Chelsea Manning and the rise of 'big data' whistleblowing in the digital age

September 5 2018, by Suelette Dreyfus

Chelsea Manning should be regarded as a whistleblower. Credit: Tim Travers Hawkins/Courtesy of Chelsea Manning

Chelsea Manning will appear via video link at events in Brisbane and Melbourne this month – as the Australian government refuses to provide her a visa.

Without a visa, Manning was in Los Angeles when she appeared electronically on a giant screen at a weekend event speaking with journalist Peter Greste at the Sydney Opera House, where she received a standing ovation.

International and Australian organisations have called on the Australian government to give a visa to Manning in support of freedom of speech. Nearly 20,000 people have signed a petition calling on Australia to allow Manning to visit.

Whether you agree with Manning or not, public debate and discussion are essential for a healthy democracy. Any attempt to shut it down flies in the face of freedom of expression.

This is important as we enter an era of machines that make decisions for us, including autonomous weapons. Data ethics, transparency, accountability and avenues of recourse for injustice become even more important to explore in public forums. These are all relevant to Manning's story.

Manning the whistleblower

Manning was a US army intelligence analyst in 2010 when she leaked more than 700,000 classified documents to WikiLeaks. Her disclosures were a major milestone in the emergence of the digital age whistleblower.

First there was the explosive Collateral Murder video, published by WikiLeaks. It showed the US military gunning down civilians in Iraq. US soldiers fired on children and killed two Reuters staff, Namir Noor-Eldeen and Saeed Chmagh along with ten other people. Former Reuters Iraq bureau chief Dean Yates, who sent his staff out that fateful day, wrote a personal piece on the impact of "moral injury" while being

treated at Melbourne's Austin Health for trauma recovery.

The US military lied about the incident and tried to cover it up. To this day, no one has been charged or convicted for the killings, nor the lying.

Manning is the only person to go to prison linked with the incident, yet she is the one who brought the truth to the public.

The astonishing video, filmed from the gunsight of an Apache helicopter, illustrates the power of bringing together visual digital media and whistleblowing. The video has had more than 16 million views on Youtube alone.

Manning also disclosed a collection of war logs. These were records about daily events happening in two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Politicians had promised the public these wars were progressing well. The data showed a different story.

The *New York Times*, publishing in partnership with WikiLeaks, described the Afghan war logs as "more grim than the official portrayal".

In Iraq, a leading independent UK-based charity Iraq Body Count, estimated 15,000 civilians were killed from 2003 to 2010, deaths that had not been previously been revealed.

Less than half of the deaths reported in the Wikileaks War Logs had been previously reported by Iraq Body Count, according to one study.

Bringing the two datasets together showed how the body count of the Iraq War had been higher than either set had initially documented.

This sort of analysis illustrates how big data and whistleblowing are

drawn together in actual cases, and have exposed the truth of what is really happening on the ground.

Big data leaks are getting bigger

In the digital age, data sets are increasingly driving news stories. Large data sets show patterns and connections—both of which can be important for accountability of decision-making by government.

At the time, Manning's disclosures seemed like an enormous amount of data. Yet, the data size was small compared with what was to come.

Collateral Murder (646MB) and the Afghan War Logs (75MB) data sets, published in 2010, created a new model for whistleblower disclosures driving database journalism. The entire tranche of this data, plus the US diplomatic cables and the Iraq War Logs, was reported to total 1.73 gigabytes (GB) – small enough to fit on a single DVD.

What followed in their footsteps was much larger disclosures in terms of total data size. These included the 2013 Offshore Leaks (260GB), the 2014 Luxembourg Leaks (4GB), the 2016 Panama Papers (2.6TB), the 2017 Paradise Papers (1.4TB), and Edward Snowden's 2013 disclosures, estimated to be at least 60GB (the total data size has not been publicly revealed).

Whistleblower protection

Strong public support in Australia and overseas for the protection of whistleblowers flowed from this torrent of revelations, and it has forced governments around the world to respond.

From Ireland to Lithuania to Nigeria, governments have been adopting

whistleblower protection laws.

In April, the European Union announced its draft Directive on whistleblower protection which, when passed, will apply to all 28 member states.

Whistleblowers reveal unsafe or illegal practices in everything from food safety to hospital practice.

In 2017, US President Barack Obama released Manning by commuting her prison sentence. The world Chelsea Manning re-entered after seven years in prison was profoundly transformed.

Increased public recognition of both the importance of whistleblowing as a corrective mechanism to wrongdoing in society, and of datasets informing a new kind of journalism, are part of that changed landscape.

Manning has been a controversial yet central figure in that transformation. As such, she has interesting perspectives to contribute to the public debate.

Encourage debate

A country which prides itself on being a free, western democracy should encourage such public discussions. Australia's close allies Canada and New Zealand have recognised this.

The New Zealand government has granted Manning a visa to visit its shores for events in Auckland and Wellington.

Canada, which had initially turned her back at the border, also allowed her entry, in order to speak publicly earlier this year.

It's worth noting the Australian government allowed US General David Petraeus into Australia last year, despite the fact that he, like Manning, "leaked secrets". Petraeus was spared prison time after pleading guilty to mishandling classified information, but he was sentenced to two years probation and fined US$100,000.

Manning's disclosure did not cause any real harm to US interests, according to media analysis of a US Department of Defense review, released in 2017 under a 2015 Freedom of Information lawsuit.

By contrast, material leaked by Petraeus was highly sensitive and, according to Reuters, contained the identities of covert officers, code word information, war strategy, intelligence capabilities and diplomatic talks.

Manning poses no danger to Australia, she is neither violent nor a terrorist. Yet, if people will still hear what she has to say via video links at the Australian events, why not let her appear in person?

Debating ideas is a core value of our democracy – and one the Australian government should embrace, not fear.

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