

Whistleblowers losing faith in media impact, finds researcher

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The whistleblowers who once trusted journalism are losing faith in the institution.

A new study from the University of Georgia found that many whistleblowers who reached out to journalists in the past no longer believe [media](#) has the same ability to motivate change, and they feel let down by a system they once trusted.

"If you don't believe that an outlet or journalist can carry you across the finish line—meaning can affect change, attract enough attention and attract the attention of the right people—then you're losing faith," said Karin Assmann, study lead and assistant professor in UGA's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. "So if you think the institution of journalism no longer has the same impact, maybe because you see algorithms dictate what people pay attention to, then you lose faith."

Distrust in institutions leads to skepticism

Assmann's study was inspired by her own career as a journalist and a desire to protect the profession as it undergoes significant change. Assmann spoke with 16 whistleblowers who contacted journalists between the 1970s and 2010s, discussing their decisions to go to the press, their experience during interviews and their reflections on how media has changed.

Although they once believed journalists would protect sources and stories would foster accountability and evoke change, study participants noted the erosion of media's reach throughout the last several decades.

"Especially with early whistleblowers, I would say through the early 2000s, there would be an emphasis on television," Assmann said.

"People would tune into the evening news, and pay attention to what this whistleblower had to say, trusting that it must be worthy of the audience's attention if it made it into the evening news."

But today, many whistleblowers believe consumers are less likely to watch the news or read a newspaper—they're tuning into YouTube and reading brief push notifications or social posts instead. This, coupled with a loss of faith in institutions, meant that if they had another whistle to blow, they might rely on a different medium to spread the message.

"Another thing about whistleblowers is that their trust in their own institution has been damaged," Assmann said. "So many of them see journalism as an institution that is equally damaged because they may have an ideology that tells them corporate ownership dictates how news is spread, the same way that maybe corporate ownership is responsible for whatever they're blowing the whistle on."

A lack of resources impacting newsrooms

Assmann's study also cataloged the care with which whistleblowers selected journalists. They sought individuals with an established byline, experience reporting on specific topics and a dedicated audience.

"The whistleblowers talked about individuals plus institutions. Jeff Wigand, for example, was really strategic," Assmann said, highlighting the former tobacco executive who reported that chemicals were added to a tobacco blend to increase the nicotine's effect. "He looked at '60 Minutes,' looked at the ratings. He knew the program was going to reach millions of people."

Another example from the study was Tom Drake, who exposed excessive spending at the National Security Agency in 2010.

Drake relied on anonymity for his own safety, and he sought out a specific journalist who would understand the nuances of encryption and the [intelligence community](#) in order make sure his report was understood and well-reported.

"He had to find somebody who understood encryption, who would buy into all of the safeguards he had set up in order to share what he had to share without being found out," Assmann said. "That is an extreme example, but other people follow that same logic and choose who they see as a subject matter expert. That kind of expertise is now at risk, I would say, in the current media landscape."

Now, reporters are stretched thin and more likely to cover multiple topics.

"You'll often start working at a [news organization](#), and maybe you'll have a beat, but you'll also have to do 100 other things," Assmann said. "How are you supposed to build trust? How are people supposed to recognize you as somebody who is a subject matter expert?"

Trending lack of trust

There are several factors at hand in waning faith in media, including shrinking newsrooms and a growing gap between communities and journalists. And in a world where more consumers rely on quick articles—or just headlines—to stay up to date, newsrooms need to become better resourced to rebuild trust.

"My suspicion, and I don't think I'm alone with that, is that there is a crisis in [local news](#)," Assmann said. "People don't meet journalists in their everyday life anymore. Normal citizens don't find themselves represented in local broadcast or the local paper."

Continued research, however, can highlight opportunities to support newsrooms and rebuild some of that trust to combat negative perceptions, Assmann said.

"There's a mistrust in the news media that's been fostered, I would say,

in the last couple of years through some politicians who have something to gain from the [news media](#) losing credibility," Assmann said. "So I think this is a huge construction site for us to work on as journalism scholars and as [journalists](#)."

If things continue along the same trajectory, [whistleblowers](#) could start turning to alternative forms of media to share their stories. Many interviewees in the study reported having greater trust for alternative news sources—blogs or social media—than traditional media.

But Assmann is wary of fully attributing this shift to mistrust.

"I would say that rather than calling it mistrust, it reflects them being media savvy and understanding how media networks work and audiences work," she said. "The new, modern whistleblower may be born out of mistrust for mainstream media and just figures out that these are the best ways to get their stuff out of there. Maybe the next whistleblower will say, 'I'll make it a TikTok video,' if, you know, TikTok is even still around."

The findings are published in *Journalism Practice*.

More information: Karin Assmann, Whistleblowers and their Faith in Journalism, *Journalism Practice* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2022.2161067](#)

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