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# Whistleblowers in film: Studying changing representations of whistleblowers in popular cinema

## ABSTRACT

*A pressing question for organizational theory and change, and for whistleblowing policy and practice in particular, is how an individual comes to think independently of the social norms of their organization. How do they arrive at a position from where they feel compelled to act contrary to those norms, while surrounded by colleagues who continue to comply? This paper turns to popular cinema to trace historically the culturally-shared constructs about the ethical value of whistleblowing, how whistleblowers enact their roles and what the likely outcomes might be.*

*Een dringende vraag voor organisatietheorie en organisatieverandering in het algemeen, en klokkenluidersbeleid in het bijzonder, is hoe een individu ertoe komt om zich onafhankelijk te kunnen denken ten aanzien van de sociale normen van hun organisatie. Hoe komen ze in een positie waarin ze zich genoodzaakt voelen om tegen die normen in te handelen, terwijl hun collega's ze blijven gehoorzamen? Dit artikel traceert welke de culturele constructies en thema's die, historisch, de ethische waarde van klokkenluiden weergeven, hoe klokkenluiders hun rol vervullen en wat de gevolgen daarvan kunnen zijn.*

**Keywords:** cinema – institution – narrative – whistleblowing

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whistleblowers are, by definition, insiders within a given institutional culture who consciously choose to place themselves outside prevailing norms in the service of challenging wrongdoing. By operating at the limits of the social in this way, they put themselves at risk of becoming abject Subjects, excluded in order to preserve the dominant social order.

A pressing question for organizational theory and change, and for whistleblowing policy and practice in particular, is how an individual comes to think independently of the social norms of their organization. How do they arrive at a position of 'choiceless choice', from where they feel compelled to act contrary to those norms, while surrounded by colleagues who continue to comply?

In this paper, I outline the theory underlying my interest in popular cinema depictions of whistleblowers, focusing on the relationship between popular cinema and dominant ideol-

ogy. I report findings emerging from a comparative historical analysis of films featuring whistleblowers, which treat the films as situated narratives – to show how film constructs whistleblowers-for-our-times.

### 1.1. Interpellation, the socially constructed Subject, and impossible speech

For Althusser (1971) individuals are 'always-already' helplessly fixed from birth, as socially constructed and therefore recognisable Subjects. This fixing of the Subject within a bounded culture is achieved by the machinery of the ideological state apparatuses of education, religion, the family and culture. All of which hail Subjects, interpellating them to function within formal and informal laws, leading them to believe that what is happening is natural, inevitable and cannot be challenged. Ideology mediates between the power of the State and the individual and transforms the biological individual into a Subject. This process of

interpellation takes place in the unconscious of the Subject, via structures of thinking imposed by language, defining what is possible, including within the realm of ethical action, within a given system of meanings. What is left out is relegated to the dustbin of the 'impossible'.

Judith Butler (1997) addresses the question of how much choice an individual has about the nature of the ideology they take on. She attributes more agency to interpellated subjects than Althusser. Because the static nature of Althusser's 'always-already' fixes subjects helplessly as products of dominant ideology he cannot explain how an individual may stand outside the dominant discourse, in order to speak truth to power. Butler argues that two levels of censorship operate to silence challenges to dominant ideology. Some speech is heard but overtly condemned as unacceptable and subjected to conventional processes of censorship. Some speech is defined more radically as impossible – the “rambling of the asocial” – and therefore some Subjects are rendered non-existent, until they insist, as whistleblowers do, on a hearing for their excitable and impossible speech (Butler, 1997; Kenny, 2018). This awakening is enabled, according to her analysis, by a working through of the unconscious guilt, triggered by the simultaneous creation and submission of the Subject within language. For Butler (1997), “I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially.”

She considers that becoming is an endless process and discusses the case of Subjects who make themselves vulnerable, for example street protestors, thereby appropriating an object identity as an act of resistance in order to claim the possibility of challenging the dominant order (Bargu, 2017; Butler, 2014; Varman & Al-Amoudi, 2016).

Whistleblowers are not immune to this process of interpellation – indeed evidence suggests that they are commonly fully committed, successful members of the organization they work in before they notice wrongdoing (Mansbach, 2011). However, by the transgressive act of blowing the whistle, they take on an object identity where their speech is rendered impossible and they become unrecognizable within the dominant discourse (Kenny, 2018). But still, their words have the ironic capacity to re-appropriate power through calling attention to their vulnerability and the public nature of their testimony seems to be important in restoring their damaged sense of self.

## 1.2. Truth-telling as discourse

Foucault argued that knowledge systems and their social context together construct discourse and practice. Further, the construction of knowledge and power are inextricably linked

but subject to change. Studying the historical development or 'genealogy' of a discourse over time illuminates how a dominant ideology has been created and maintained.

Foucault's late work discussed the conditions which historically made it possible for an individual to speak truth to power. His analysis of *parrhesia* (translatable as 'Fearless Speech', provides an account of truth-tellers as situated Subjects engaging in situated actions. He defined *parrhesia* as “a verbal activity in which the speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (Foucault & Pearson, 2001: 19-20).

Foucault offers five criteria which construct the identity of a *parrhesiastes*:

1. What they say must be **critical**, either of prevailing opinion and practice, or the politically powerful.
2. They show courage in speaking truth, placing themselves in **danger** by speaking out to a more powerful other.
3. Their belief in the truth expressed must be **credible**.
4. They feel a **duty** to speak out, yet have free choice.
5. They speak **frankly** and plainly, without rhetoric.

All five criteria are still relevant for contemporary whistleblowing acts as some recent examples show. By definition, whistleblowing **critiques** prevailing norms, highlighting the wrongdoing in accepted practice which has been maintained by powerful interests: the exposure of failures of care by the Mid Staffordshire NHS Trust in England showed how a target-driven culture, widely prevailing in cost-conscious NHS governance replaced an ethic of quality patient care; similarly, the Cambridge Analytica scandal exposed the complaisance of digital social media giants towards access to and exploitation of personal data. Despite protective legislation, whistleblowing is still a courageous and **dangerous** act, widely seen as career suicide and destructive of personal well-being (Vick, 2019). The **credibility** of the whistleblower's testimony continues to be rooted in evidence of their personal integrity, as demonstrated by efforts to discredit disclosures through character assassination of whistleblowers, for instance in the Harvey Weinstein scandal and during the investigation of Brett Kavanaugh during his election to the US Supreme Court. That whistleblowing must be a freely assumed **duty** is less clear cut now in the context of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and legislated duty of candour in public service in the UK. However, the passionate wording of the testimony of many whistleblowers, such as Shahmir Sanni (Caddwalladr, 2018), who speak out against their best interests, with no financial incentive or legal obligation suggests how strongly this criteria and that of **frankness** still prevail.

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Foucault's historical analysis indicates that *parrhesia* is not an un-nuanced good: education was necessary to ensure that fearless speech was not mindless chatter which could have no value for the purposes of the State. The *parrhesiastes* must have a mastery of the rules and principles of free speech in order to use them appropriately. He also identified a paradoxical relationship between truth-telling and democracy – each relies on, while simultaneously undermining, the other (Foucault & Pearson, 2001; Luxon, 2004).

There is some uncertainty about whether whistleblowing does serve the best interests of the commonality. Whistleblowing has driven some positive changes such as legislation to protect whistleblowers or establish it as a legal act. Such protective changes ensure that fewer courageous individuals who are prepared to speak out to identify wrongdoing in the hope of initiating change will be deterred by fear of the consequences of their actions. They also raise the likelihood that the response to whistleblowing will focus on addressing the identified wrong rather than pursuing the whistleblower. Set against these considerations, whistleblowing can be seen as undermining democracy since it forces the will of a single individual onto a system (Contu, 2014). From the inside perspective of the organization whistleblowing can be detrimental, as trust between worker and organization may be broken, reputations damaged or security undermined (Mansbach, 2011).

However, when whistleblowing is prescribed, either as a role within an organization for a nominated individual, such as financial services compliance officers or freedom to speak up guardians in the British NHS, or mandated as an individual duty, as with the duty of candour in the NHS, there is a risk that speaking out becomes tamed, and officials may struggle with the ambiguity of their role as insider company employees. At its worst, the process can be perverted, as with the Stasi in the DDR, into wholesale informing, supporting the interests of an authoritarian regime. Recent critical reviews of the impact of duty of candour in the NHS show that it has not achieved the cultural change intended, but rather has created defensive anxiety about compensation litigation and left staff feeling “you get to know the truth but you can't do anything with it” (Vick, 2019).

In summary, whistleblowing is necessarily unsettling and disobedience is essential to its function in upholding democracy (Fromm, 1981). Prescription can undermine its critical function and disinterested capacity to hold up a mirror to the wrongdoing of the powerful and the contingent nature of contemporary norms (Contu, 2014).

## 2. THE INDIVIDUAL IN AN INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The systems-psychodynamic understanding of organizational functioning (Armstrong & Rustin, 2015; Douglas, 1986) links micro-level individual phenomenological description of institutional experience to more generalizable concepts of macro-level social structure and function. Instances of individual behavior are construed as the outcome of a complex mix of personal history and internalized but collective perceptions, rules and values. Socially constructed, but unconscious defences help workers to manage the anxiety evoked by their identified task and are institutionalized in routine practices – “the way we do things around here”. Institutions adopt “thought styles” – which generate rules and justifications and determine the conscious and unconscious sense of agency as precursors to behavior (Douglas, 1986). Collective ideas about right and wrong are part of social defences. In pathological organizations, where corrupt practices have become the norm, these defences form a system of perverse containment. A gang mentality builds up, which enforces collusion and denial about wrongdoing among its members (Long, 2008; Stein, 2000a, 2000b).

Informants' internalized representations of their organizational system – their organization-in-the-mind will influence how they choose to respond to the defensive manoeuvres within the organization (Armstrong, 2004). Individuals' valency to respond is determined by their personal histories (Tucker, 2015) but is part of a dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between actor and social context (Hoggett, 2014).

### 2.1. Narrative as a tool for understanding rather than explanation

Biographical accounts, whether fact or fiction provide a narrative – a thick description – (Geertz, 1973) within which meaning, causal connections and typicality can be displayed and from which constructed truths of general significance can be derived (Bruner, 2004; Rustin, 2000). Such thick descriptions can make visible the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between the individual actor and their social context. This is a reflexive process – narrative and experience influence each other: a given culture has a stock of possible narratives about how life can be lived, influenced by cultural norms and linguistic processes, which in turn structure events and the perceptual experience of those events.

The main goal of narrative thought, in contrast to logical reasoning, is the construction of a coherent description of experi-

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ence to aid sense-making rather than explanation. Narratives, whether myth, stories, news reports or biography, provide a model OF and FOR meaning and value in social life and tend to be about the 'vicissitudes of human intention' (Bruner, 2004). Conventionally, in dramatic narrative a mismatch between structural features such as agent, action or setting, creates trouble when cultural legitimacy is breached. A new legitimate order might emerge out of a static situation, challenged thus by troubling events (Burke, 1966; Turner, 1982). The unfolding drama of a whistleblowing act is precisely such a moment of trouble in which stasis is disrupted and a new order is made possible.

Narrative enactment pervades daily life. (Barthes, 1972/2012) reflected on how any mundane object, an advert for soap powder, the design of a car chassis, an actor's hairstyle, could be mythologized. He was no fan of myth-making, the appropriation of such objects to signify a politicized meaning. In his view, myths promote the sense that what is seen is 'what-goes-without-saying'. Phenomena are compellingly portrayed as natural and universal, thereby denying historical contingency, suffocating dissent and legitimizing the existing order.

News stories rarely promote radical dissent. They construct narratives about events which draw on a stock of culturally-shared myths, in order to engage their audience in an essentially conservative process (Handley & Rutigliano, 2012; Lule, 2001). When newspapers report whistleblowing they use a similar stock of canonical myths (DiSalvo & Negro, 2016; Lezard, 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). Similarly workers in organizations create shared narratives, manifest in stories, gossip, jokes, graffiti, which run counter to the official or managed story of the organization (Gabriel, 1991).

Fictional representations promote thinking and learning about the relationship between social processes and individual experience. By provoking emotional identification with protagonists as well as recognizing their typicality, readers and viewers learn how to behave (Rustin, 2000; Wright, 1975).

## 2.2. Whistleblowing and biographical narrative

Some decades of positivist research, using quantitative methods, into the determinants of whistleblowing within and between contexts has gained useful but essentially piecemeal insights. Studies of whistleblowing action, rather than intent, have tended to show small and inconsistent effects (Mes-

mer-Magnus & Chockalingam, 2005; Miceli *et al.*, 2008). The search for objective and generalizable causal explanations encourages research which treats whistleblowing as a singular event and investigates an individual rational actor's mechanical cognitive and/or behavioural response to specific stimuli.

Becoming a whistleblower is more usefully seen as a complex, relational process occurring within a cultural system. Workers commonly start from a position of voluntary subordination and commitment to their workplace (Mansbach, 2011). As individuals make sense of wrongdoing in their workplace, personal and social meanings, constructed within the bounds of that system, form the basis for action in an unfolding narrative. Eventually a moment of choice, experienced by many as choiceless initiates a journey of no return culminating in blowing the whistle.

Whistleblowing has not provoked a uniform response historically and across cultures (Di Salvo & Negro, 2016; Vandekerckhove *et al.*, 2014). The moral value of some acts are bitterly contested e.g. (Sauter & Kendall, 2011) the whistleblower is either condemned as a traitor and troublemaker or lauded as a hero and maybe martyr. Culturally-shared constructs about the role of whistleblower provide participants, both whistleblowers and spectators, with information about the ethical value of what they observe, how to enact their roles and likely outcomes. Narratives

contained in myths, stories and dramas inform consumers, including potential whistleblowers, about the moral valency of whistleblowing and the fate of those who blow the whistle or turn a blind eye. Notable examples, the story of Antigone (Contu, 2014), have been frequently reworked for contemporary audiences (e.g. Ibsen 1960, Miller, 1966, 1978; Shamsie, 2017).

## 2.3. Film and dominant discourse

Popular cinema sells compellingly packaged stories with mythological leanings to offer its audience a way to make sense of the world. Representations in film simultaneously reflect shared culture and induct audiences into systems of rules and values, some of which may be novel or contested. In film, routinely '*the glamorous impersonates the ordinary*,' (Mulvey, 2009: 18). Through a complex process of recognizing similarity and difference audiences are encouraged to identify with the main characters and consequently unconsciously internalize new ego-ideals.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1969/2002) saw cinema as an industrialized process, which manufactures culture. They, like

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Barthes, took a negative view of mythologizing. They argued that film titillated audiences, and through creating unsatisfied longings, pacified and stultified them, thereby binding them more firmly into conformity to dominant ideology. Counter to this Mulvey, questioning how a Subject can resist patriarchal power relations which are encoded at an unconscious level in language, argues that Horkheimer and Adorno have overlooked the diversity and conflict that exist within the culture industry. She sees potential for autonomy in conscious life and the willed occupation of a vulnerable identity. Hall (1973) argues for the possibility of opposition to dominant discourse via negotiated readings of images and the deliberate ironic appropriation of othered identities.

## 2.4. Whistleblowers in popular cinema

Popular cinema has long been fascinated by the figure of the whistleblower. There are numerous lists of ‘the X best films about whistleblowers’.<sup>1</sup> Films about whistleblowing provide an invaluable archive of shifting constructions of the act and its perpetrators across historical time and context.

Through a close analysis of popular films about whistleblowers I trace the genealogy of the discourse of fearless speech, examining how representations of the process of speaking truth to power has been interwoven with social and political context. The films interpellate a mass audience, persuading them that the ethical drama they are watching, has that ideologically driven, always-already, goes-without-saying quality.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

I selected for analysis three English language films, spanning the decades between 1939 (“*Mr Smith goes to Washington*”<sup>2</sup>) and 2016 (“*Snowden*”<sup>3</sup>). Using techniques of situational analysis (Clarke *et al.*, 2018), I deconstructed the films’ narratives and then examined the relationship between historical contextual factors and the portrayal of the whistleblowing act, to draw out discursive concepts which construct the Subject of the whistleblower. Situational analysis shares with Foucault a focus on how situated Subjects are constituted out of contingently-related, culturally-imposed elements or practices, which describe conditions of possibility.

I first coded each film, scene by scene, identifying increasingly abstracted categories of action and relationship, then mapped all the human and non-human elements in the narrative, exploring the relationships between them, repeatedly connecting elements to a single key element or concept. I derived positional maps of discursive positions along axes of concern and controversy, to illustrate dominant and marginalized or impossible positions (Clarke *et al.*, 2018).

## 4. ANALYSES OF SAMPLE FILMS

### 4.1. Mr Smith goes to Washington (1939)

This is generally cited as the first whistleblower film and described by later whistleblowers as seminal (Murtagh & Wigand, 2007). There was a *Simpsons* remake in 1991<sup>4</sup> and James Comey wondered, when he became Deputy Attorney General in 2003, whether he might turn into Mr Smith (Comey, 2018).

#### 4.1.1. Historical context

When the film was released the US was hesitating about entering the European war, torn between support for democratic ideals and the self-interest and isolationism of the crypto-fascist America First movement. The film repeatedly references contemporary dark and dangerous times.

#### 4.1.2. The plot

The eponymous Jefferson Smith, an innocent idealist, is brought to Washington to be a silent stooge in the Senate for corrupt capitalists, led by Jim Taylor, who have politicians and the Press in their pockets. Smith doesn’t understand the rules of this perverse system. He idolizes the notion that the Senate’s task is “Government of, for and by the people”. He is publicly ridiculed after being tricked by newsmen into using animal noises instead of words, so he is denied a voice, inside and outside the Senate. Once he realizes that he cannot challenge the corruption within the system as a lone outsider, he decides to fight it using the rules of the system itself. He conducts a fearless filibuster – literally saying everything – using all the great speeches of the American constitution.

In parallel with this central drama the story of a corrupted bystander unfolds: Jo Paine once worked alongside Jefferson Smith’s father, championing lost causes. When Jefferson Smith’s father was murdered for his truth-telling, Jo Paine be-

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031679/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3774114/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0701183/>

came an ambitious politician corrupted by the capitalist. He struggles with poisoning ambivalence about his position, but repeatedly colludes with the conspiracy to silence Jefferson Smith. Eventually he is overwhelmed with the horror of his position and after a failed attempt to shoot himself, he rushes into the Senate to denounce, in an outburst of truth-telling, the corrupt system and himself for his collusion with it.

At the end of Smith's filibuster, submerged in a deluge of phony petitions from citizens, Smith invokes the heroism of lost causes, archetypal 'impossible speech', to justify his persistence in the face of apparently democratic opposition, until he collapses: however, this Christ-like self-sacrifice leads to victory – the Senate votes through his proposal.

#### 4.1.3. Analysis

The narrative's account of how truth was voiced and power made to hear it can be mapped along dimensions which reflect key discursive positions: Integrity (honest/corrupt) and Knowhow (innocent outsider/knowledgeable insider) (see Figure 1). These are not simple binary oppositions – individual characters in the narrative and collective entities such as the crowd and the press occupy nuanced positions along these dimensions.

Two opposed worlds are represented in the film: innocent traditional small-town America and knowing, corrupt political Washington. The small-town world, a pre-lapsarian idyll, is populated by innocent adults and children, who live wholesome, heroic and self-less lives. Washington by contrast, is noisy and fast – social life takes place in bars and opulent drawing rooms, inhabited by world-weary cynics. Capitol Hill is a disputed space: on the one hand, the floor of the Senate is thronged by conniving political operators, while its classical monuments to an enduring tradition are monumental, empty spaces. Several discursive elements are mapped onto the distinction between these two worlds: community, innocence, naivete, health, space and lost causes, versus self-interest, pragmatism, corruption, know-how, crowding and adult sexuality.

Smith undertakes a couple of journeys representing periods of developmental transition. He starts from a position of innocent outsider, where he can be exploited and silenced (position A in Figure 1). He is likened to Don Quixote. The speedy train journey between his hometown and Washington begins his induction into a deceitful world. His second slower journey he takes alone, by bus, to connect with fundamental American values, enshrined in the monuments of Capitol Hill. Both time and

space are used symbolically to convey complex relationships between systems of values.

The contrasted locations symbolically mediate the question of what is possible speech. The lack of voice is associated with Smith's home-town: he is first seen conducting a band and is inarticulate in public. In Washington people are always talking, although who can say what and when is generally manipulated by political or financial interests rather than used in the service of truth. Even Smith's filibuster used words in a performative speech act, employing them not for their meaning but as concrete objects.

Possible speech, in Washington's political system, is determined by rules. Participants have to learn the rules to have a voice. Smith is silenced by his failure to understand the rules. Paradoxically, he can only keep his place in the Senate if he stays silent or mouths the words scripted for him by the corrupt capitalist. His effort to promote the value of disinterested community well-being is, in this context, impossible speech, and he is censored, becomes a non-Subject (Butler, 1997). However, Saunders his female assistant with whom he has now established a properly adult, sexual attachment, shows him how to use the rules knowingly. Once he understands the rules, he claims a voice of a sort and the capacity to act honestly (position B in Figure 1). His opponents are silenced by the weight of American values, equated in the film, discursively as equivalent to truth. Finding a voice, and becoming a knowledgeable insider are thus intimately connected. As he finds his voice Mr. Smith becomes a true *parrhesiastes*, although he is destroyed by the effort. However, the corrupt system cannot be defeated by a lone outsider alone, but by a convergence of Paine, a fallen angel and a holy innocent.

#### 4.1.4. Contemporary reactions to the film

Ironically, both US censors and fascist European states attempted to ban the film for opposing reasons: the US censor expressed concern about the negative portrayal of the political process, requesting the film was edited to show the Senate in a more flattering light; senators demanded its suppression and the press were angry that they were portrayed as rowdy and amoral. In fascist Europe, it was initially banned, then dubbed to reflect support for totalitarian principles. However, after the US entered the War in 1940, it became a huge box-office success in America.

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## 4.2. Rumpole of the Bailey and the Official Secrets (1987)<sup>5</sup>

This is an episode of a British TV comic drama series. Rumpole is a world-weary and cynical barrister, left-leaning and disrespectful of conventions of legal procedure but standing for the “*liberty to speak insolent truth to power*” (Lezard, 2013).

### 4.2.1. Historical context

A Tory landslide in 1983 ushered in the Thatcherite era of free-market economics and authoritarian socially conservative policies. Establishment interests were protected by the violent crushing of union power during the miners’ strike and Wapping printers’ dispute, subversion of political protests such as the Greenham Common and Molesworth peace camps, the imprisonment of whistleblower Sarah Tisdall, and widening social inequalities.

### 4.2.2. The plot

A main story and subplots explore the dynamics of speaking truth to power. In the main storyline Rumpole defends Rosemary Tuttle, an eccentric clerk in the Ministry of Defence, charged with breaching the Official Secrets Act. She allegedly leaked information to a gossip columnist about the Ministry’s extravagant spend on tea & biscuits. Rumpole intends to defend her whistleblowing by highlighting the silliness of the charge while casting her as a latter-day Joan of Arc, a medieval *parrhesiastes*. Establishment figures are shown manoeuvring in committee and dining club, attempting to stifle exposure of the truth. Codes of conduct are quietly reinforced by powerful figures ‘*having a word*’. Ms Tuttle seems to be supported by a senior civil servant ‘Batty’ Bowling, a life-long eccentric outsider who has tried to frame her to disguise his much more significant leak, about UK nuclear capability. Bowling kills himself when he realises his actions will be exposed by Rumpole. In keeping with contemporary historical events, the establishment wins, the status quo is maintained and the whistleblower silenced.

In a subplot, a fellow lawyer asks Rumpole to cover for him in his pursuit of a female trainee barrister, Liz Probert, who he invited to the opera. The trainee blows the whistle, phoning his wife to tell her directly what has happened. Rumpole is warned

to exclude, ie. silence, Liz Probert from Rosemary Tuttle’s trial because she is exposed as the daughter of a famous socialist ‘Red Ron’. At home we witness Rumpole keeping secrets from his intimidating wife, with absurdly disastrous consequences.

### 4.2.3. Analysis

At first truth-telling is portrayed as something laughable, eccentric and naïve, at the level of gossip. Truth-tellers are given abject identities – Bowling is ‘batty’; Rosemary Tuttle is derided as an eccentric spinster; Liz Probert can’t be trusted as the daughter of a socialist subversive. They are outsiders, denied a voice by the power-holding, clubbable and collusive establishment.

Two linked pairs of discursive positions around truth-telling are discernable in this narrative: the first (see Figure 2) considers how institutional loyalty shapes the representation of truth; the second pairing considers how gaining a voice interacts with speaking out (see Figure 3).

Loyalty to class and institutional interests interacts with frankness and truth-telling. The Official Secrets Act protects the executive government from democratic demands of transparency and accountability. Loyalty to the organization – the Crown, your institution, your class – is expected to take precedence over truth-telling and is supported by the keeping of secrets. This message is reinforced in the film by images of the threatening and intrusive power of the organization over the individual. However, the truth can be told from a variety of positions, across a range of attitudes to the status quo. Here committed dissenters speak out about truths which are independent of institutional loyalties.

Voice is conferred or stifled, depending on whether a subject conforms to what is expected. Norms are implicitly reinforced – “*having a word*” – so those who have a voice speak for the power-holding elite and suppress the truth, while lone individuals have a precarious entitlement to voice – what they say is censored, not fully recognised as possible speech (see Figure 3). The subplots demonstrate that while keeping secrets is poisonous and disruptive, telling the truth is personally risky and requires individual courage. In this narrative no-one speaks the truth frankly. In such a system, speaking truth which is heard is impossible and being denied a voice, is subverted into cynically delivered gossip or innuendo.

**“In a clear reference to Orwell’s novel 1984, O’Brian, his features monstrously enlarged via skype, shows Snowden that his every move is monitored including his private life with his girlfriend. This final effort at interpellation was the tipping point for Snowden.”**

5 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0691377/>

However, the question of the moral value of truth-telling is examined in the film, taking into account the consequences of exposing the truth. The subplot offers a pragmatic appraisal of truth-telling: total honesty can be unproductively disruptive. Rumpole considers casting Rosemary Tuttle as Joan of Arc, a lone powerless individual, futilely insisting on telling the truth against her own best interests, confronting an omnipotent organization. Bowling's concern for the public good was tainted by motives of personal vanity. Bowling fails as a *parrhesiastes* because his relationship to truth lacked credibility and his speech was less than frank or plain. Rumpole acknowledges finally that keeping secrets is dangerous but the purpose and value of truth-telling needs to be carefully weighed. In the end Rumpole argues for moral pragmatism (see Figure 2 & 3). The value of fearless speech is constructed as context-dependent.

In this narrative, the consequence of the dramatic crisis merely reinforced the existing order, in keeping with contemporary historical events which saw the machinery of the State become increasingly dominant. Although it is a hostile portrait of the methods by which the ruling elite maintains its power, whistleblowing is also portrayed negatively, as ineffective and irresponsible if a solitary and defeated individual endangers public stability without a valid purpose. This echoes Foucault's argument that there is a paradoxical relationship between democracy and truth-telling (Foucault & Pearson, 2001; Luxon, 2004).

### 4.3. Snowden (2016)

This is the dramatized story of Snowden, the US intelligence analyst who exposed US security agencies' mass surveillance activities. The film focusses attention on peculiarly contemporary systemic issues – moral and legal accountability in a digital, globalised and networked world.

#### 4.3.1. Historical context

The years immediately preceding Snowden's whistleblowing were troubled by conflict and violence. As Obama's presidency drew to a close, in the US confidence in the integrity of the old political elite declined in the face of corruption scandals. Accusations of 'fake news' undermined confidence in the impartiality of the press. Mass shootings and episodes of police brutality towards black citizens fuelled awareness of the violence beneath the surface of American society. The sense of security was undermined in Europe and the US by numerous terrorist acts, and internationally by prolonged conflict in Syria, instability in the Middle East and Russian incursions on its southern neighbours.

#### 4.3.2. The plot

A series of flashbacks tell how Snowden became a whistleblower. Episodes of his personal journey are interleaved with images of the world-wide excitement and outrage which greeted the material he leaked in June 2013.

The film opens with Snowden positioned as a loyal and dutiful US soldier struggling heroically to belong to his training cohort. He is invalided out of the army because his training was literally crushing his bones. He is recruited by Corbin O'Brian, a senior CIA figure, intent on making use of his exceptional IT skills and is given a series of jobs around the world, working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or National Security Agency (NSA), ostensibly to support computer network security. Snowden is persuaded by O'Brian that this task is valid for a loyal 'soldier' working to defend his country. He acquires the nickname 'Snow White', the pun perhaps underlining his exceptional qualities as well as his naivete about the intentions of his CIA masters. He discovers that the CIA has the capability to conduct surveillance on anyone, anywhere, without their consent and that the information gathered can be used for wanton destruction. He begins to question the moral integrity of the task he has been given and is increasingly pre-occupied, once again crushed by his duties, by his potential responsibility for the well-being of millions of people. He resigns and, reminiscent of Jefferson Smith at his moment of crisis, regains a moral compass after he visits the Roosevelt monument on which is inscribed: *'a man's usefulness depends upon his living up to his ideals'*.

But, again O'Brian recruits him, appealing to his sense of duty as a loyal soldier, arguing that his work will be entirely in the interests of the security of the people of America, to whom security is more valuable than freedom of choice. He also dismisses the idea of accountability to the press and politicians. Again Snowden witnesses the capacity of the government to conduct universal, indiscriminate surveillance. He is appalled to see how complaisantly surveillance can be used for warfare: *'you track 'em, we wack 'em'* remarks a colleague. His unquestioning attachment to the system which O'Brian represents is finally broken. In a clear reference to Orwell's novel *1984* (1949) O'Brian, his features monstrously enlarged via skype, shows Snowden that his every move is monitored including his private life with his girlfriend. This final effort at interpellation was the tipping point for Snowden. He leaks incriminating files to Guardian journalists in Hong Kong, and then escapes to Moscow where he is given refuge.

The final scene is documentary footage of the real Snowden being interviewed in Moscow via a robot monitor. He is shown smiling for the first time since the opening scenes. He ruefully



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describes a sense of freedom gained from believing that he has done the right thing.

### 4.3.3. Analysis

The narrative explores Snowden's moral journey, undertaken at great physical and emotional expense. He takes up a series of subtly different discursive positions along the way and encounters shades of denial and compliance in others. These positions are distributed along axes of *conscious choice* and identification with the interests of the American state summarised as *belonging* (see Figure 4). He moves away from a highly localised position as 'Snow White', a naively committed and compliant insider (position 1) towards a universal awareness and individualised sense of duty where he is an isolated, stateless individual (position 8), capable of disobedience (Fromm, 1981). In front of the Roosevelt monument, he begins to connect with a sense of supposedly universal values, literally set in stone (position 5).

He becomes aware of how the purposes of State have been perverted by O'Brian, arguably the wicked stepmother to Snowden's 'Snow White'. O'Brian omnipotently advocates for a corrupt form of government: his ethical code is based entirely on pragmatism: trust is replaced by lie detectors; 'duty' by blind obedience and coercion; O'Brian's weapons are not guns or open warfare, but secrecy, spying, cameras, mass surveillance. The conflict between duty and a right to a private life is enacted between O'Brian and Snowden, reflecting the same untrusting relationship between the security services and the American people. In front of the Roosevelt monument Snowden is freed from the gang state of mind (Long, 2008; Stein, 2000a) gaining a sophisticated understanding of his moral obligations as an agent of free choice. Snowden's journey arguably recapitulates the historical development of the concept of *parrhesia* which Foucault traced from '*nomos*' (institutionally-determined law) to '*bios*' (law based in individual existential knowledge).

The narrative vividly portrays the shades of states of denial which create obedient bystanders: those who turn a blind eye (position 2) to step around the unthought known buried in their consciousness (Stein, 2000a, 2000b); those who acknowledge the wrongdoing but remain compliant in order to belong (position 6).

The representation constructs Snowden as a whistleblower-for-our-time, emphasising how both the nature of the wrongdoing he exposes (mass surveillance on a global scale) and the course of events leading up to and beyond his revelations, is situated in and shaped by a globalised and networked world. The imagery of the film highlights how Snowden's trajec-

tory is increasingly deracinated. The leaking of the data takes place high in the sky in Hong Kong and he then crosses the globe seeking a refuge, spending many days in the transitional no-man's land of an international airport.

The narrative emphases of the film, highlighting the moral ambiguities of Snowden's history, reflect shifting uncertainties in the contemporary discourse about whistleblowing. Here the whistleblower survives and has some impact on the system – for example, Obama is shown announcing amendments to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. But he is left as an isolated Subject, with a vulnerable, even impossible identity.

Nevertheless, it is striking how some discursive positions have not changed at all since Mr Smith went to Washington. Again we have a heroic, patriotic and naïve subject who becomes gradually aware of the deceit and corruption in the purposes of the State. He finds a moral compass in the mythologised signifiers of American monuments, used to represent discursively, universal and eternal values.

### 4.3.4. Contemporary reactions to the film

On release in 2016 the film met with very mixed critical responses: the Guardian: '*Hair-raisingly taut and intense*' (Bradshaw, 2016) against the Telegraph's '*Crude, ludicrously sexed-up portrait*' (Collin, 2016). It was criticised for avoiding discussion of the ambiguities of Snowden's actions: that US security and diplomacy and possibly democracy were damaged by his frank and fearless speech. It was a box-office failure, media commentators reflected that currently the American public has no liking for issue movies and incorrectly (Di Salvo & Negro, 2016) speculated they may not even know who Snowden was.

## 5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Broadly the films' narratives share a structure. We watch an archetypal mythical confrontation between good and evil, a heroic but lone and alienated individual challenges a contemporary evil to expose wrongdoing in an effort to bring about change. This same myth was repeatedly played out in classical Westerns (Wright, 1975) but in whistleblower films it is given an urban and industrialised context.

The films' narratives echo Foucault's definition of *parrhesia* in most respects. Whistleblowers' personal relationship to truth is established as credible within the story. The whistleblower, experiencing a duty to criticize corrupt power, undertakes a journey towards finding a voice. Truth-telling requires cour-

age and poses a risk to self. Indeed, it never ends well for the whistleblowers in these films (see line 7, Table 1) who are routinely destroyed or extruded in the process, an outcome which reflects the negative outcome for a high percentage of actual whistleblowers. As object Subjects, the whistleblowers parade

their vulnerability to public gaze, refusing to have their words defined as impossible and thus creating conditions of possibility to introduce a new social order. Also, their truth is spoken openly, frankly and plainly. Truth-telling will fail in its purpose, as it does in *Rumpole*, if manipulation or rhetoric is used.

**Table 1. Comparison of key conceptual categories between films**

Line	Conceptual Category	Mr Smith (1939)	Rumpole (1987)	Snowden (2016)
1	Political context	US hesitating on brink of entering WW2 in opposition to America First's position of self-interest	Thatcherism: neo-liberalism+ authoritarian state control; rising social inequalities	Globalised and networked world, where traditional allegiances are fractured
2	Nature of the wrongdoing	Selfish gain	Hegemonic control	Making power unaccountable
3	Characteristics of the 'gang'	Corrupt capitalists	Class cliques	Machinery of the State gone rogue
4	Innocence of the whistleblower	Innocence lost	No change	Innocence lost and re-gained
5	Insider/outsider status of the whistleblower	Outsider → Insider	Remains outsider	Insider → Outsider
6	Character of the Press	Rowdy and cynical bystanders	Amoral gossips	Heroic guardians of the truth, challenging hegemonic power
7	Outcome	Moral system endorsed through the sacrifice of the whistleblower	System of power held in the hands of the privileged rolls on; defeat of whistleblower	System forced into minor change; whistleblower finds personal salvation but at cost of social annihilation

But there are significant differences between the films, reflecting their historical context (summarised in line 1, Table 1). That context determines the nature of the wrongdoing portrayed (line 2, Table 1) and the interests of the collusive perpetrators (line 3, Table 1) who have ganged together, seeing themselves as omnipotent, to corrupt the primary task of the organization. The nature of the corrupt power which the whistleblower confronts evolves from self-interested capitalism, through establishment hegemony to intrusive and unaccountable state control of private lives.

The whistleblower's journey usually involves a loss of innocent, unquestioning allegiance to the system's rules (line 4, Table 1) and shift in their identification with their institution (line 5, Table 1). Although both Jefferson Smith and Snowden hold fast to universal, even if specifically American, principles, Smith learns to use the rules to gain a voice, while Snowden, in keeping with our current cultural context, finds his voice through the practice of autonomous freedom (Milchman & Rosenberg, 2009).

Interestingly, the image of the press's role has also evolved (line 6, Table 1), arguably in step with the loss of faith in tra-

ditional institutionalized means of holding power to account. While in *Mr Smith* and *Rumpole*, the Press is portrayed as collusive and amoral, in *Snowden* they have become heroic guardians of truth.

Thus the narratives dramatically enact pressing concerns about the social contract in the era in which the films were made.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The narratives in these and several other big box-office whistleblower films, for example *Serpico* (1973); *Silkwood* (1983); *The Constant Gardener* (2005), simultaneously titillated, educated and warned off their audiences from following the whistleblower's example. They show that the cost to the whistleblower is always personal and social annihilation. The mythological quality of the narrative structure perhaps accounts for the continuing popularity of whistleblower movies. However, unlike in Westerns, the hero is invariably destroyed and there is no re-assuring image of permanent change for the better – the enduringly powerful system survives virtually unchanged.

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These whistleblowers generally begin as good, compliant, idealistic members of their organisations (Mansbach, 2011). The glamorous impersonation of the ordinary, their very typicality encourages audiences' cathartic identification with the hero (Mulvey, 2009; Rustin, 2000) and may also work to deter actual emulation. In this way, as Horkheimer and Adorno (1969/2002) contended, popular cinema of this kind pacifies and reinforces compliance with dominant power.

The portrayal of the whistleblowing act in these films changes in keeping with the historical context. Institutional and wider cultural norms generally define what is required of a recognizable Subject and what critical speech is possible (Butler, 1997; Hoggett, 2014). Although the actions of all the central characters show that subjection to hegemonic power is negotiable (Hall, 1973), the contrast between the paths followed by Jefferson Smith and Snowden evidences the genealogy of *parrhesia*. Jefferson Smith gains a voice by learning how to use institutional rules – what Foucault would call subjectivation to *logos*. Snowden by contrast gains his voice through the conscious practice of individualized freedom, problematizing rather than accommodating to the norms of his contemporary world. This process of *bios* is a good match for a globalized and networked world where autonomous, disconnected individualism is the dominant mode of being. 'Batty' Bowling represents an interesting transitional case: his cynical and narcissistic motives were not those of a true *parrhesiastes*, but also the historical context of the drama was bitter and violent clashes between the diehard conservatism of the establishment and the right to radical self-determination.

Finally, the relationship between what Fromm (1981) has termed disobedience and support for freedom and democracy inherent in the whistleblowing act is enacted in each drama. The mythic quality of this struggle points to how essential the untamed nature of whistleblowing is in the popular imagination. Efforts to prescribe whistleblowing, bringing it in from the cold as it were, may therefore, not only undermine its value as an ethical imperative (Contu, 2014; Mansbach, 2011) but compromise its power as a heroic archetype which can be relevantly recast in any institutional context.

### BIOGRAPHY

**Brigid MacCarthy** is an organisational consultant and executive coach with experience of consulting to teams within health and social care services and coaching individuals from a range of corporate and public service settings. She originally trained as a Clinical Psychologist and has managed and researched mental health services within the NHS and continues to work

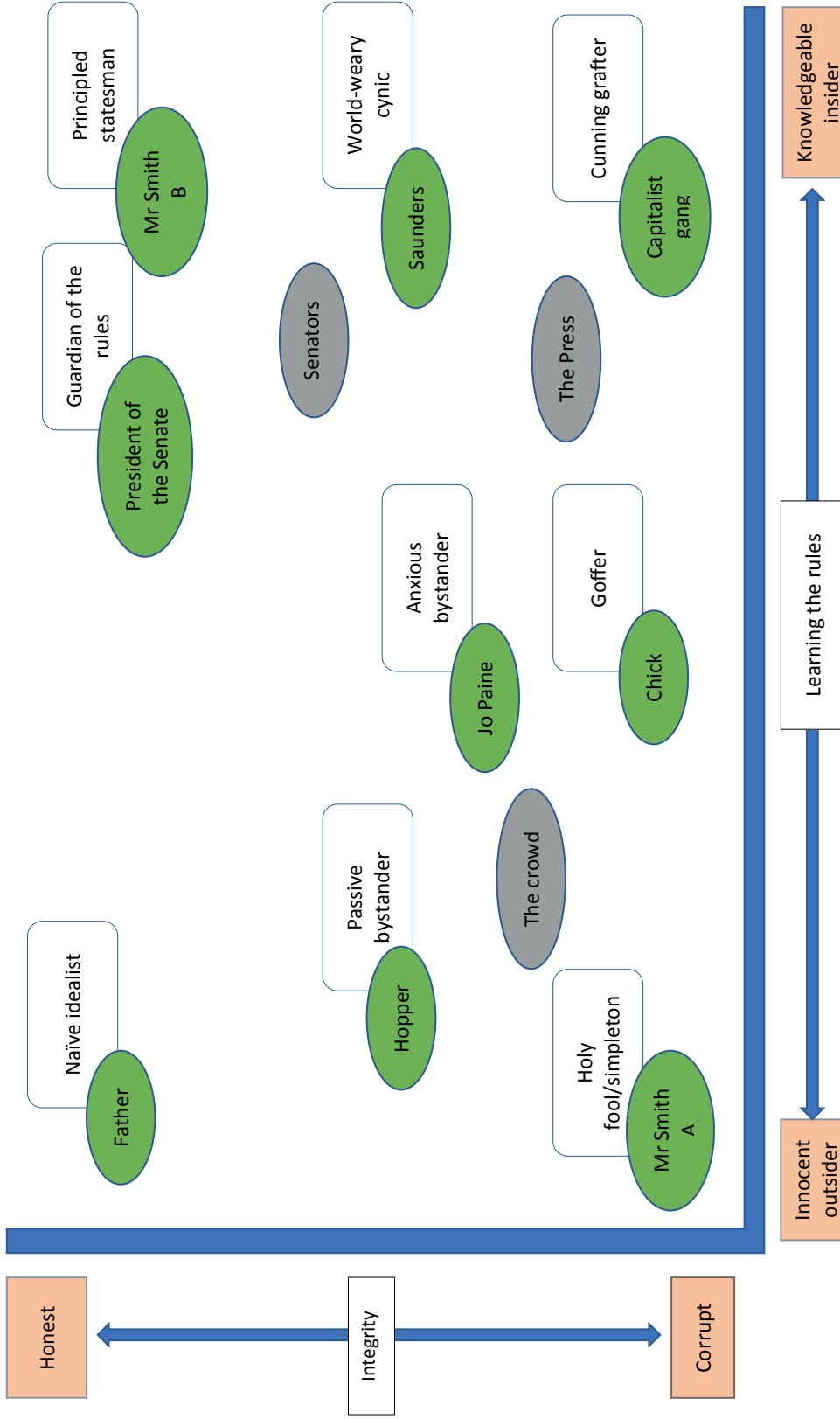
psychotherapeutically with complex mental health needs. She is currently undertaking the Professional Doctorate in Consultation at the Tavistock Centre in London. Her thesis topic is a study of systemic issues which shape workers' reaction to wrong-doing within organizations.

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Figure 1. Positional map: Mr Smith goes to Washington



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Figure 2. Rumpole Positional Map A: Institutional loyalty x Representing the truth

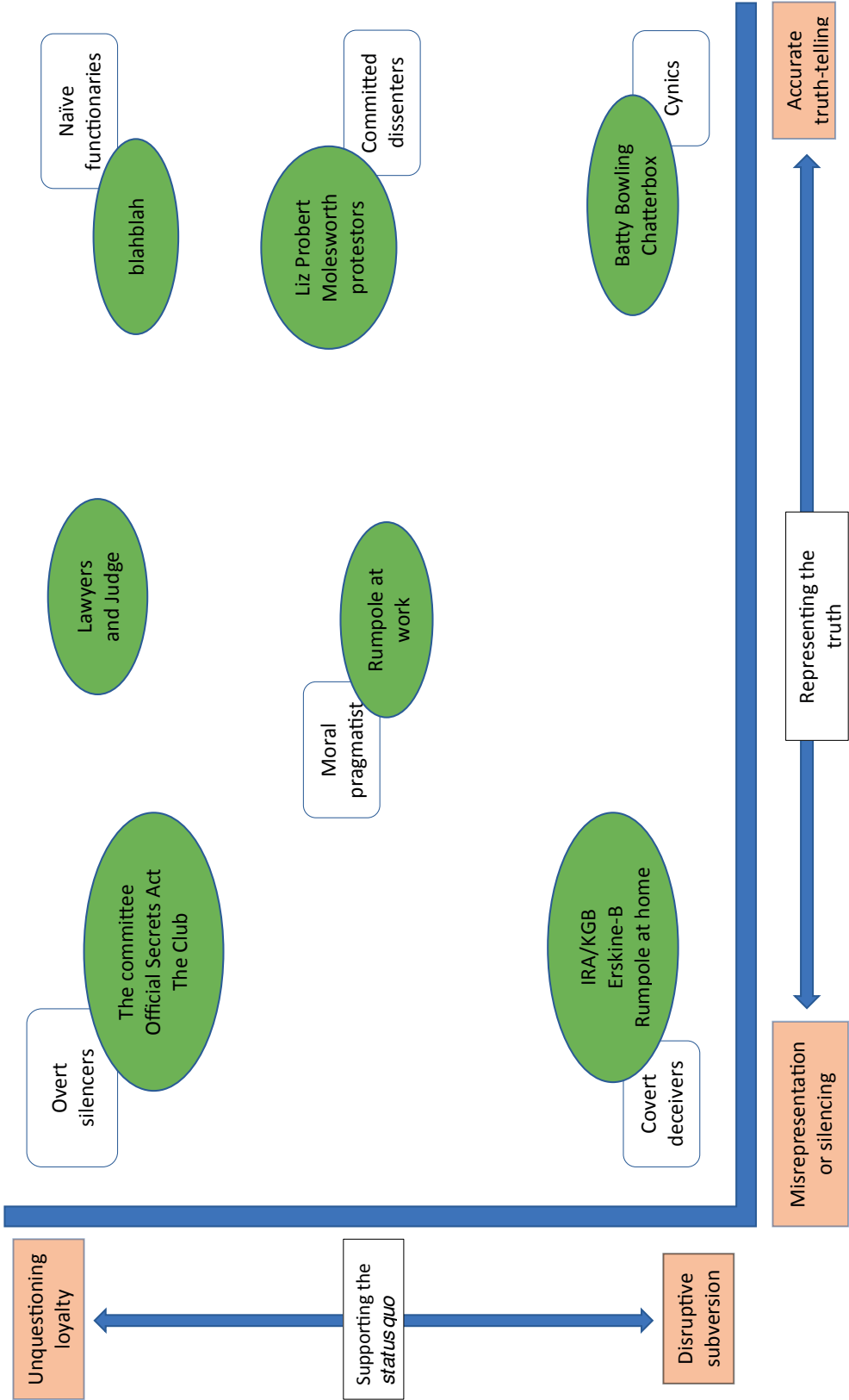


Figure 3. Rumpole Positional Map B: Claiming a voice x Speaking out

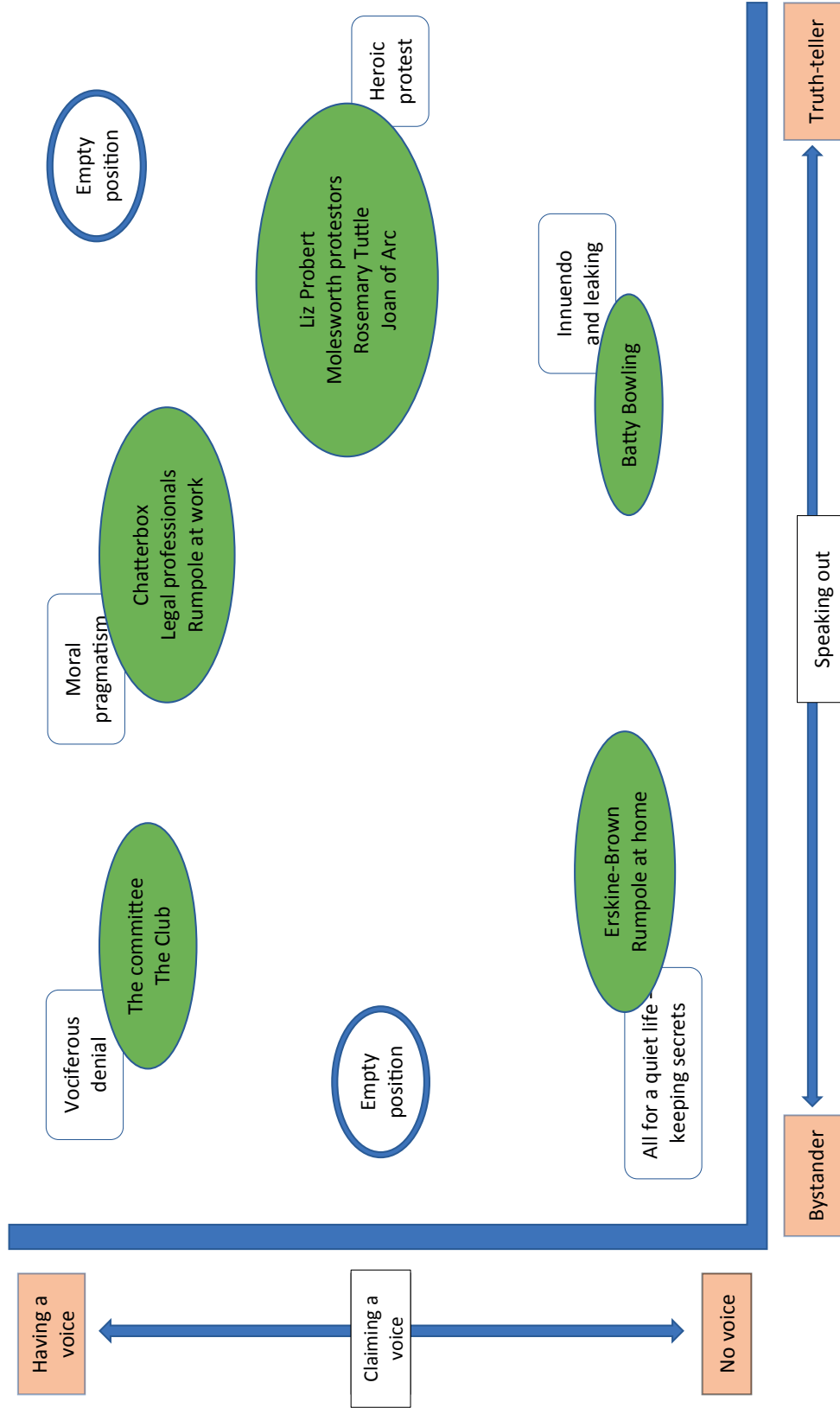


Figure 4. Snowden Positional Map: Conscious choice x Belonging

