

The Construction of Edward Snowden as a Whistleblower in the *New York Times* and the  
*Washington Post* and How It Represents American Freedom of Speech

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## Abstract

This article employs the media narratives and semiotics approach to examine how Edward Snowden was constructed in online publications of the *Times* and the *Post* as two major national newspapers in the United States. The analysis finds that both media successfully construct Snowden positively as a new kind of leaker and as a hero in the sense that he brings back the importance of freedom of speech as a living myth in the United States. He is still viewed as a hero despite his moving to Russia, the political enemy of the United States. The analysis also shows that both media perpetuate the myth of free speech. They construct Snowden's action positively as a new method to give people courage to criticize the government.

*Keywords:* Edward Snowden, Whistleblower, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and Freedom of Speech.

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### **Introduction**

The development of internet era brings advantages for freedom of speech. It encourages bravery and provides the platform for individuals with sensitive but important information to publish it whether using a real or anonymous identity. There are many cases of whistleblower in the U.S. for the last decade with diverse levels of significance. One of the biggest leaks is done by Edward Snowden. In June 2013, Snowden leaked some information about massive surveillance programs done by the NSA (National Security Agency), the intelligence organization of the U.S. government. This leak is so glorified in the media narrative that it marks the new era in 2014 which is called as the *Post-Snowden* era (Blake, 2014). It refers to the growing concern about the freedom of privacy and the spirit to create a more transparent government. It encourages more people to commit whistleblowing actions such as in the case of Panama Papers.

Whistleblower is generally defined as a person who tells the public or someone in authority about dishonest or illegal activities happening in a government department, a public or private organization, or a company (Bahri, 2011). In the case of Snowden, he was a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) employee and NSA contractor when he exposed that the U.S. government was collecting their citizen's personal data from their phone and internet records without warrant (Greenwald and MacAskill, 2013). Snowden identity was made public by the Guardian on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013 at his own request and his profile suddenly became viral. His reason for doing such action is that the people should know what is done by the government and whether they consider it as right or wrong. Since the U.S. citizens are a liberal society and their freedom of speech is

protected by the Constitution, this event ignites the old debate between national security and civil liberty.

The idea of freedom of speech was brought to the nation in a form of myth by U.S. philosophers, especially Walt Whitman. Ira Chernus (2013), in his essay *Walt Whitman: The Mythology of Perfect and Free Individuals*, writes that “American democracy, at its best, recognizes the unique value of each person”, each opinion is “equally important”. Snowden and each individual of U.S., based on that myth, is unique and important. The First Amendment of US Constitution also built the concept of individual right. It makes people believe that everyone should be allowed to contribute on “public discourse” (Post, 2012). However, individual right or freedom cannot go out of control. People can burn American flag, but to bomb the White House which probably caused many casualties is obviously a wrong thing. Thus American people also need to live under state constitution, under government’s rules. Sometime the government needs to sacrifice certain right in the process of “governing”. Many thinkers from the past such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) already agreed that maintaining order and controlling people are indeed the objective of a government (to govern means to control) (as stated in Janda, et al, 1989). There were many cases in U.S. history that the attempt to speak encountered with the law, one famous example is the case of civil disobedience done by Henry David Thoreau.

The controversy of Snowden has a strong political nuance related to how civil liberty is battled with national security. Civil liberty, especially the freedom of speech, is protected by the U.S. constitution. The U.S. citizens are likely to point at the first amendments of the Bill of Rights which strongly protects the freedom of speech and expression from the government restrictions (U.S. Const. amend. I). However, sometime the government needs to sacrifice certain right in the process of “governing”. Many thinkers from the past such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-

1679) agree that the objectives of a government are maintaining order and controlling people (to govern means to control) (as stated in Janda, et al, 1989). It also becomes the justification from the U.S. government through NSA to keep the surveillance programs in order to maintain the national security. However, there were many cases in U.S. history that the attempt to speak are encountered with the law. This kind of action has been acknowledged in U.S. history as civil disobedience, with the famous case of it was done by Henry David Thoreau. He spent a night in jail after refusing to pay a poll tax because he knew that the money will be used to fund the Mexican-American War.

This study is developed to take an issue of a whistleblower whether he is categorized as hero or traitor in the narrative construction. It focuses less on the facts of the case and more on “discursive power” from those to control the narrative (Alford, 2016). Mass media today has the tendency of making a social actor a celebrity, instead of focusing on their actions. In the case of Snowden, the story lasts for months especially after he decided to move to Russia, a well-known political enemy of the U.S. This fact adds the political nuances of this issue and probably change the way the media see Snowden. As found out by Lee et al (2011), many scholars in journalism argue that foreign news created by U.S. media tend to reflect the government’s foreign policy, their “elite-defined national interest”, and/or their dominant ideology (i.e. democracy). Any issue in Russia, along with the other political enemy of the U.S. such as China, has been covered unfairly by U.S. media. For instance, Russia has been depicted as a dangerous country from the issue of communism until the increased number of Islamic societies associated with terrorism. This research is conducted to examine not only the representation of Snowden as an NSA whistleblower but also whether his image is shifting or not after he moved to Russia.

However, the identification of hero or traitor on a whistleblower is less on the facts of the case and more on “discursive power” from those to control the narrative (Alford, 2016). Mass media today has the tendency of making a social actor a celebrity, instead of focusing on their actions. Previous study about Snowden by Moretti (2013) presented in Moscow Readings Conference also concludes that Snowden is constructed as international celebrity by the power of media, after comparing him to Daniels Ellsberg, the famous whistleblower in U.S. history who leaked the Pentagon Paper. It leaves a gap, however, on the way he is constructed, whether if it has positive or negative impacts toward Snowden. This research attempts to fill the gap on whether Snowden is constructed as a hero or traitor. Further, this representation of Snowden can be a parameter to see the idea of free speech in the U.S.

What differentiates Snowden from the previous whistleblowers in the U.S. history is the timeline of the leaks. Starting his leaks in 2013, he is supported by the development of internet communication. However, what really separates Snowden from the old generation of whistleblowers is that he can maximize the nature of the online media which can reach global audience in a short time. Prior to Snowden, the U.S. whistleblowers such as Stephen Jin-Woo Kim and Jeffrey Alexander Sterling choose different approach which is to be anonymous, until the government arrested them. The coverages of these whistleblowers are not as much as Snowden because they did not immediately appear in public. Snowden is also blown up in the media due to the high responses from the society through social media. In the era of social media, ordinary people are increasingly involved in compiling, sharing, filtering, discussing and distributing news (“Back to the coffee house”, 2011). YouTube, the media used by the Guardian to introduce Snowden, does not only allow the people to upload videos but also provide the space for the supportive comments or criticisms.

### **Methodology**

This research belongs to descriptive qualitative research. The sources of data are four online articles from the *Times* and the *Post* entitled *Media Decoder: A New Kind of Leaker for an Internet Age* (Carr, June 10, 2013) and *Defiant Russia Grants Snowden Year's Asylum* (Myers and Kramer, August 1, 2013) from the *Times* and *From Obscurity to Notoriety, Snowden Took an Unusual Path* (Nakashima, June 10, 2013) and *Snowden Granted Asylum in Russia, Leaves Moscow Airport* (Gorst and Warrick, August 1, 2013) from the *Post*. These articles are chosen based on a particular timeline which is the first coverage about Snowden and the time when Snowden moved to Russia. Therefore, the primary data are the narratives, tones, words, phrases, sentences, and expression in those articles which are related to the construction of Snowden as the NSA whistleblower and how it represents the freedom of speech in the U.S. The primary data are chosen by applying purposive sampling technique. There are three steps of data collection: data examination, data selection, and data classification. In analyzing data, I applied media narratives theory, semiotic theory, and socio-political perspective

## Findings and Discussion

### The Construction of Snowden as Hero and New Leaker in the *Times* and the *Post*

Every media agency takes side. However, U.S. media especially the *Times* and the *Post* do not focus on whether they support individual liberty or national security. They do not even focus on the information brought by Snowden. The U.S. media especially the *Times* and *Post* have been focusing on his personality as the social actor. After analyzing the data, it is found out that Snowden is successfully constructed as a new kind of leaker, as a hero in the sense that he brings back the importance of freedom of speech as living myth in the U.S, and still viewed as a hero despite his moving to Russia.

The first important point of Snowden's image construction is his newness compared to the previous whistleblower in the U.S. history. Snowden is constructed as a new kind of leaker at least based on these argumentations: he revealed himself and maintained that high-profile, his quick appearance in public, and his differences from the previous whistleblowers in U.S. history. This idea might be the most obvious point as it is already constructed from the beginning. The title made by David Carr from the *Times* says "A New Kind of Leaker for an Internet Age", which is continued by presenting a common belief about leakers in the headline: "What does a leaker look like? Sometimes, people who reveal secrets remain in the shadows". This beginning part signifies Snowden is different from a group of leakers that has existed previously. It can be referred to the small number of significant whistleblowers recorded in U.S. history. By saying "people who reveal secrets remain in the shadows", Carr indirectly explains that the previous leakers stayed in anonymous profile to hide from government's observation. This is what makes Snowden different. In fact, Snowden directly conveys his message using his real identity.



The differentiation of Snowden from the stereotype about whistleblower also occurs in the *Post*. The title and the headline of the *Post* article written by Nakashima signify the different path taken by Snowden. The title reads “*From Obscurity to Notoriety, Snowden Took an Unusual Path*” and continued by “Edward Snowden ... who admitted that he was behind recent leaks of classified intelligence, has vaulted from obscurity to international notoriety”. The word admitted shows that in this issue, Snowden is an active subject who gets his identity revealed by choice. It suggests an image that Snowden wins against the government, as “to admit” denotatively means to give entrance or access. It suggests that the government can only identify their leaker because of Snowden’s acknowledgment. In fact, Snowden revealed his identity right away (as suggested by the word vaulted) and has maintained his “high profile” as international figure since that.

It can be seen that most of the arguments used to construct Snowden as a hero are written in a positive way. It leads to the second point of his construction which is a hero who brings back the importance of freedom of speech upon the U.S society. The tendency to construct Snowden as hero or villain is strongly related to whether the newspapers prefer on free speech or the government interest. Seeing that the media put so many efforts on voicing up Snowden issue, it might also be considered that the media share the same interest with Snowden. Snowden’s act of leaking information is a form of freedom of expression, which has been becoming the main reason why mass media exist. Jeopardizing Snowden may impact to the death of U.S. media expression. This judgment can be seen from the differentiation on how they describe Snowden’s action and what have been done by the U.S. government. One of the most interesting dictions is the choice of word “pursuit” in the *Times* article in describing U.S. government activity: “National Security Agency’s pursuit of phone and computer data”.

Pursuit denotatively means an activity that someone engages in as a profession and synonymous with “work”. Instead of using more general words such as “collect”, Carr prefers “pursue”, which connotatively means the act of surveillance itself is already conducted on purpose and becoming one of the governmental jobs. It is also important to notice that the word “pursuit” is a particular word that has a deep and strong impression for U.S. citizen. Appeared in the Declaration of Independence in a term “pursuit of happiness”, the word “pursuit” triggers a sense of priority and anything that is attached to the word is an obligation to be earned individually. In this case, when the author writes the National Security Agency’s pursuit of phone and computer data, it seems that the collecting of these private data is very important for the government without necessarily thinking about the effects for the people. This time the government is suppressed because of the bad description of their activity.

Snowden is also constructed as a hero by showing the rightness of his action. In political perspective, it can be said that the U.S. government violates the U.S. constitution by hiding the fact that they run the domestic surveillance program. Both newspapers describe Snowden’s action as a “revelation” (such as in a sentence of the *Post* article “His revelations of the inner workings of the two programs ...”). Revelation is denotatively defined as “an enlightening or astonishing disclosure”. It is also often associated with divine truth. This particular term signifies the importance of the leaks. The thought about whether the surveillance programs still active or not exists in the society, Snowden’s revelations give clear understanding that U.S. government still does that.

The third important point of Snowden’s construction is that he is still viewed as hero despite his moving to Russia. It is mentioned earlier that Russia has been depicted negatively by the U.S. major newspapers and as a logical consequence, it should give bad influence to

Snowden's image. However, both newspapers identify Snowden as a hero in a "defiant country" (as the title of the *Times* article *Defiant Russia Grants Snowden Year's Asylum*). Russia is portrayed as having defiant personality in the perspective of the U.S. interest. Defiant is the characteristic of bold resistance, even in the face of defeat, as they are usually fighting a powerful enemy. The *Times* has tendency to put Russia in lower position than the U.S. since Russia is supposed to be obeying U.S. as the "world police" who tries to keep order.

As the debate about Snowden is mainly between U.S. government and its society, the polarization between the government and the society (represented by Snowden) is important in the media narrative. In most parts of the articles about Russia, Myers and Kramer specifically refer to U.S. government as the party who wants Snowden to be punished (such as the mentioning of "President Obama and other senior Americans"). It suggests the idea that it is only U.S. government who wants Snowden back to America. Considering the high possibility of Snowden receiving cruel punishment when he goes back, these leads to the conclusion that the one who has problem with Snowden's action is U.S. government. Snowden is the enemy of the government only, and not U.S. society in general. Further, the authors also make a clear remark that Snowden has been "safely out of the reach of American prosecutors". The word safe is commonly used to describe free from harm or risk, in other words free from something evil which is the U.S. government. It then puts the U.S. government in bad position since the previous analysis considers Snowden as hero. From this point, it may be noticed that even the involvement of Russia does not create a significant change in the media narrative about Snowden. Snowden is the hero, and the U.S. and Russian government are the "bad guys".

Meanwhile, the *Post* emphasizes the polarization between the U.S. government and American society by quoting Thomas Drake saying that Snowden's act is a magnificent act of

civil disobedience. Magnificent signifies something great in action. Although it seems like an exaggerated remark from the fellow whistleblower, the phrase civil disobedience is important to notice as the authors chose to put it in the beginning of the article. Hearing such phrase, the audiences will most likely to remember the historical contexts of the similar disobedience in the past. In the history of U.S. development as a nation, civil disobedience is a common way to fulfill the demand of government's moral enforcement. The writings and actions of historical figures such as Henry David Thoreau or Martin Luther King Jr. show that conflict is the starting way to establish justice. It has been explained in the previous chapter as well that civil disobedience is one of important political expressions in democratic society.

### **The Representation of American Freedom of Speech in Snowden's Case**

The idea of the new era marked by Snowden leaks is glorified in the media narrative by the using of the term Post-Snowden era. As mentioned before, it refers not only to the spirit to create a more transparent government, but also the growing concern about the freedom of privacy. Clark (2016) in his journal *The Digital Divide in the Post-Snowden Era* explains the term "digital divide" which is described as the divide between those who can exploit the internet to their own advantage and those cannot. In the Post-Snowden era, the definition expands to the divide between those who can navigate the internet free from the state and corporate surveillance and those who cannot (ibid.). As consequences, there are many instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp that offer encrypted communication. It comes from the demand of a more protected freedom of speech in every available platform in the internet era.

Further analysis from the *Times* and the *Post* media narratives concludes that Snowden's coverage can be seen as a parameter on how U.S. society in general perceives the ideal concept of individual freedom. The positive coverage of Snowden represents the

perpetuation of the idea of free speech. It is stated in the previous part that the media share the same interest with Snowden. Indeed, a study on national newspapers covering from 1997 to 2009 finds that whistleblowers are represented in a positive manner (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hunt, 2009). Snowden's positive construction continues the idea that blowing the whistle on corruption and malpractice is seen as a brave act in the public interest.

Snowden is constructed as a reasonable and wise person who is so thoughtful about the information he publishes. He is compared to Chelsea Manning who is just, as the *Times* puts it, "dumping a bunch of unredacted documents" on the Wikileaks. In the newer online publication of the *Times* published on July 2016, Snowden is even compared to the Wikileaks. They may both support the dissemination of government secret, but Snowden "seem[s] to disagree" on how best to do it as he criticizes Wikileaks' unfiltered approach (Chokshi, 2016). Meanwhile, the *Post* also mentions the similar thing in the sentence "Snowden's leaks were targeted and selective, unlike those of Army Pfc. Bradley E. Manning" (Nakashima, 2013). This argumentation signifies how Snowden even within the idea of free speech is still considering the ethic of revealing information.

Alford (2016) on his journal entitled *What Makes Whistleblowers So Threatening?* states that the real question on whistleblowers is not the reason behind their action, but rather how the organization reacts to them and why. It comes from the idea that what often encourage individual to blow the whistle is the thought that they feel responsible for the entity larger than their organization, for instance the society. Almost all organizations seek full control of their surroundings, thus what makes these moral individuals so threatening for the will favor the interest of the society (ibid.). In the case of Snowden, the *Times* even states that "he would be seen as someone who acted in the broader interest of the country" which suggests that his action

of speaking fits into the country's interest. Snowden is depicted to be embracing the main or essential idea of democracy which is freedom of speech. For U.S. society, this is more important than what so-called national security.

It can also be seen that by supporting Snowden as a whistleblower, the *Times* and the *Post* as the major newspapers in the U.S. give him an enough strength to be debated with the government. Through the narratives of the article, Snowden is depicted as a reasonable person who knows what he does. The *Times* even emphasizes that the government can no longer define those who speak in public interest as the enemy of the state. In this case, Snowden is depicted as the man who is "using the Web and speaking on his own behalf", thus he "is not allowing himself to be defined by the government". This idea encourages people to speak.

From a deeper analysis, both newspapers emphasize that these leaks have reignited social debate and reminded the people about the importance of free speech. Although the U.S. media indirectly support Snowden, they still give a space for the audiences to debate. The example of this encouragement happens in the *Post* in the sentence: "His revelations ... have reignited a debate over whether the government's secret surveillance programs are sufficiently protective of civil liberties and privacy in the name of protecting the country against terrorism (Nakashima, 2013). Meanwhile, the *Times* further mentions the importance of social media as the platform of the social debate, by saying that "social media, most notably Twitter, is alive with commentary".

In short, Snowden's newness and phenomena are strongly related to the development of the internet era. Snowden can maximize his message to be heard by global audience. The internet era indeed is so important that individuals can bring about the change and use the technology to overcome the surveillance state. Using the advanced technology of communication and the

nature of online media are mostly the new method offered by Snowden for the next moral individual who will blow the whistle. In the other hand, however, they remind the people about the consequences of living in this era and indeed encourage the debate. There will always be counter opinion from other people due to the easy access of global communication.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the analysis shows that an image of celebrity and hero is constructed in the *Times* and *Post* media narratives on Edward Snowden and his NSA leaks in 2013. The action taken by Snowden is represented positively as a new way of expressing important information in this era of global communication. Snowden is different, in this case better than any U.S. previous whistleblowers in the way he appears to public and publishes the information owing to the development of internet era. Snowden is also still seen as hero even after moving to Russia, which has been seen as the U.S. political enemy. The positive construction of Snowden further can be seen as the representation of the perpetuation of the idea of free speech. Both newspapers see the debate around Snowden as the consequences of living in this internet era. Although Snowden is supported, the U.S. media still give a space for the audiences to debate. This is related to the function of the U.S. major media in raising awareness of the society especially about the freedom of speech.



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