



## THERESA ZÜGER

Photo by Jens Kurznack

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# AFTERWORD

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## THE WORLD WE THINK IS THE WORLD WE GET

**THIS BOOK** can be understood as an artifact that exhibits its key messages. It is a literary assembly of actors, each standing for a different perspective, all connected by a collective discourse about the political and societal meaning of truth-telling. In her work of the past years, curator Tatianna Bazzichelli and her Berlin based team have tied the knots of this unique network, and, with the help of the individuals who speak up in this work, shed light on many dark corners of today's society. Tatiana's exceptional curatorial work allowed all participants of the Disruption Network Lab to connect to a community. This book portrays a part of this extraordinary community and the political as well as cultural discourse it represents. It also expands the network to its readers and amplifies the voices that herein speak, analyse, and think loudly and collectively.

The book itself thereby becomes a piece of art and evidence, in the meaning established here. As such a piece of evidence, it captures the ongoing reflection of investigating and exposing truths, which are either hidden, obscured, or collectively suppressed. It also allows us to reflect on this practice of exposing painful and devastating truths as a political act in our societies and specifically as a truly democratic act. This reading can therefore be seen as an act of empowerment for speakers, writers, as well as readers, who share their knowledge and thoughts and thereby extend the discourse and community building which happened over the past years in Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

This editorial selection displays the stories and thoughts of people who in one way or another engaged with painful truths, be it as a whistleblower or another type of truth-teller, artist, activist, journalist, or academic. It allows us to understand the topic of truth-telling from multiple perspectives: through the eyes of a whistleblower, from a close by, but nonetheless outside perspective reflecting on the effects of whistleblowing and artistic practices of truth-telling, as well as by

shedding light on the surveillance that is the background against which whistleblowing has to act in a digital society. Some contributions go on by representing acts of truth-telling in themselves. They allow us to lift the curtain on dark realities, exploring repression, isolation, and persecution, investigating the systematic misconduct and corruption that occurs in front of our eyes, and finally bringing the daily injustices and discriminations of a technology dependent society to our attention.

The truth, it seems, hasn't aged well. Were there times in history, where rationality and logic were (believed to be) stable routes to get to the truth, it seems that today these paths are overgrown and deserted. Postmodern thinkers question the truth's universal existence and stress its relational nature (see Caputo 2013). As everything is mobile and relational today, so too has the truth become a moving target. One that has to be fought for and that has to be collectively rediscovered. The truth is a good that is determined and secured in shared experiences and dialogue. This book—in combination with the events that preceded it—provides such a dialogue and with every chapter offers a search for a truth.

What this book displays are the struggles of becoming a truth-teller and how unwelcome some truths are. For the outsiders of an act of truth-telling they are unwelcome because they shake up our world to an extent that is unbearable for many. There is a limit to the unease that even postmodern minds can bear, and that which extends this limit is muted by the power of denial. Collective denial, it seems, has become the truth's new offspring. This is not to say that past generations didn't live in denial, but it is shocking how widespread and accepted the force of denial has become, as well as how easy conspiracy theories and contesting ideas are to find. It almost seems as if denial has become a fashionable life choice that is deliberately chosen and that searching for truth is out of style.

The stories and thoughts this book speaks about are reports of attempts to describe this vanishing truth in a world that is constantly shaking. But as Barret Brown highlighted in a previous chapter, truths don't make it on their own, they need to be portrayed as a narrative and follow the rules of our attention economy. Nevertheless, some of these truths that are told are reminders of the world's instability, its unreliability and its corruption. In a world that is facing challenges that threaten its future wellbeing, like the climate crisis, and that display its conflicts, inequalities and injustices in an ubiquitous media flow (and lived experiences) every day, humans, as psychological beings, desperately need a different kind of truth. We want truth to reveal itself as a lasting pure and good core of our existence. But oftentimes all we get is the disappointment, that those who are supposed to keep us safe are the ones ignoring human rights, and those who act on our behalf are abusing their positions for their own advantage. The truth sometimes is more than we can bear, and the more the ubiquitous media flow is

delivering news about the world, the harder it seems to account for all the painful truths that we learn about.

Nevertheless, we should be thankful to those who risk and sacrifice so much to reveal the truth. Instead, we often punish them and deem them suspicious. Whistleblowers, as well as other truth-tellers, often experience a stigma as a troublemaker or traitor. Truth-tellers, to become who they are, often break with community and its insider conventions and convictions. They refuse to tune in with a common need for harmony and trust in our system. They play the dissonant note that our ears can't stand to hear over and over. There are only two ways to avoid the dissonance, to mute the disruptor or to completely change the tune. The question I want to investigate here is, what we would need to do as societies to achieve this change. I believe the answer lies on many—or at least three—levels.

How we see these truth-tellers is a choice that does not only concern them—it concerns us too, and also informs the society which we choose to live in. If we choose to see them as the exemption, the hero or traitor, the extreme in a herd of 'normals', we choose to distance ourselves from them and to live in a society that deems truth-telling extraordinary. As Os Keyes rightly spells out in a previous chapter, the narrative figure assigned to the whistleblower, as the individual hero or traitor, ignores the inherently social situation whistleblowing always takes place in. This narrative leaves no room to pay attention to the social inequalities the whistleblowing occurs (or can't occur) in, and the social relations and collective efforts that most often surround it.

We can choose differently, and see truth-telling as an admirable but *ordinary* act, as ourselves in a different position. This shift in our perception would have consequences on three major levels: Firstly, the societal level, which I will turn to next, secondly, the meso-level of associations, and thirdly, the micro level of the individual.

On a societal level, the shift in our perception of truth-tellers would touch upon our understanding of politics and democracy. If we understand democracy and politics as a system of representation, as a system ruled by a majority and by experts and bureaucrats, we will find little space for active intervention into political affairs by citizens (which whistleblowing represents). If instead we understand democracies as never finished dynamic political constructs, as an organized form of collective self-governance of the people that allows for conflict, scrutiny and rehabilitation, for change, disruption and intervention by citizens in their capacities as political subjects, then we start to think of whistleblowing as an act of fruitful political progress, along the line of other acts of civil disobedience and acts of democratic protest. We would need to accept that democratic structures are not designed to be immutable, but that they are to be re-thought and re-built as soon as they take shape. The practice of speaking truth to power goes to the heart of democracies. It re-negotiates the roles and qualities of demo-

cratic institutions and questions systemic democratic deficits. It connects well to the democratic understanding of philosopher John Dewey (1927). He envisioned a transformative democracy and understood democracy not as a static system, but as a collective and deliberative governance. A collective “effort in the first place to counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of the rule by accidental or irrelevant factors, and in the second place an effort to counteract the tendency to employ political power to serve private instead of public ends” (Dewey 1927: 32f). In regard to this vision of a transformative democracy by Dewey, our societies seem to be in a state of tension, stuck halfway between attempts to change and the persistence of the status quo.

One important landmark for societal change is the law. In 2019, the European Union released a directive to its member states to implement new laws that protect whistleblowers to a new extent (EU 2019). The implementation on national levels in the EU will (at least in many cases) protect those taking the risk of bringing misconduct to light. The ongoing discourse on the exact enactment of a national whistleblower protection in Germany thus exemplifies how deeply situated resistance against a general protection of whistleblowers is. It is still a point of debate, for instance, if whistleblowers in matters that touch upon national law (instead of Union law), national security, or classified information will enjoy protection (see *Positionspapier des Whistleblower Netzwerk e. V.*).<sup>2</sup> To leave such matters excluded for protected truth-telling means to define spaces of governance that are untouchable and unscrutinised by the public. The struggle for the implementation of this regulation demonstrates the persistence of organizational and administrative power and its unwillingness to change and allow scrutiny and accountability.

Most chapters of this book exemplify an asymmetry of power that is manifested in state and private institutions. They exemplify that in most cases of truth-telling, it is David challenging Goliath. Laws and regulation, due process, transparency and the rule of law are institutional counter-measures to ensure that no Goliath goes unchecked. The upcoming regulation hopefully allows for a new procedure for whistleblowers to come forth and not risk their societal and financial standing. Nevertheless, this does not mean that extra institutional political direct action is unnecessary or superfluous. Instead, acts of civil disobedience and citizens’ interventions are a constantly needed correction that philosopher Hannah Arendt saw as the actual core of democracy itself (see Arendt 2000; Balibar 2014). In the revolutionary spirit of civil disobedience she saw the true democratic root.

Of course, much has changed since Arendt’s time and the democracy we live in today is dependent on technological infrastructure to a new extent. The ubiquity of digital technology not only changes our private lives, it also deeply changes politics—understood as the practice of freedom and democracy acted out by humans. Truth-telling under these new conditions still has the same relevance as in earlier decades, thinking of Daniel Ellsberg for instance, but the practices that allow cit-

izens to tell the truth in a meaningful way to our society have changed radically. While Ellsberg copied hundreds of documents in copy shop night shifts, today's whistleblowers can download and transmit massive amounts of data, like for instance Edward Snowden, whose leaks to this day are not captured and interpreted in full. Today's whistleblowers often depend on cryptography to secure their communication, since surveillance on many levels has become an omnipresent countermeasure to secret communication.

Another major change of our public is introduced through powerful intermediaries that operate as new gatekeepers for political information and gather massive amounts of data about citizens around the world. We have new ways to learn about the world, from online news and influencers, to YouTube channels and imageboards. Who and what gets attention in social media has turned into an ongoing struggle for 'eyeballs' in which the predicate of truthfulness is a rather low selling point by itself.

The power of art in this context is an important issue that is reflected on in the concept of art as evidence by Laura Poitras and Tatiana Bazzichelli. Especially in a time where universal truths are out of fashion, art represents a well-established alternative route for gaining deeper insights about a society's truths. Since its beginning, art has depicted truth through the subjective eyes of an artist, never claiming to be rational or accurate, but undoubtedly reaching the roots of societal truths nevertheless. Oftentimes art is able to present a repressed truth more clearly than any report, any bureaucratic document or any eyewitness account could ever do. Art as evidence, as an "act of revealing facts, exposing misconduct and wrongdoings, and promoting awareness about social, political and technological matters" in artistic forms, reminds us that the truth is never only a matter of facts. It is also a matter of interpretation, of reflection and context. Truth is only that which is allowed to think and say, and art has a long standing tradition of expanding this realm of speakable and thinkable things like no other realm of society.

This brings us to a second level of a possible shift we can choose to make when we think about whistleblowers as potentially ourselves, and as whistleblowing not as the extraordinary, but as a normal act of political intervention. This second shift takes place in all the associations that we are part of which are important structures of our society. Associations, such as cultural communities, religions, and organizations, all have more or less binding conventions and normative rules that we are often implicitly or explicitly supposed to follow (see Walzer 1970). Associations are a way for humans to create stability in our subjective and collective world, by creating a feeling of familiarity and belonging. The organizations we work in are often no different in that regard. We identify with what we do, who we consider colleagues, and what we achieve or contribute to as an organization or as a whole. Organizational change is on its own a profession and an area of

research. Organizations often work well, if they have clear structures, habits and conventions. They tend to achieve stability in themselves rather than to transform themselves too quickly and often have a status quo bias—so a tendency to prefer the known (even if deeply flawed) over the new. For those inside the association, a hidden truth often connects to the loyalty inside the association. Things that each individual by herself would deem wrong, might become acceptable in the loyalty of an association. Loyalty is the last reliable force that many will choose over justice in a setting where whistleblowing is the only way to get the truth to light (see Dugan et al. 2015).

A whistleblower in this type of setting is often not only in conflict with labour law (or at least status quo) but also acting in contradiction to loyalties and unwritten conventions, that sometimes even incorporate shared secrets about wrongdoings. She is often the breaker of a perceived stability, harmony and trust in an organization's system, sometimes in actual economic terms, but most often in social terms. Whistleblowing—no matter how morally valid and honourable—might risk other people's jobs, social harmony and threaten their psychological model of the world. To understand why whistleblowing is such a contested political act, we need to take into account the social nature of humans; that is at least as important as our moral and political being—and maybe often more powerful.

To normalize whistleblowing, we will need to do a balancing act to stay true to social loyalties and relationships, as they are crucial for our social survival, but also have a higher rule of morality and democratically shared principles that prevails over any type of collective pressure or bond. Every individual who is part of an association needs to feel part of an even higher ranking association—the democratic society we live in. To overcome the stigma of the truth-teller, we need to reach a new level of political reflection in our societies that values loyalty to human rights and democracy higher than loyalty to any in-group.

We need to come to a point where we allow ourselves to think (self-)critically about the networks we are part of and the associations we feel belonging to (even the activist networks surrounding the Disruption Network Lab). To support their goals does not necessarily mean that we support every part of the means they use to achieve them, or that we identify with every convention or person in the organization. It is a hard and brave endeavour to choose justice over loyalty and to scrutinize from within even if this means questioning the existing order of things and oftentimes questioning those in power, be it institutional or psychological. No community, no association, no matter how honourable its goals and intentions may be, is immune to abuse of power, to internal injustices and dynamics of discrimination.

One important option that Keyes also highlights is that we could aim for more collective forms of resistance and go beyond the idealization of heroic individuals.

There is strength not only in numbers, but in a shared cause and shared efforts. Whistleblowing is a practice of the lonely. It shouldn't stay that way.

Lastly, the third shift will happen on the level of the individual. What would it mean to consider the possibility for all of us to step into the role of a whistleblower when the situation calls for it? To normalize this idea also means to deconstruct the image of the whistleblower that we know. We should not see a hero or a traitor; we should be able to see their personalities, their weaknesses and flaws, as well as their strengths and arguments.<sup>3</sup> The important step, though, is to look at whistleblowers' personal story *separately* from their political act. The act of whistleblowing should stand for itself and be accounted for in its value to democracy and not the story of an individual hero or traitor. Its evaluation should not depend on sympathy, empathy, or any media narrative that plays on our emotions. It should depend on our democratic principles and our loyalty to these higher values, beyond personal bonds (be they to the whistleblower *or* to the organization concerned).

Only if our societies, the associations they are built on, and we as individuals start thinking about whistleblowing and truth-telling as an act possible for anyone, can we overcome the blind spots and democratic deficits or injustices our societies maintain.

The reading of this book might provoke pessimism: it demasks deep-rooted corruption and wrongdoing, and it might be a challenge to not feel hopeless as a result. But I believe it can also be read as an important source for hope: it exemplifies the resistance that exists despite all the wrongdoings it describes. Every chapter represents a successful act of uncovering and deepening our understanding of the specific type of resistance that is truth-telling and whistleblowing. It displays a belief in politics and citizens as political subjects that can make a huge difference, even though the struggle never ends.

## Notes

1. See <https://www.disruptionlab.org>.
2. [https://www.whistleblower-net.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Positionspapier\\_Umsetzung\\_EU\\_Richtlinie\\_Hinweisgeberschutz\\_26.02.2021.pdf](https://www.whistleblower-net.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Positionspapier_Umsetzung_EU_Richtlinie_Hinweisgeberschutz_26.02.2021.pdf)
3. Again, I would like to point to the chapter written by Os Keyes that illustrates in a very personal description, how the stereotype of the truth-teller society currently perpetrates is hurtful not only to society and the social contexts of whistleblowing but particularly to the truth-tellers themselves.

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