

The Power of the Whistle:

The Consequences of Leaked Information in the Global Age

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Illustration by Savannah Flores

Government leaks have long captured news headlines and sparked controversy. Major international deals, such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Pentagon Papers, and the Panama Papers, have all revealed secret information to the general public. Through such leaks, whistleblowers are important players in uncovering government secrets and shaping public opinion.

Data breaches and government leaks are evidence of weak and insecure organizations. When sensitive data is released, whether it be the private data of ordinary citizens or the illicit activities of powerful figures, public distrust, domestic unrest, and international strife increase. While both the culprits and their incentives often remain obscured in the shadows, one thing is abundantly clear: leaks are a powerful tool with which to manipulate public opinion of governments, leaders, institutions, and individuals themselves.

Russia Unveiled

In the last 15 years, whistleblowers have accused the Russian government of a variety of illegal activities, decreasing domestic trust in the government and fueling international skepticism about the legitimacy of Russian institutions.

Whistleblowers have leaked documented allegations describing the corruption of the Russian government as a “modern brand of authoritarianism.”¹ In addition, other released documents have accused the Russian government of working alongside multiple crime networks for weaponry and political levy. Such documents reveal illicit proceeds that indicate the government has rigged elections to favor parties associated with crime networks, undermining the democratic process. Jose Gonzales, a Spanish prosecutor, contended that if the leaked documents were true, they demonstrated Russia working in tandem with mafia groups and giving mafia leaders jobs in politics.² Russian president Vladimir Putin responded to these accusations by warning Washington not to interfere with Russia’s internal affairs.³ This reaction generated public suspicion about the morality of the Russian leader, but attempting to attack the validity of such a large country and powerful leader comes with great geopolitical and domestic risk, so no further action was taken. Government leaks indicate that the lack of clarity around Russia’s involvement with mafia groups and crime rings, as well as evidence of internally corrupt government agencies, continues to fuel suspicions over what secrets remain hidden by Putin and his regime.

Pandora Papers

Data leaks are not only targeted at governments, but also at wealthy and powerful individuals. The Pandora Papers are a cache of 11.9 million leaked files from companies with wealthy clients that exposed the secret finances of current and former world leaders, public officials, and other influential figures.⁴ Initially leaked to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists in Washington and other news media sources, the papers constituted the largest leak in volume since 2013.⁵ They included information such as leading donors to the Conservative party of England, which hurt Boris Johnson's campaign, emails, memos, and reports about corporate structures, as well as other significant private information. The papers also contained evidence of wealthy individuals and companies stashing assets offshore to avoid taxes, actions which cost several governments billions of dollars. The files contained an array of information, from evidence of individuals attempting to avoid privacy regulations to receipts of extremely large or extravagant purchases.

Public outcry over the papers was initially dampened by the general chaos surrounding the pandemic, as the global crisis was already highlighting significant flaws in government institutions and wealth inequality. Nonetheless, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists found that, as a result of the leak and the resulting influx of investigative stories, the leaked information became a sensation on Twitter. The Pandora Papers became the No. 2 top-searched topic on the worldwide social media platform. Shortly after becoming highly publicized on Twitter, there were large public outcries for accountability from the officials whose information has been revealed in the Pandora Papers.⁶ Thus, the leak successfully shed light on the misdeeds of the wealthy and powerful, bringing secrets out into the public sphere.

Global Abuse of Cyber Surveillance

Unlike many other leaks, which targeted powerful governments and leaders, the hacking of the Israeli-sold software Pegasus targeted human rights activists, journalists, and lawyers. Pegasus, a software sold by the technology company NSO Group to military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies in 40 countries, is a surveillance tool that extracts messages, photos, emails, and calls in devices. The data collected and leaked was the list of phone numbers of the infected devices, which was a total of 50,000 phone numbers that are believed to have been people of interest by government clients of NSO Group.⁷ The information was given to media organizations, where several journalists worked together to analyze the data. They found that the leak provided information indicating which governments utilize NSO's surveillance software. The countries include Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, India, and the United Arab Emirates.⁸ Thus, these coun-

tries were revealed to have surveillance on their citizens. Though these countries were exposed through forensic analysis of the leaked data, NSO Group refused to reveal the government clients and claimed that it did not have access to the data of its consumers' targets.⁹ NSO's lawyers have since stated that the 50,000 leaked numbers were "exaggerated," and the list could not be a list of numbers "targeted by governments using Pegasus, but instead, may be part of a larger list of numbers that might have been used by NSO Group customers for other purposes."¹⁰ They claimed that a number appearing on the list was not indicative of having been used for surveillance purposes using their software. The Pegasus Project spurred debates over government surveillance using technology in several countries, as there continues to be a lack of clarity around government tracking.

Dobbs vs. Jackson

In the US, the recent leak of the *Dobbs v. Jackson* Supreme Court decision immediately eroded trust in the judicial system, an institution which is often shielded from public suspicion. The case focused on the constitutionality of the 15-week abortion ban in Mississippi. The ruling in favor of Dobbs would counteract and revoke *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey* (1992), which granted the constitutional right of abortion.¹¹ The Supreme Court was supposed to release its verdict between June and July of 2022; however, in May, a draft was leaked to the press. The drafted decision indicated that the court agreed with a 6-3 ruling to allow Mississippi's prohibition of pre-viability abortion.¹² This controversial decision immediately sparked massive protests across the country, bolstered by claims that the leak confirmed that the Court was no longer an independent governing body. The timing highlights how leaks can be a tool to manipulate public opinion, even before the information is cemented. Leaking such a monumental decision broke the confidentiality of the once well-respected Court, fueling public distrust in one of the core pillars of the US government. While the leak sparked political protests and public opposition to the Court, the permanent ruling remained the same. As a result of the leak, the trust within the institution of the court was fundamentally altered.

Is leaked information to be trusted?

It is not often that the secrets of the world's most powerful see the light of day. However, cases such as Russian WikiLeaks, the Pandora Papers, and the Pegasus leaks reveal the monumental impact that uncovering such covert information can have. Indeed, because these events have a unique capacity to capture the attention of the public, they often result in investigations and accountability measures that might otherwise never have developed. Thus, a single leak has the capacity to shape the trajectories of leaders, institutions, and even nations.