16 Epilogue

God and Devil, Hero and Villain, and the Long Journey Ahead

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This collection of essays, showcasing the expertise of nearly two dozen organizational communication scholars, is a daring anomaly. All of its richly varied chapters explore just a single case study. More unusual still, they all focus on one man's intensely personal story of corporate whistleblowing in a country, Norway, otherwise renowned for its ethics and transparency.

How do our three co-editors defend such an approach? In Chapter 2, it is argued that the full complexity of any major socio-organizational event is best captured by triangulation—that is, by using multiple frames for analysis. So, at the outset, they offered each potential contributor two theoretical viewing lenses to consider: Hirschman's social-economic perspective on exiting organizations (a dialectic of self vs. organizational preservation) and Campbell's social-psychological model of the heroic monomyth (in a twist on that myth, the case study possibly reflects not heroic valuation but the dialectic tension of "saving" the self vs. a greater other).

In addition, they wisely made available to these contributors a rich array of primary and secondary source materials, any of which might prove especially pertinent to a scholar's preferred theoretical perspective. Given the variety of perspectives here, and given that all of them focus on a single story, we can expect that the book will prove fascinating, not to mention unusually accessible, to a wide range of readers.

Because this project was several years in gestation, the editors will seem prescient in their anticipation of the debates on whistleblowing that began dominating American politics in the fall of 2019. These latter events, far more public in scope and impact than the Norsk Tipping (NT) scandal, can prove difficult for many of us to interpret amid the cacophony of opinions being expressed. We might find this nuanced guide helpful, then, when revisiting our own sensemaking in interpreting the meaning of any single whistleblowing event, especially one of such national scope and impact. Here, we are able to explore whistleblowing more broadly—as a public, organizational, mediated, corporate, even "paracorporate" act of communication—thanks to the book's multiple views on the history,

practice, and perceptions of calling public attention to wrongdoing. These analyses also take our understanding of what whistleblowing is, and can be, far beyond typical “classifications” that merely identify top types of reported corporate wrongdoing (e.g., health care, defense contractor, tax/IRS, securities, or procurement fraud; see Hagens Berman Sobol Shapiro, 2016).

Instead, these chapters bring to life the kind of deep understanding of whistleblowing that Sarah Amira de la Garza describes: “Whistleblowing experiences are vivid displays of conflict between forces of power and largely unspoken values.” Reading this collection will be valuable to anyone seeking a more well-rounded appreciation of this very particular and dramatic form of organizational/rhetorical narrative. But the interdisciplinary and intercultural nature of this collection deserves to be noted as well. We hear from not only corporate and legal practitioners but also scholars from across the United States, England, and Norway, writing from departments of communication, economics, and business. This makes for an impressive wealth (or array) of interdisciplinary expertise.

Of the many intriguing questions and themes arising from the 15 chapters in this collection, I want to explore these four:

- How, rhetorically, do publics define and manage the concept of whistleblowing?
- How does this process shift over time as cultural norms and expectations change?
- How can the whistleblowing process be understood as a multidimensional, shifting matrix of dialectic tensions?
- How does whistleblowing hold potential for engaged research and practice in organizational and “paracorporate communication” (a term I’ll define at the end of this epilogue)?

How Whistleblowing Is Rhetorically Defined and Managed

Let’s begin with a classical rhetorical perspective on these contemporary events. Ronald Walter Greene, Daniel Horvath, and Larry Browning walk us through the applicability of the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia*, denoting frank free speech that, like whistleblowing, involves both criticizing and truth-telling in the face of considerable personal risk. Their discussion establishes a foundation for our thinking about whistleblowing as a rhetorical act, not just a moral one. From the perspective of organizational communication scholarship, these authors also show how whistleblowing can lead to improving an organization’s infrastructure and enhancing its democracy.

This discussion can be extended further, however, if we consider whistleblowing as not only a rhetorical/organizational act but also as a broader social process. The word “whistleblower” itself has been viewed

by various publics as a “god term”—rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s evocative name for what he called “the ultimates of motivation.” Scholar Richard Weaver extended that idea by proposing a dichotomy between “god” and “devil” terms. “God” terms—words such as “liberty,” “justice,” “freedom,” and “allies”—are sanctified by rhetorical communities or cultures and become guiding terms for collective inspiration and positive action, whereas “devil” terms—words such as “Nazi,” “abortion,” and “rapist”—are used because “there seems to be indeed some obscure psychic law which compels every nation to have in its national imagination an enemy . . . for something which will personify ‘the adversary’” (Weaver, 2009/1953, p. 222, see also Kperogi, 2016). These latter words, while negatively nuanced, can have the same rhetorical force as their dialectic opposites. What makes this dialectic—and therefore a challenging target when it comes to the rhetoric surrounding whistleblowing—is that both “god” and “devil” terms can, and do, shift over time.

How Cultural Meaning-Making of Whistleblowing Shifts Over Time

Given the history of whistleblowing legislation in America dating all the way back to 1778 (Stanger, cited in Naylor, 2019), we might expect whistleblowing to enjoy the cultural gravitas of a “god term.” But can we truly say that whistleblowing is *always* so considered? Or is it instead an example of a principle caught in the dialectic of “god” vs. “devil” terms?

While the whistleblower’s legal rights and protections have usually been defended during the past few decades, and while whistleblowers certainly have been romanticized if not glamorized in movies such as *On the Waterfront*, *All the President’s Men*, and *Erin Brockovich*, consider its definition as it appears online and in the public domain in the second edition of *Black’s Law Dictionary*. There, “whistleblower” is defined as “an employee who *turns against their superiors* to bring a problem out in the open” (*italics mine*). This is very different from Miceli and Near’s (1985) summary quoted in several of these essays. And while Greene, Horvath, and Browning are justified in presenting a definition grounded in organizational scholarship, its wording—“disclosure . . . to persons or organizations able to effect action”—does not quite convey the potential for backlash against whistleblowers in the way that *Black’s* early legal definition can (and, I suggest, does). In the court of public opinion, this legal definition as it appears in the public domain might well carry more weight in shaping reactions to whistleblowing than definitions from a more limited field of study.

No less influential are the power and presence of those “superiors” in the *Black’s Law* definition. When those superiors include the actual government or leadership of a country, our task of deciding whether “whistleblower” is a “god” or “devil” term—and public discussion of the

act—becomes far muddier. Consider the discourse surrounding whistleblowing in the daily headlines of the past decade. There, we can see a linguistic tug-of-war between “god” and “devil” terms as a split develops between those who view whistleblowing as an unpatriotic act (attacking, for instance, the motives of Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning) and those who staunchly defend the right of whistleblowers to be protected for their patriotic or moral acts (most recently, in 2019, the CIA official whose White House whistleblower complaint triggered presidential impeachment hearings).

Perhaps another key to deeper understanding of the social meaning-making in whistleblowing lies in Greene, Horvath, and Browning’s presentation of Charles Redding’s differentiation between “boat rockers” and “whistleblowers”—implying that their motivation, as we perceive it, might lead to a wider definition of a whistleblowing act as being on one side or the other of the “god/devil” dialectic. We also can take into consideration Corey Bruno and Charles Conrad’s observation that once people have been “de-humanized through existing rhetoric” (perhaps through the application of “devil terms”), they are less likely to be dissenters at all.

Whistleblowing as Dialectic Tensions

The dialectic tensions in our very talking about whistleblowing lead us back to the opening chapter of this volume. There, in his own account of his whistleblowing experience, we find Peer Jacob Svenkerud (PJS) reflecting on his personal and professional struggles to navigate the competing forces of self-preservation and self-sacrifice. PJS poignantly describes feeling, for much of his life, a “stranger in a strange land,” moving from company to company in search of a professional home that truly aligned with his values, his training as a scholar of social structures and diffusion theory, and his day-to-day work as a corporate leader.

Organizational assimilation is a powerful force, especially for someone who has long sought the ideal fit for his skills, temperament, and experience. PJS, as just such a person, likely felt especially susceptible to its influence; Bruno and Conrad agree that “self-knowledge and self-perception at a given point in time/space guides and constrains actors’ symbolic action and their identity narratives,” which implies that the forces of organizational assimilation can strongly affect an individual’s decision to delay whistleblowing.

Further, as PJS describes, NT had an authoritarian corporate culture in which anyone daring to speak out about unethical practices had repeatedly and quickly been sanctioned. Such a repressive culture, Bruno and Conrad point out, often leads to co-workers perceiving the dissenter as a threat to their own well-being. In one particular meeting, only one of many in which he tried to voice his concerns about unethical practices and

the growing attention they were getting in the media, PJS was christened “The Prince of Darkness”—a “devil term” in all senses of the phrase. And just a few short months later, when he had expressed his concerns to another top leader, the vice CEO introduced another “devil term,” telling the group, “We have an unfaithful servant . . . do any of you know who this individual is?” As PJS then reveals, his identity was outed nearly three years later, and despite a new CEO’s promises to “clean up” after the scandal, PJS was essentially removed from an active role as director for communications and external affairs. He then hired an attorney, settled with the company, and began a new career just days after terminating his relationship with NT. What began as informed self-sacrifice for the public good then became nearly a life-and-death (or life-and-health) issue of self-preservation. What PJS does not discuss in depth but is also relevant, is his identity as the son and grandson of a socially and politically prominent family in Norway. Knowing this helps us understand even better the deeper dimensions of the personal and professional risks he took in this case.

Along these same lines, Karl E. Weick’s chapter addresses such dialectic tensions as “surfaces of apprehension” (citing Taylor & Van Every, 2000)—“opposed ideas that become increasingly difficult to manage”—and delves more deeply into the sensemaking that PJS needed to do in his particular circumstances. Weick says that “whistleblowing can be treated as a deepening struggle to make sense under conditions where a growing set of implications, tied to a generative cognition, become increasingly incompatible” and adds that while some people are able (or acculturated) to adapt to modest dissonance, others have a “fixation with stronger dissonance that edits sensemaking more severely.” Returning to PJS’s story and viewing it from this sensemaking perspective, it appears his personal vulnerability in feeling a lack of belongingness or satisfaction despite his successful career might well have been a hidden strength—not only to call out the dissonances between organizational messaging and practice, but also to brave the risks of the whistleblowing act.

At this point, then, we have a sense of how rhetorical, multidisciplinary, intercultural/international, and historical views inform a keener understanding of whistleblowing. For me personally, however, as a passionate lifelong student of organizational/corporate communication and rhetoric, the finest value of this collection is how it inspires future directions for research in these fields—with whistleblowing as the centerpiece of a vital discursive community.

Whistleblowing as Research and Practice in Organizational Communication

The idea of personal and organizational risk-taking that I discussed in the previous section ties closely to the final topic of this epilogue—the

idea that whistleblowing might be a more inclusive, and more promising, topic for research and practice in organizational communication than previously realized. Authors Greene, Horvath, and Browning discuss the unique nature of whistleblowing as organizational communication. They suggest we move beyond established definitions of whistleblowing (i.e., as a public act or an act against one's superiors) and instead view it as a way to "negotiate asymmetrical relationships of power." They contend that both organizations and individuals might benefit from organizations actively encouraging collective action and upward communication on whistleblowing, keeping discussions internal and therefore resulting in positive correction that remains under organizational control.

I discussed earlier the dialectic tension resulting in the use of "legal" vs. "scholarly" definitions of whistleblowing. Another reason to examine whistleblowing as a unique form of organizational communication comes from law professor Anne Oline Haugen, who says: "In this story, the whistleblower blew the whistle about the use of public funds that he considered illegitimate. No one disputed the justness of his charges, but he still received no protection from recrimination. How could this happen?" Indeed. It's especially puzzling given Bjørn T. Bakken and Thorvald Hærem's observation that whistleblowing cases are "high on the public agenda in Norway." Essentially, Haugen goes on to explain, there are differences in Norway's legal statutes and practice. Norwegian law, for instance, determines that some immoral practices are not punishable within the scope of whistleblowing statutes. But regardless of context or culture, the law can be flawed.

Norwegian scholars Einar Øverenget and Åse Storhaug Hole, in their discussions of ethical blindness and the lack of reporting organizational wrongdoing, offer another intriguing possibility for future research. What can we investigate further to improve risk assessment for ethical blindness in the organizational cultures we study? These authors identify several likely subjects: fear of retaliation, beliefs of inaction, difficulty in assessing the wrongdoing, and lacking trusted confidants.

But the case of NT reveals other factors that might influence non-reportage, such as the prestige and value structures of the organization—factors building a strong sense of organizational identification and pride. Joseph McGlynn reminds us in his chapter on whistleblowing and risk that from the perspective of prospect theory, people "place a greater emphasis on potential losses than they do gains." Thus, where they occupy a comfortable place in a successful organization, people are more apt to be risk-averse. And any organization that enjoys a positive reputation, as Audra Diers-Larson points out, suffers from the "vulnerability of complacency." The stronger and more accomplished the organization, then, the greater the risk might be of failure to address unethical actions unless the kind of "mindful management" discussed by Bakken and Hærem is in place. If these principles are followed, whistleblowers

are not needed to amplify weaker signals of wrongdoing to management, which of course is what PJS eventually decided he had to do. As William Rothel Smith III, Jeffrey W. Treem, and Joshua B. Barbour remind us in their chapter on reconstituting organizations, whistleblowing is a signal of the “need to reconstitute the organization . . . and . . . marshal constitutive resources to do so,” as PJS experienced in the NT case.

Contributors Åse Storhaug Hole and Therese E. Sverdrup offer another valuable perspective from the field of organizational behavior regarding decision-making, sensemaking, and whether or not dialectic tensions are addressed and resolved. Their discussion of psychological contracts resonates with PJS’s discussion of the many pressures weighing on him at NT. He certainly had long-standing relational contracts based on trust and loyalty (reinforced by considerable organizational messaging that loyalty was a priority), as well as ideological contracts based on the stated values of the organization. In fact, it was only when these ideological contracts were so repeatedly and egregiously violated that he could break the relational contract keeping him from whistleblowing.

If whistleblowers cannot be guaranteed legal protection, and if individuals struggle with organizational identification, perceived loss vs. gain, and their own unwritten psychological contracts, does this mean that whistleblowing will most likely occur only when it raises the lowest risks for all and can be managed internally within organizations? Consider the point made by Bruno and Conrad that not only PJS’s story, but also his *status*, allowed him to engage in whistleblowing. (He was, we recall, an insider in upper management, tasked with looking after his company’s image and strategy, and someone who maintained secrecy and anonymity for nearly three years.) This view is echoed in writer Amira de la Garza’s observation that PJS was able to “elegantly navigate events due largely in part to the power that accompanied his experience and position, as well as the power of having governmental agencies collaborating to investigate.” So, do we infer from this narrative and these discussions that whistleblowing is most likely to be carried out by those who are already well connected and/or protected?

Several of the scholars invited to this colloquy addressed the issue of *voice* and how it’s expressed or suppressed in the meaning-making that accompanies the act of whistleblowing. In terms of its implications for organizational research, Diers-Lawson makes a poignant point in her chapter on the “loneliest stakeholder.” She notes a lack of attention to “narrative about transgressions in organizations—the emotional journey that employees take through the crisis, no matter whether they are whistleblowers or trying to make sense of the events as they unfold.” Contributors Storhaug Hole and Sverdrup agree, noting, “We think it no less important to focus on non-reporting behavior because most employees stand by in silence.” This might well be worth consideration in future research on both organizations generally and crisis communication specifically.

Additionally, where does the sensemaking of stakeholders fit into the dynamic of risk, decision-making, and dialectic tensions involved in whistleblowing? After all, the perceived opinion of the board of directors came into play in the NT case when PJS was told that his voice would carry more weight than that of someone less highly ranked in the company. Yet, he recalls, when he met with the chair and vice chair of the board in Oslo, “case after case was dismissed with the explanation that it was impossible to prove, that they lacked written evidence, that, yes, it was serious and warranted a ‘warning’ and change of practice, but that no further action was required.” Although this was not the final decision by the board, it was certainly a stunning first reaction to PJS’s attempt to share his concerns.

The significance of this action, contributor Brian K. Richardson explains, is that whistleblowers rarely win their case if stakeholders don’t, or won’t, get involved in the issue. And, applying attribution theory, they are generally apt to have “more negative perceptions about whistleblowers who were engaged in the wrongdoing they are now reporting.” Yet, at the other end of the spectrum, the “saint whistleblower will face greater retaliation . . . in an attempt to reduce their credibility and legitimacy.” Diers-Lawson affirms that in the NT situation, “blame attribution [was] less of a question of the facts of a situation and more of a question of perception and competing interests.” This takes us back to our earlier discussion of the “god”/“devil” dialectic. Richardson poses the question of whether stakeholders would consider PJS to have been a hero or a prince of darkness.

This discussion fully acknowledges the difficulties inherent in changing any organization’s culture, particularly when its potential losses may exceed any gains. Nord University Professor June Borge Doornich reminds us of companies such as Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco that were forced to implement change after their white-collar scandals made the news but wonders whether such forced change as a result of publicized crises is actually effective in the long term. She concedes that the judicial frameworks in certain countries “force companies to implement a management control system that both eases the threshold for blowing the whistle and protects the whistleblower afterwards.” But as we have already discussed, a legal paradigm isn’t always the most effective one for understanding and managing whistleblowing.

At the start of this epilogue, you’ll recall my coining the phrase “paracorporate communication,” with the prefix “para” denoting “beside, alongside of, beyond, aside from” (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019). I meant “paracorporate” to reference the broader, multidisciplinary field of study that surrounds and supplements our studies of corporate communication. In this very volume, perspectives ranging from organizational to interpersonal to rhetorical theory offer varied perceptual lenses trained on a single, significant, value-laden act, one that calls out corporate

wrongdoing. To help navigate the difficult cultural, social, and organizational changes such an act carries with it, we might well have to draw on many different tools as scholars.

Ultimately, the narrative offered by PJS in the NT case—indeed, this entire volume—challenges us to examine our own values as scholars and practitioners. As we pursue these lines of paracorporate research, do we believe the need for self-identity, the need to tell a story until it is heard, and the innate drive for sensemaking will be enough for aggrieved individuals to overcome the pressures of organizational culture, identification, and assimilation and find the courage to report wrongdoing? Can we take our skills at risk assessment and employ them to make organizations stronger and safer for (and perhaps through) whistleblowing? Do we believe organizations can evolve cultures actually welcoming the whistleblowing act as a means of rewriting the organization's story on the way to fulfilling its own manifest destiny?

As in the act of whistleblowing itself, our future goals as scholars and practitioners might well be to come together into the kind of community of practice represented in this collection, studying the “communicative constitution of organizations” suggested by Rothel Smith III, Treem, and Barbour, and using our shared wisdom and insights to draw belief and action together.

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