

Whistleblower or Traitor: Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg and the Power of Media Celebrity

Anthony Moretti*

Associate Professor, School of Communications and Information Systems, Robert Morris University, 6001 University Blvd, Moon Township, PA 15108, USA, Tel: 412 397 6467; E-mail: moretti@rmu.edu

Abstract

During the spring and summer of 2013, an American citizen drew international attention after deliberately leaking to journalists classified documents pertaining to the operations of the National Security Agency.

Edward Snowden soon became a polarizing figure; privacy advocates hailed him a hero and government officials labeled him a criminal.

Snowden fled the U.S. for Hong Kong, where he stayed for a couple weeks before flying to Russia. After a one-month ordeal in which he remained in legal limbo, Snowden was granted temporary asylum by the Russian government.

Snowden's case – correctly or not – drew comparisons to Daniel Ellsberg, another American citizen who more than 40 years ago handed over to journalists classified documents pertaining to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. The “Pentagon Papers” case led to Ellsberg being called a hero by those people and groups that saw U.S. military policies as failed and a traitor by those people and groups that believed undermining the military effort was akin to treason. Charged with multiple crimes, Ellsberg walked out of court a free man after all charges against him were dismissed by a judge.

Today, Ellsberg remains in the U.S. (something Snowden refused to do), and he is still speaking out on government efforts to hide information from the American people.

This paper suggests that Ellsberg was viewed more as an “American” figure while Snowden was seen as an “international” figure. And the changing media environment – brought on by economic and technological forces – over the past couple decades explains why. This paper argues that the transformation of media agencies that must focus more on audience expectations, global commercial pressures and personality-driven information ensured news agencies paid more attention to Snowden the person rather than his actions. In short, media capitalized on him as a person so as to ensure the largest possible audiences for their stories.

Keywords: Media and politics, freedom of the press, United States, Russia, Edward Snowden, Daniel Ellsberg

Introduction

During the spring and summer of 2013, an American citizen drew international attention after deliberately leaking to journalists classified documents pertaining to the operations of the National Security Agency (NSA).

Edward Snowden soon became a polarizing figure; privacy advocates hailed him a hero, and government officials and politicians labeled him a criminal.

Snowden fled the U.S. for Hong Kong, where he stayed for a couple weeks before flying to Russia. After a one-month ordeal in which he remained in legal limbo, Snowden was granted temporary asylum by the Russian government.

Snowden's case – correctly or not – drew comparisons to Daniel Ellsberg, another American citizen who more than 40 years ago handed over to journalists classified documents pertaining to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. The “Pentagon Papers” case led to Ellsberg being called a hero by those people and groups that saw U.S. military policies regarding Vietnam as failed, and a traitor by those people and groups that believed undermining the military effort was akin to treason. Charged with multiple crimes, Ellsberg eventually walked out of court a free man after all charges against him were dismissed by a judge.

This paper briefly examines the actions of Snowden and Ellsberg, offering a look at what they did, and what journalists and others have said motivated their actions. It then moves to its larger purpose: reviewing the current climate in which especially American print and broadcast media operate, suggesting that important differences between 40 years ago (Ellsberg and “The Pentagon Papers”) to today (Snowden and the NSA) within mainstream media explain why each man and his actions were

covered differently. The paper concludes with a discussion of this media landscape.

This paper reads more like a case study than a research paper; as a result, the author has abandoned a traditional literature review (though the larger section of this paper will read like one) and a detailed methodology. For purposes of this research, media coverage of Edward Snowden began June 9, 2013, the day Snowden publicly acknowledged he had provided classified information to journalists about the workings of the NSA, and continued through June 27, 2013, when President Obama made his initial characterization of Snowden and outlined what his government would (and would not) do in order to extradite him to the U.S. And for purposes of this research, media coverage of Daniel Ellsberg began June 13, 1971, the day the *New York Times* published the first set of the so-called “Pentagon Papers” and continued through July 1, 1971, the day after the Supreme Court ruled the publication of the papers could continue.

The stories selected for the Snowden section were based on searches conducted through EBSCO Host and through the author's university library. The keywords for this section included his name and “NSA,” “Obama,” “Russia,” “*The Guardian*,” “traitor” and “whistleblower.” The stories for the Ellsberg section also came from EBSCO Host and through the author's university library. The keywords included his name and “*New York Times*,” “Nixon,” “Pentagon Papers,” “prior restraint,” “trial,” and “Vietnam.” Stories that were not placed behind a pay wall, came from a reputable news organization and had their full text available were considered for inclusion. Stories that best fit the narrative for these short Snowden and Ellsberg sections were then selected.

Who is Edward Snowden?

Edward Snowden was approaching his 30th birthday in the spring of 2013 when his life changed forever. An employee of Booz Allen Hamilton, Snowden was an infrastructure analyst for the NSA when in May he released to *The Guardian* and the *Washington Post* details of the previously classified program Prism that *The Guardian* noted involved “direct access to the systems of Google, Facebook, Apple and other U.S. internet giants” (Greenwald and MacAskill, 2013, June 6). He also shared with *The Guardian* classified information pertaining to the NSA “collecting the telephone records of millions of U.S. customers of Verizon” (Greenwald, 2013, June 5). Snowden handed over other documents, and soon decided to flee the U.S. to avoid prosecution.

Arriving first in Hong Kong, Snowden was interviewed there by *The Guardian*'s Glenn Greenwald, the journalist who had received the classified information from Snowden and then wrote about it. Snowden stated that the NSA once concerned itself solely with intercepting the communications of the international community but at some point moved to domestic surveillance. He said the NSA “targets the communications of everyone. It ingests them by default. It collects them in its system, and it filters them, and it analyzes them, and it measures them and it stores them for periods of time.” When asked what motivated him to break the law, Snowden said, “The public needs to decide whether these programs and policies are right or wrong” (“NSA Whistleblower...,” 2013, June 9).

During that interview and in many other articles, Greenwald classified Snowden as a “whistleblower,” a term that for purposes of this research is labeled as a “positive” reference. Within

the first few days of that classification, other news organizations adopted the same label. Among them (and this is not an exhaustive list) were *Forbes* (Greenberg, 2013, June 9), FOX News (“NSA Whistleblower Whereabouts...,” 2013, June 11), *The Atlantic* (Franke-Ruta, 2013, June 9) and *The Nation* (Madar, 2013, June 24).

At least one news organization opted to call Snowden “a source” (Gellman, Blake and Miller, 2013, June 9), which for purposes of this research is considered “neutral.” That was the *Washington Post*, which, as mentioned, also received information from Snowden and published it. When asked to explain the selection of “source,” the paper’s editor Martin Baron said, “No one internally, as far as I know, has suggested we use the term ‘whistleblower.’ I prefer ‘source’ or ‘leaker’” (Wemple, 2013, June 10). “Leaker” was the label applied to Snowden by the Associated Press (“5 Things to Note...,” 2013, June 9) and the *New York Times* (Mazzetti and Schmidt, 2013, June 9). That term for purposes of this research also is considered “neutral.”

It appears no news organization adopted the “negative” term “traitor” to describe Snowden, although one columnist came close. The *New York Times*' David Brooks suggested Snowden had “betrayed...honesty and integrity...his employers...the cause of open government...the privacy of us all...[and] the Constitution” by illegally making public the actions of the NSA (Brooks, 2013, June 10).

Politicians from both major U.S. political parties were quick to identify Snowden as a “traitor.” California senator Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat who chairs the Senate’s Intelligence Committee, suggested to UPI that “I don't look at this as being a whistleblower. I think it's an act of treason” (“Feinstein Calls

Snowden...,” 2013, June 10). Appearing on ABC News’ “This Week”, House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican from Ohio, said, “He’s a traitor. ... [T]hese are important national security programs to help keep Americans safe. ...The disclosure of this information puts Americans at risk” (“John Boehner Defends...,” 2013, June 11).

President Obama chose his words carefully. The White House initially refused any label (“White House Sidesteps...,” 2013, June 11). The president then deflected any questions on whether Snowden should be prosecuted (“President Obama Defends...,” 2013, June 17). Then, more than two weeks after Snowden’s interview with *The Guardian* and with efforts to extradite Snowden from Russia collapsing, he finally made a substantive comment. Calling Snowden “a 29-year-old hacker,” the president asserted that he would not use the military or engage in “wheeling and dealing and trading on a whole host of other issues” just to get Snowden back to the U.S. (“Obama Won’t Make Deals...,” 2013, June 27).

The president’s comments came four days after Snowden had arrived in Russia, where he remained in a Moscow airport for more than one month before being granted temporary asylum by the Russian government.

There also were people angry at Greenwald for accepting Snowden’s information and publishing it. One Republican congressman, Peter King, suggested that Greenwald and Snowden both should have faced criminal prosecution for, in essence, conspiring to steal and disseminate classified data (“King: Journalists in...,” 2013, June 11). NBC News’ anchor David Gregory, the host of “Meet the Press”, interviewed Greenwald and at one point asked, “To the extent that you have aided and abetted Snowden, even in his current movements, why shouldn’t you,

Mr. Greenwald, be charged with a crime?” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xObacZAPk8w>)

Greenwald’s response, stripped of the sarcasm directed at Gregory, was that he was acting in the best traditions of investigative journalism and that Snowden was acting in the best traditions of finding illegal government activity and bringing it to light.

At no point in the Snowden narrative did the question arise as to whether the Obama administration should seek to prevent the future publication of additional documents. And there was a good reason: Any such effort was doomed to failure. To understand why, it is necessary to again link Snowden to Ellsberg.

Who IS Daniel Ellsberg?

Ellsberg was about 10 years older than Snowden was in 2013 when beginning in 1969 he injected himself into a national conversation by photocopying and then distributing to selected U.S. media a 7,000-page study pertaining to America’s war effort in Vietnam. Much like Snowden, Ellsberg, employed at the time by the RAND Corporation, became disaffected by his government, telling PBS that “the hundreds of thousands we were killing [in Vietnam] was unjustified homicide. And I couldn’t see the difference between that and murder. Murder had to be stopped” (“The Most Dangerous Man...,” 2010, October 5).

On June 13, 1971, the *New York Times* published the first set of files it had received from Ellsberg, and other U.S. newspapers soon did the same. Under the headline “Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement,” the story began:

A massive study of how the United States went to war in Indochina, conducted by the Pentagon three years ago, demonstrates that four administrations

progressively developed a sense of commitment to a non- Communist Vietnam, a readiness to fight the North to protect the South, and an ultimate frustration with this effort--to a much greater extent than their public statements acknowledged at the time (Sheehan, 1971, June 13).

The fallout from the publication of the “Pentagon Papers” demonstrates one of the important differences between news gathering and reporting 40 years ago and today. As TIME magazine reported in late June 1971:

Nearly a day went by before the networks and wire services took note. The first White House reaction was to refrain from comment so as not to give the series any greater "exposure." But when Attorney General John Mitchell charged that the Times's disclosures would cause "irreparable injury to the defense of the United States" and obtained a temporary restraining order to stop the series after three installments, worldwide attention was inevitably assured (“Pentagon Papers...,” 1971, June 28).

The politicians who did speak publicly on the dissemination of the “Pentagon Papers” fell into distinct camps. The *New York Times* noted that South Dakota senator George McGovern, a Democrat, said, “The greatest danger in this country today is not the release of these documents, but the secrecy, the deception, the politics, the manipulation which is undermining the confidence of the American people in both political parties” (Fosburgh, 1971, June 21). Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, a Republican, saw it differently, suggesting that "when publishers and editors decide on their own what security laws to obey, it puts them in the same category as those radicals who foment civil and criminal disobedience of laws they disagree with for moral reasons” (“Ellsberg: The

Battle...,” 1971, July 5). A former member of the Lyndon Johnson administration also offered sharp criticism of the *New York Times*. Walt Rostow, who had been a special assistant for national security affairs and who had subsequently returned to Texas to teach at the University of Texas-Austin said, "If a student here at Texas were to turn in a term paper where the gap between data and conclusions was as wide as that between the Pentagon study and the newspaper stories, he would expect to be flunked" (“Ellsberg: The Battle...,” 1971, July 5).

Ellsberg was not spared public criticism but none of it came from President Nixon. Whether because the president loathed the media in general and especially disliked the East coast media that he had considered overwhelmingly liberal, or whether he had hoped public opinion would turn against Ellsberg and the *New York Times*, or for other reasons, the president said nothing to journalists covering the White House. However, in private, the president tore into Ellsberg. On June 15, Nixon first learned that Ellsberg might have been the person responsible for the leak. The president suggested whoever had done it was “a radical” who had to go to jail (WhiteHouseTapes.net). Two days later, speaking to two of his aides, the president equated Ellsberg to Alger Hiss, who was involved in a sensational trial in 1948 during which Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist, testified that Hiss was a long-standing Communist. In short, President Nixon was calling Ellsberg a Communist (WhiteHouseTapes.net). Then on June 29, Nixon told his attorney general John Mitchell, “We’ve got to keep our eye on the main ball. The main ball is Ellsberg. We’ve got to get this (expletive)... We can’t be in a position of ever allowing, just because some guy is going to be a martyr, of allowing a fellow to get away with this kind of wholesale thievery or otherwise it’s

going to happen all over the government” (WhiteHouseTapes.net).

As mentioned above, Glenn Greenwald was attacked by his critics for exposing the NSA’s surveillance programs. But it appears no such personal attacks were made against Neil Sheehan or any other *New York Times*’ journalist who wrote about the “Pentagon Papers.” While the newspaper itself was the subject of scrutiny, no individual reporter was. Granted, and a further discussion of this point will be made below, Greenwald repeatedly talked about what he had done and always in strong defense of his actions while Sheehan remained mum, but nevertheless the public conversation of the journalist himself/herself and the motives guiding their actions are phenomena not evident 40 years ago.

The Nixon administration did seek to halt the publication of the “Pentagon Papers,” suggesting that America’s national interests were at stake and that the nation also would be damaged diplomatically if the documents continued to be published. The case moved rapidly to the Supreme Court. On June 30, 1971, slightly more than two weeks after the initial *New York Times*’ story about the “Pentagon Papers,” the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in favor of the newspaper’s right to publish. Split 4-3, the decisive votes were cast by Justices Potter Stewart and Byron White. One of the attorneys who represented the *New York Times*, Floyd Abrams, writing many years later, explained what prompted the two Justices to rule as they did, and how their opinion continues to influence relations between the government and the media.

In their opinion, they stated that, at least in the absence of explicit Congressional authorization, they could not agree to the constitutionality of a prior restraint on publication unless the disclosures in question would “surely result in the direct, immediate

and irreparable damage to our nation or its people. ... The Stewart-White opinion is generally cited as establishing the legal test of the Pentagon Papers case. It is plainly an extremely difficult one to meet, not least because it is virtually impossible to demonstrate that publication of anything will “surely” lead to “irreparable damage” (Abrams, 2013: 144-45).

The sections above about Snowden and Ellsberg, albeit brief, are important as they demonstrate important changes in media coverage, the next section of this research. As we have seen, media were slower to jump on the publication of the “Pentagon Papers” than on the release of the NSA information. The focus in the 1970s was on the leaker/source/traitor/whistleblower and the news agencies disseminating the information he had provided, while in 2013 the focus was on the leaker/source/traitor/whistleblower and the journalist that disseminated the data he had provided. Finally, more voices contributed to the attempt to define Snowden than were involved in media discourse about Ellsberg.

A Changing Media Landscape

Corporate Ownership

Significant discussions are taking place in schools of communication/journalism/mass media and in the communications industry about the future of the field. Those conversations are happening as the field continues to sort out already-in-place corporate and technological changes. And some of those changes explain, at least in part, the coverage differences seen in the Ellsberg/“Pentagon Papers” era and the Snowden/NSA era.

The “corporatization” of the media (print and broadcast) has been a rich topic of conversation and research (not to mention controversy). Now in its

fourth decade, the corporate ownership of U.S media has led to significant alterations of the media landscape. (The government's role in allowing this to happen will be addressed later in this paper.) Newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times* have moved from being family-owned entities to parts of larger corporations (in the *Times*' case, the Tribune Company). Television networks such as NBC are now part of conglomerates (in NBC's case, Comcast). Clear Channel is synonymous with owning thousands of radio stations. Put another way, more and more media are now owned by fewer and fewer companies. Fenton (2011) adds this phenomenon is not limited to the United States but also is evident in Britain.

Whether taking place in the print or broadcasting worlds, there are consistencies to corporate ownership – cutting news staffs; shrinking news holes; declining emphasis on investigative reporting; the “homogenization” of news coverage; demanding ever-higher profits; and emphasizing people/celebrities as newsmakers. One of the effects is a kind-of dumbing down of the news in which drama replaces seriousness, and the unimportant seems to matter. Critics are everywhere. Though referring to British politicians, Anderson (1997: 3) could have included American politicians, educators and other critics when suggesting they “frequently accuse the media of sensationalism, trivialization, narrowness of focus and straightforward factual inaccuracy.”

As Smith (2009) noted, other critics of the corporate takeover of media suggest “free markets serve only the financial interests of advertisers and stockholders – leaving citizens to fend for themselves” (pp. 389). Brandenburg (in Anderson and Ward, 2007: 212-13) put it more bluntly: “The obvious outcome of deregulation is a trend towards oligopolistic market structures...[including] monopolies in many local

markets.” This idea of the media becoming rich (monetarily, and abandoning their social responsibility commitments) with the public becoming poor (in detailed information told by multiple voices and sources) was contextualized in McChesney's 2000 book “Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times”. In another work, McChesney cast doubt on how Americans benefited from “the same large media corporations own(ing) the TV networks, the cable TV channels and the Hollywood film studios” (McChesney, 2004: 232).

Omachonu and Healey (2009) identified another concern with media consolidation when they wrote, “Compared with their representation in the general population, females, blacks, and Hispanics comprise a tiny fraction of media owners. Continued media consolidation exacerbates the disparity in media ownership” (pp. 91).

“The New Media Monopoly” written by Bagdikian is an often-cited work to assist in explaining the consolidation in media ownership. He asserted that the five global corporations that own most of the media in the U.S. and around the world operate “with many of the characteristics of a cartel” interested more in protecting themselves and their profits rather than acting in a true competitive spirit (2004: 3) or delivering quality, in depth information to their readers. Bagdikian laments that the “cartels” have allowed stories such as “a distant kidnapped child” to remain atop the national headlines for weeks while “there is no such media persistence with problems that afflict millions” (2004: 20). It is not a stretch to see this similar attention devoted to one man – Edward Snowden – subsuming more important conversations in media discourse.

Linking the “corporatization” of media to Snowden and Ellsberg is not a stretch. Forty years ago,

print and broadcast news organizations were owned by more individuals and companies, and those additional “voices” engaged in a battle, albeit peaceful, to do serious journalism designed to keep audiences informed of the important issues of the day. The commitment to doing serious news meant devoting resources and personnel to the places of power and influence at home and abroad. It also meant a commitment to investigative journalism, always an expensive and time-consuming task. These ownership groups respected the idea of information as a public good that should not be commoditized. The often-used phrase from the broadcasting world was “loss leader,” indicating that the news division likely would lose money fulfilling the tasks mentioned in this paragraph but its commitment to social responsibility made such financial losses acceptable. Moreover, the profit made by the entertainment division more than covered the news division’s expenses, thus ensuring that the company as a whole was profitable.

Though stories pertaining to celebrities, entertainers, athletes and other individuals had a place in that news environment, those people did not appear at the top of newscasts or on the front page of the newspaper, and they certainly didn’t have hour-length television talk programs masquerading as news highlighting their every move. Nor was there social media, where critics and supporters could spout any idea, rational or otherwise, about what was taking place. During this period, individuals and companies of course demanded their newspapers or broadcast operations make a profit, but they did not expect the level of profit that corporate media agencies must deliver to their owners and stakeholders.

In this environment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Daniel Ellsberg and his motives for illegally copying and distributing the “Pentagon

Papers” were seen as trivial; the legitimate questions were not about him and what motivated him, but rather inquiry on (among other items) the relationship between government and media; whether the U.S. would be damaged militarily or diplomatically because of the release of the papers; the extent to which the media were acting as watchdogs; and why Americans needed to know about these items.

Fast forward to 2013 and a period in which different goals and values for media existed. News agencies found themselves part of global corporations that focused sharply on profit. National and international news bureaus at both print and broadcast operations were dwindling with less attention therefore concentrated on the halls of power. Serious reporting that required time was cast aside as being of little interest to the public. And individuals – no matter their career – became news because of what they had done or were doing. Thus, media discussion centered around what motivated Edward Snowden; how social media reacted to him; whether he was a loyal American; the drama over rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia vis-à-vis extradition; and the ambitions of the journalists assisting him in telling his story.

Technology

Ownership and the changing values associated with it do not tell the entire story of how Ellsberg/the “Pentagon Papers” differed from Snowden/the NSA. The rapid development of technological tools that can deliver news and information to computers, tablets and mobile devices cannot be ignored. Fenton (2011: 65) summed up this issue perhaps better than anyone, noting that “new technology has brought with it new practices of journalism that have changed the very nature of the

production of news where speeding it up and spreading it thin has become the norm.”

Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) suggest that homogenization ought to be added to that list. In examining two leading Argentine newspapers and their online sites, they found that similar stories appear on the papers’ front pages and on their Websites as the news day progresses. They state, “An organizational imperative to keep the homepage current and complete leads journalists to permanently watch other media and rapidly incorporate other media’s stories when they are initially missed. This heightened monitoring and mimicry further homogenizes the news due to the heavy reliance on wire services and other media” (2007: 177). In a separate study, Boczkowski added that “a journalist spends more time learning about other media than ever before, and this information increasingly influences editorial judgments” (2009: 40).

Jones (2009: 179-180) acknowledges that “good journalism on the Web is a wondrous thing” but laments that “the culture of the Web favors news in small bites – increasingly just enough news to fill the screen of a cell phone[, ...] and prefers attitude and edge and opinion.” A significant percentage of the American public recognizes that and does not approve. The Pew Research Center’s “The State of the News Media 2013” report found that large numbers of people were turning away from the traditional media and their Websites, suggesting that their reporting lacked the depth and quality informed citizens demanded. The report warned that “[t]he job of news organizations is to come to terms with the fact that, as they search for economic stability, their financial future may well hinge on their ability to provide high quality reporting” (Enda and Mitchell, 2013).

Journalists, themselves, are worried. The 2009 Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism report found that close to six in 10 journalists thought that the Internet was changing the “fundamental values” of journalism and leading to a “loosening of standards” (Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

Steensen examined the potential for technology to transform online journalism and came away unimpressed. He suggested that too many journalists are reluctant to use hyperlinks, perhaps because of a “protectionist attitude” about their work; remain steadfast in being the gatekeepers of news (at the expense of more robust participatory journalism); and especially hesitant to use the multimedia options available to them. (2011: 311-327). Livingston and Bennett lamented that despite the potential for technology to assist reporters in telling stories with a wider variety of sources too many international reports continue to be framed by “official” sources (2003: 363-380).

Associated with this technological development is the fragmenting of the audience. Simply put, cable, the Internet, tablets and smartphones allow consumers to pick the device through which they receive their information, making newspapers, news magazines and over-the-air television less valuable in their lives. Consider this note from the 2013 State of the News Media report: “Network news audiences have been steadily eroding for more than three decades, with slight upticks in 1985, in 1992 and 2001, years in which major events, such as the end of the Cold War and the 9/11 attacks, helped boost viewership. Since 1980, the three commercial evening newscasts have lost about 27.4 million viewers, or 52.6%, of their audience” (“State of the News Media 2013”). Mersey (2010: 6) has suggested that news began to be delivered in

“modulization” form once cable news assumed preference in consumers’ minds. “Tidbits of news in the form of infographics, short stories, and audio or video bites became commonplace,” she wrote.

While it is true that no single cable network threatens the reach of ABC, CBS, FOX or NBC, the cumulative effect is that the major networks are not in the same dominant position they were just 30 years ago. Anderson and Weymouth (in Anderson, 2007: 24) note that this fragmentation has contributed to news agencies moving from being suppliers of news to operating in a consumer-driven market in which “providers of information jostle, often ferociously, for the attentions of a public that, far from seeking information, is suffering from ‘information overload’, and some would claim ‘interpretive deficit.’”

And then there is the Internet itself, which Mersey (2010: 7) asserts has changed journalism most dramatically because “nonprofessional producers” easily can disseminate information (no matter how dubious it might be). As a corollary, they can in real-time respond to perceived biases, factual errors or other elements of news discourse. A kind-of drama thus plays out, as ordinary citizens make or react to news.

What these strands of research above indicate is that media agencies tend to tell the same stories as their competitors, and often those same stories have the same editorial line. Moreover, a mixture of opinion and editorializing has entered media discourse that the public quickly can add to through social media. The cumulative effect is a breakdown in the authority and ratings power of the traditional television networks (and similar cuts in circulation for newspapers). The often opinion-based and shallow coverage that follows ensures that reporting lacks the depth and meaning it did one generation ago.

Discussion

Washington, the seat of America’s governmental power, has abandoned its long-held commitment to regulating the ownership of media properties and has neutered the Federal Communication Commission’s (FCC) ability to enforce rules pertaining to the licensing of media properties and their reach into America’s living rooms. These deregulation policies that began under Ronald Reagan have continued under administrations led by Republicans and Democrats. Those changes also are vital to understand, as they assist in explaining why broadcast coverage of Daniel Ellsberg and the “Pentagon Papers” differed from Edward Snowden and the NSA.

When the FCC was developed as an extension of the former Federal Radio Commission, its charge was to act in the “public interest.” Though that term has never had a single operationally defined description, it came to be summarized thusly – the FCC’s mission is to ensure a diversity of ownership groups, voices and programs in local and national markets; to guarantee competition; and to promote localism. Put another way, the needs of the public superseded those of media owners. But over the past three decades, the FCC has seen its ability to carry out its mission change.

One example of this weakening of FCC authority is in the area of media mergers or ownership changes. Shaffer and Jordan (2013: 392) assert that “members of Congress have sponsored legislation aimed at severely limiting – and even stripping – FCC regulators of their power to review acquisitions.” Likewise, the FCC now allows one station in a market to produce news for itself and another station in that market. Yanich (2013) noted that ownership groups

regularly state that such agreements will lead to more enterprise reporting in the market. But he found that in at least one example the opposite was true: Stations did less in-depth reporting, and in one market two stations “simply duplicated their newscasts through the mechanism of a simulcast,” meaning that the newscasts “were exactly the same” no matter which channel a viewer chose (2013: 254). Austin returned to a familiar theme in her evaluation of the weakening of ownership rules, noting “we are reading and seeing recycled stories that cater to a majoritarian audience (2011: 734).

The FCC once prevented any individual or group from owning a newspaper and a television station in the same market. In 2003 that rule was abandoned. *The Wall Street Journal* examined the new media landscape: “In large cities such as New York or Los Angeles, the rule changes mean that a single company can own the dominant newspaper, the cable-television system, as many as three local TV stations and eight radio stations” (Dreazen and Flint, 2003, June 3). At the same time, the FCC approved rules that increased the reach of television ownership groups. Previously, groups could own stations that reached a maximum of 35 percent of the national audience; the new figure was 45 percent. However, public outrage and a series of political moves by Congress led to that figure being reduced to 39 percent.

In sum, the political climate in Washington favors a less-strident FCC watching over the nation’s media. One of the effects, as has been noted on more than one occasion in this paper, is that the amount and the quality of news and information delivered to the public has suffered.

In 2013, Edward Snowden became a cause celebre for liberals and libertarians who speak in ominous terms about the reach of government into

Americans’ private lives. There was little about him (or his girlfriend) that media organizations didn’t cover. And journalists became part of the narrative, as their motives for accepting and publishing what Snowden illegally had downloaded. *New York Times* reporter David Carr examined why the ire felt by some people about Snowden was matched by their disdain for journalists such as Glenn Greenwald of *The Guardian*. Carr suggested that the vitriol directed at Greenwald (and Carr adds WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange to the conversation) might be because “they aren’t what we think of as real journalists. Instead, they represent an emerging Fifth Estate composed of leakers, activists and bloggers who threaten those of us in traditional media. They are, as one says, not like us” (Carr, 2013, August 26, pp. B4). But he concludes by stating, “If the revelations about the N.S.A. surveillance were broken by Time, CNN or the New York Times, executives there would be already be building new shelves to hold all the Pulitzer Prizes and Peabodies they expected.”

We also must not forget that Greenwald used his platform as a journalist to openly advocate for Snowden, and no journalist in the late 1960s or early 1970s did the same thing for Daniel Ellsberg. Whether it was on the pages (actual or Web) pages of *The Guardian* or on social media, Greenwald did not back down in asserting that Snowden was doing the right thing and that people had to pay attention to how the American government would treat him if he had been returned to the U.S. Bruns (2012) noted the importance of Twitter in enhancing the stature of journalists covering the 2010 Australian elections, noting, “[I]ndividual journalists and political commentators appear to remain substantially more able to generate significant visibility on Twitter than news organizations themselves. Twitter visibility

appears to be driven by individual personality, not institutional imprint” (2012: 106).

In sum, one is left to wonder about Bagdikian’s lament that a weakened FCC and other government agencies has also weakened the quality of news received by Americans. As he wrote, “The majority of Americans depend on the standard news media for full and realistic reporting with relevant background. With few exceptions the main media failed the challenge” (2004: 132).

References

- 1) "5 Things to Note About NSA Surveillance Programs." (2013, June 9). Associated Press. <http://news.yahoo.com/5-things-note-nsa-surveillance-programs-232854835.html>. Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 2) Abrams, Floyd. (2013). *Friend of the Court: On the Frontlines with the First Amendment*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- 3) Anderson, Peter and Geoff Ward (eds). (2007). *The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate.
- 4) Austin, Caridad. (2011). Overwhelmed by Big Consolidation: Brining Back Regulation to Increase Diversity in Programming That Serves Minority Audiences. *Federal Communications Law Journal*, 63, 3, 733-763.
- 5) Bagdikian, Ben. (2004). *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 6) Boczkowski, Pablo J. (2009). Technology, Monitoring, and the Imitation in Contemporary News Work. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 2009(2), 39-59.
- 7) Martin de Santos. (2007). When More Media Equals Less News: Patterns of Content Homogenization in Argentina's Leading Print and Online Newspapers. *Political Communication*, 24, 167-180.
- 8) Brooks, David. (2013, June 10). "The Solitary Leaker." New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/11/opinion/brooks-the-solitary-leaker.html?ref=davidbrooks>. Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 9) Bruns, Axel. (2012). Journalists and Twitter: How Australian News Organizations Adapt to a New Medium. *Media International Australia*, 144, 97-107.
- 10) Carr, David. (2013, August 26). "War on Leaks Is Pitting Journalist Vs. Journalist." *New York Times*.
- 11) Drazen, Yochi J. and Joe Flint. (2003, June 3). FCC Eases Media-Ownership Caps, Clearing the Way for New Mergers – But Big Companies Claim Changes Aren't Enough; Fewer News Outlets Seen. *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/399000874> (Retrieved September 12, 2013).
- 12) "Ellsberg: The Battle Over the Right to Know." (1971, July 5). TIME. <http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?vid=8&id=2e7f926b-342d-473c-baec-2c91df9b4cc3%40sessionmgr110&hid=109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=53807038>. Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 13) Enda, Jodi and Amy Mitchell. "Americans Show Signs of Leaving a News Outlet, Citing Less Information." Pew Research Center. <http://stateofthedia.org/2013/special-reports-landing-page/citing-reduced-quality-many-americans-abandon-news-outlets/>. Retrieved September 3, 2013.
- 14) "Feinstein Calls Snowden A Traitor." (2013, June 10). UPI. http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2013/06/10/Feinstein-calls-Snowden-a-traitor/UPI-86781370845139/. Retrieved August 20, 2013.

- 15) Fenton, Natalie. (2011). Deregulation or Democracy? New Media, News, Neoliberalism and the Public Interest. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 25(1), 63-72.
- 16) Fosburgh, Lacey. (1971, June 21). "Reactions Focus on Security Rules." New York Times. <http://reddog.rmu.edu:2056/hnpnewyorktimes/index/docview/119119131/fulltextPDF/14008D311B9274ED39B/3?accountid=28365>. Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 17) Franke-Ruta, Garance. (2013, June 9). Meet Edward Snowden, the NSA Whistleblower. The Atlantic. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/06/meet-edward-snowden-the-nsa-whistleblower/276688/>. Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 18) Gellman, Barton, Aaron Blake and Greg Miller. (2013, June 9). Edward Snowden Comes Forward As Source of NSA Leaks. *Washington Post*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/intelligence-leaders-push-back-on-leakers-media/2013/06/09/fff80160-d122-11e2-a73e-826d299ff459_story.html. Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 19) Greenberg, Andy. (2013, June 9). Icelandic Legislator: I'm Ready to Help NSA Whistleblower Edward Snowden Seek Asylum. *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/andygreenberg/2013/06/09/icelandic-legislator-im-ready-to-help-nsa-whistleblower-seek-asylum/>. Retrieved Aug. 20, 2013.
- 20) Greenwald, Glenn. (2013, June 5). NSA Collecting Phone Records of Millions of Verizon Customers Daily. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/nsa-phone-records-verizon-court-order>. Retrieved Aug. 19, 2013.
- 21) Greenwald, Glenn and Ewen MacAskill. (2013, June 6). NSA Prism Program Taps Into User Data of Apple, Google and Others. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data>. Retrieved Aug. 19, 2013.
- 22) "John Boehner Defends NSA Snooping Programs, Blasts 'Traitor.'" ABC News video. http://youtu.be/41_X9cNqHPM. Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 23) Jones, Alex S. (2009). *Losing the News: The Future of the News That Feeds Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 24) "King: Journalists in Classified Leaks Cases Should Face Punishment. CNN. http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/11/king-journalists-in-classified-leak-cases-should-face-punishment/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2Fenn_politicalticker+%28Blog%3A+Political+Ticker%29. Retrieved August 27, 2013.
- 25) Livingston, Steven and W. Lance Bennett. (2003). Gatekeeping, Indexing and Live-Event News: Is Technology Altering the Construction of News? *Political Communication*, 20, 363-380.
- 26) Madar, Chase. (2013, June 24). Seven Myths About Edward Snowden, NSA Whistleblower. *The Nation*. <http://www.thenation.com/blog/174963/seven>

- [-myths-about-edward-snowden-nsa-whistleblower#](#)
Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 27) Mazzetti, Mark and Michael S. Schmidt. "Ex-worker at CIA Says He Leaked Data on Surveillance." *New York Times*.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/10/us/former-cia-worker-says-he-leaked-surveillance-data.html?pagewanted=all&r=1&>
Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 28) McChesney, Robert W. (2004). Media Policy Goes to Main Street: The Uprising of 2003. *The Communication Review*, 7, 223-258.
- 29) (2000). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. New York: The New Press.
- 30) John Nichols. (2010). *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution That Will Begin the World Again*. Philadelphia: Nation Books.
- 31) Mersey, Rachel Davis. (2010). *Can Journalism Be Saved? Rediscovering America's Appetite for News*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- 32) Moran, Jordan. "The First Domino: Nixon and the Pentagon Papers."
<http://whitehousetapes.net/exhibit/first-domino-nixon-and-pentagon-papers>.
Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 33) "NSA Whistleblower Edward Snowden: 'I Don't Want to Live in a Society That Does These Sorts of Things.'" *The Guardian*.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/jun/09/nsa-whistleblower-edward-snowden-interview-video>
- 34) "NSA Whistleblower Whereabouts Unknown As Authorities Consider Charges." FOX News.
<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2013/06/11/report-nsa-contract-worker-is-surveillance-source/>
Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 35) "Obama Won't Make Deals for Snowden Extradition." (2013, June 27). Associated Press.
<http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2013/06/27/obama-won-make-deals-for-snowden-extradition/M8ARHHFRcg8m06UWlu62QL/story.html>
Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 36) Omachonu, John O. and Kevin Healey. (2009). Media Concentration and Minority Ownership: The Intersection of Ellul and Habermas. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 24, 90-109.
- 37) "Pentagon Papers: The Secret War." (1971, June 28). TIME.
<http://ehis.ebscohost.com/eds/detail?vid=4&sid=24dcf022-8439-40df-a4e2-f9b74a2f7077%40sessionmgr114&hid=109&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=53807005>.
Retrieved from EBSCO Host on August 21, 2013.
- 38) Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2013). "The State of the News Media 2013."
<http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/>
Retrieved September 3, 2013.
- 39) (2009). "The State of the News Media 2009."
<http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2009/>

- Retrieved September 3, 2013.
- 40) "President Obama Defends NSA Spying." (2013, June 17). BuzzFeed. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeedpolitics/president-obama-defends-nsa-spying>
Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 41) Shaffer, Gwen Lisa and Scott Jordan. (2013). Classic Conditioning: The FCC's Use of Merger Conditions to Advance Policy Goals. *Media, Culture and Society*, 35(3), 392-403.
- 42) Sheehan, Neil. (1971, June 13). "Vietnam Archive: Pentagon Study Traces 3 Decades of Growing U.S. Involvement." *New York Times*.
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/13/reviews/papers-overview.html>
Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 43) Smith, Laura K. (2009). Consolidation and News Content: How Broadcast Ownership Policy Impacts Local Television News and Public Interests. *Journalism and Communication Monographs*, 10, 387-453.
- 44) Steensen, Steen. (2011). Online Journalism and the Promises of New Technology: A Critical Review and Look Ahead. *Journalism Studies*, 12(3), 311-327.
- 45) "The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers." (2010, October 11). PBS.
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/mostdangerousman/>.
Retrieved August 21, 2013.
- 46) Wemple, Erik. (2013, June 10). Edward Snowden: 'Leaker,' 'Source,' or 'Whistleblower'? *Washington Post*.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/06/10/edward-snowden-leaker-source-or-whistleblower/>
- Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 47) "White House Sidesteps Snowden 'Traitor' Debate." (2013, June 11). Agence France-Press. <http://www.alternet.org/progressive-wire/white-house-sidesteps-snowden-traitor-debate>
Retrieved August 20, 2013.
- 48) Yanich, Danilo. (2013). Local TV News: Content and Shared Service Agreements: The Honolulu Case. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 57(2), 242-259.